



Is Copying Acceptable in Product Development? What to Tell Our Students?

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When we were in first grade or kindergarten, we, and millions of children, first learned through copying. We learned to write letters and words by copying the alphabet from the board onto lined tablets, or by tracing the dotted letters that appeared on our work sheets. The better we copied the higher the praise we received. Copying, as a pedagogical technique, is both inherent in education and an effective pedagogy for knowledge building (e.g., Neilson, 2006), especially for learning manual skills.

The pedagogy of copying continues through our school years into college, especially in the arts. We instruct students about the elements and principles of design by copying the “old masters” (McKinnon, 2011). As part of teaching historic costume, we may have students trace the garments in illustrations or paintings. The rote procedure of tracing, or copying, helps students remember the characteristics of the styles they copy. In our product development classes, we often reward students who copy the best with the best grades. Computer software makes copying even more prevalent, and because of its ease and availability it becomes seemingly more acceptable. Tracing and copying are ways to create quick images in Adobe Illustrator. In Photoshop, Word, and PowerPoint, you find something you like; click/copy/paste and repeat it across the page or on to another page.

According to student feedback, as instructors, after encouraging and promoting copying in early product development classes, we suddenly ask for creativity and originality in other classes. For example, we caution students with bad grades, if they copy when they get to upper level studio classes. We decided to stop and think! Students in our Portfolio classes are confused! They thought copying was good. Now we tell them it is bad? We want students to learn content and master software skills; however, we also want to encourage students to be innovative and creative, especially in courses where they are preparing work for professional review. We began to reflect on when is copying acceptable.

To bring academic perspective to this conundrum, we investigated our university’s policy on plagiarism and other legal definitions of copying and plagiarism. The policy detailed with

examples three specific forms of honor code violations: cheating, plagiarism, and falsification (“Undergraduate,” 2015). Although plagiarism was applied traditionally only to written work, it is the one code violation, among the three, that is most closely connected to copying in product development. At our university and other schools, the policy has been amended to address plagiarism across newer styles of creativity including computer work and other modes of idea creation.

To bring further knowledge to this conflict in our classrooms, we also surveyed our alumni for best industry practices. We sent an online survey to 20 of our alumni who work in product development and design jobs, and asked “Do you expect employees to copy?” Every one of the 10 who replied said YES! They reported that copying is a big part of the fashion industry. We further discovered from their feedback that few alumni knew specifics about when copying became counterfeiting (i.e., clearly an illegal business practice). These findings added support to the idea that copying is okay in product development but also caused us concern for establishing guidelines for and teaching students about situations when copying is wrong.

The seemingly conflicting situation, we found in industry and in our classrooms caused us to seek policies for classes on what is copying and when is it right and when wrong (i.e., plagiarism, counterfeiting). Using the findings from industry (i.e., the practice exists in industry) and our university policy (i.e., it is wrong to pass another’s ideas off as one’s own) as guidance, we decided to bring the issue into the open. In the past year in our classes, we introduced the topics of copying, plagiarism and counterfeiting into class discussions and project directions. We are frank in discussions about when copying is correctly used as a technique for learning and when copying is wrong, as when the purpose is to represent someone’s work as your own. After class discussions on the topics and directed readings on legal considerations, our students are more aware of copying issues and are more open to being creative when needed and to use copying when appropriate.

References

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