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Here's to All the Cheaters

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I begin this analysis of cheating with an example from my own teaching in a fifth grade classroom. This was years ago, and it was my first time teaching Language Arts. I was asked by our vice principal, Ms. Pahl, to teach English grammar to my students. In particular, I was to teach them parts of speech: the noun, the verb, the adjective, the adverb, the pronoun, the proper pronoun, the possessive pronoun, and more. I recall the awful feeling in the pit of my stomach when Ms. Pahl asked me to teach this grammar. The awful feeling came from the fact that I had been asked to teach something I did not know at the time. Quite simply, I did not know what a noun was. Nor what a verb was. Nor an adverb. Nor an adjective. And I certainly did not know what this thing called a "possessive pronoun" was.

It is not that I was uneducated. I had already graduated from university. I had in fact written many successful papers in the process of attaining my degree. I could write well without knowing any grammar at all. But to teach fifth grade Language Arts, I suddenly learned, was different than being able to write. It meant knowing those fifth grade parts of speech. And so I had to learn them before my students did. Each night, I studied our textbook diligently, learning the parts of speech. And each morning, I would teach a new grammatical form to my students. As far as my students knew, I had known those parts of speech all of my life — or at least since fifth grade. For I certainly didn't tell them that I was cramming at night. Such an admission would have been too embarrassing at that early stage in my teaching career, too threatening to my position of teaching authority. I thus began my teaching career with something to hide. I began as a cheater, employing knowledge that was not really mine.

Those days of study-and-concealment didn't last for long of course. And I continued to teach the parts of speech to my students for years. The difference, as the years went by, was that I no longer needed to consult my textbook the night before. I no longer had anything to hide from my students because I felt this knowledge was already mine. I did, however, have something to hide from myself. For, I soon forgot that there was ever such a time when I myself didn't know what a pronoun was. I forgot that I had once been a cheater. And through this forgetting, I became a new sort of cheater. I taught my students pronouns under the implicit pretense of having known pronouns all along. Under this pretense, I was a double cheater. Earlier on, I was a cheater of a teacher who pretended not to be borrowing knowledge from an outside source. Later on, my students were being cheated into thinking that their teacher had never been a cheater.

In this essay, we look into the status of cheating in education. We argue that just as cheating was at the heart of the early teaching experience discussed above by one of this essay's authors, cheating is more generally at the very heart of education

itself. To undertake this cheaterly analysis, we rely primarily on the work of Jacques Derrida, and in particular, on Derrida's reading of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile*. With the help of Derrida and Rousseau, we argue that the situation we find ourselves in today — where cheating is said to be on the rise in education — is in reality a result of inherent tensions concerning what it means to be educated. We do not intend to look at cheating in order to find ways to more effectively stop people from cheating. Nor do we intend to argue that educators should become more lenient toward cheaters. We do not intend to show how cheaters are immoral. Nor will we show that cheaters are less immoral than is commonly assumed. We intend to show, rather, how cheating works as an organizing principle of education at the very same time that educators go to great lengths to rid educational institutions of any and all who are said to be cheaters.

Cheating Nature

I turn first to Rousseau's *Emile* and to Jacques Derrida's comments on this text. In *Emile*, Rousseau struggles with a very fundamental educational question: How is it that the human being needs to be given instruction in order to live up to his or her natural potential? Why is it that the human being, in his or her natural state, needs to be further supplemented by the educator, and by the texts that the educator exposes the student to? Rousseau's answer to this question is that God-given nature is perfect, but nature, once exposed to the forces of culture, is likely to be corrupted, made stupid, and turned toward evil. Education should militate against this corruption. As Rousseau puts it,

> God makes all things good; man meddles with them and they become evil.…Under existing conditions a man left to himself from birth would be more of a monster than the rest. She [nature] would be like a sapling chance sown in the midst of the highway, bent hither and thither and soon crushed by the passers-by.…We are born weak, we need strength; helpless, we need aid; foolish, we need reason. All that we lack at birth, all that we need when we come to man's estate, is the gift of education.[1]

Thus for Rousseau, while God-given nature is perfect, the child will still lack sufficient strength and intelligence if left alone to face the devices of society. This lack will not go away on its own. It is, in fact, a natural lack that occurs in the face of culture, a natural lack that needs to be supplemented through instruction. Thus, the answer to this fundamental question — Why do people need education? — is fraught with paradox from the outset. For, while the child is perfect naturally, one must proceed to educate the child on the premise that nature will naturally turn out corrupted. One must overcome nature's lack in a way that lets nature be as natural as it can be. Yet paradoxically, it is not nature that lets nature be herself. It is rather the intervention of man, of education, that lets nature be more herself: "Viewed as an art," Rousseau goes on to say in *Emile*, "the success of education is almost impossible.…Our efforts may bring us within sight of the goal, but fortune must favor us if we are to reach it. What is this goal? As we have just shown, it is the goal of nature."[2] Thus one must overcome nature's lack in order to get back to what is natural. Paradoxically, this must happen by means of the unnatural "gift" of education. Nature becomes an educational "goal" rather than a natural given.

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Commenting on Rousseau's *Emile*, Derrida describes this situation as follows:

> Childhood is the first manifestation of the deficiency which, in Nature, calls for substitution (suppléance). Pedagogy illuminates perhaps more crudely the paradoxes of the supplement. How is natural weakness possible? How can Nature ask for forces that it does not furnish? How is a child possible in general?[3]

Pedagogy functions within an economy where "it is indeed culture or cultivation that must supplement a deficient nature, a deficiency" that cannot be adequately supplied by nature itself (*OG*, 146). Quoting Rousseau, Derrida goes on to say that "[a]ll organization of, and all the time spent in, education will be regulated by this necessary evil: 'supply [suppléer] … [what] … is lacking' and to replace Nature" (*OG*, 146). Pedagogy is an endeavor caught up in the logic of supplementarity: Students need to be given their educational supplements not only because they lack a certain amount of knowledge, but also because such knowledge completes them and becomes inseparable from them. Education is both an addition to, and a natural part of, the student. The classroom both contributes to certain habits of nature, and creates naturalness out of other non-natural habits that are supplied by education.

The educational situation is best described as a supplemental scene in two ways. First, education can be construed as a supplement to the natural state of the student, as a welcome addition that makes whatever is natural to the student even stronger and even more intelligent. This understanding of education-as-supplement follows a long tradition of educational thought that calls upon the teacher to clarify curriculum for students, to make texts more available to student understanding, to add to student knowledge. But the supplement should not be construed solely as something that is in addition to a given natural state. The process of supplementarity entails a double gesture. Supplementing nature must be construed both as something that adds to the student and as something that makes the student whole, both as something that augments and as something that completes.

Derrida reminds us that the doubleness of pedagogical supplementarity is isomorphous with the supplementary relation between one who interprets a text, and the text under interpretation. To begin with, a textual supplement enriches a text by bringing it more fully into the light of day, into the realm of human understanding, into presence. Noting this first (but not primary) role of the supplement, Derrida writes,

> The supplement adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the fullest measure of presence. It cumulates and accumulates presence. It is thus that art, techne, image, convention, come as supplements to nature and are rich with this entire cumulating function. (*OG*, 144–145)

But also, the supplement of a text instills itself as a natural part of the text that it supplements. When one comments on a text, one adds to the text, but one also builds the text anew. We might think here of a person who takes a vitamin supplement. The vitamin supplement is an addition, but it also stands in for a natural lack. It becomes a natural part of the body. In Derrida's words, "the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself in-the-place-of; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void. If it represents and makes an image, it is by the anterior default of a presence" (*OG*, 145).

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Cheating and the Supplement

It might seem at this point that we are far into a Derridean interpretation of Rousseau, and far from the topic of cheating in schools. But it is precisely this distance that it is important to diminish. Cheating in education is, after all, precisely concerned with the extent to which the student uses un-natural means in order to supplement what is otherwise a natural ability. Cheating is, essentially, the practice of taking the work done by someone else, or done by some technology, and passing it off as one's own work. As an illustration of some typical scenarios of cheating, take for example the following excerpt, which is a description of academic dishonesty found in the policies of a major North American university. At this particular university, cheating consists of

> 1. "submitting or presenting the work of another person, including artistic imagery, as that of the student without full and appropriate accreditation";
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> 2. "copying all or part of an essay or other assignment from an author or other person, including a tutor or student mentor, and presenting the material as the student's original work";
>
> 3. "failing to acknowledge the phrases, sentences or ideas of the author of published and unpublished material that is incorporated into an essay or other assignment"; and
>
> 4. "submitting the same, or substantially the same, essay, project, presentation or other assignment more than once, whether or not the earlier submission was at … [this] university or another institution, unless prior approval has been obtained from the instructor to whom the work is being submitted."[4]

In this same document, the following rationale is given for the censure of cheating:

> Academic dishonesty, in whatever form, is ultimately destructive of the values of the University. Furthermore, it is unfair and discouraging to the majority of students who pursue their studies honestly. Scholarly integrity is required of all members of the University.[5]

What is at stake in cheating is precisely a particular relation of the natural to the unnatural. The cheater, it is said, is one who does not act naturally. The cheater is one whose natural self is augmented unnaturally with the help of something or somebody not, naturally, part of the student. When the student, in his or her natural state, fails "to acknowledge the phrases, sentences or ideas of the author of published and unpublished material that is incorporated into an essay or other assignment" — when such a student proceeds without owning up to outside sources, then he or she is acting un-naturally rather than naturally. He or she is being supplemented without admitting to being supplemented.

But here one should stop to contemplate the following curious fact: It is not possible to describe the qualities of a cheater without at the same time noticing an inescapable coincidence between, on the one hand, the cheater, and, on the other, each and every student. The cheater, it is said, is one who "fails to acknowledge sentences, phrases, or ideas of others." Yet, at the same time, it is in no way implied that the non-cheating student may not use the sentences, phrases, or ideas of another.

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Indeed, the non-cheating student must often use sentences, phrases, and ideas of another, but he or she must also acknowledge such use. The non-cheating student needs the work of others just as much as the cheater. This is because, as Rousseau points out, the natural state of the student needs the help of others. Every student needs to be educated in a way that proceeds, unnaturally, to the natural goal of being educated. But the non-cheating student goes to great lengths to demarcate the words that come naturally from those that do not come naturally. And this, so that education can appear to happen naturally in spite of the fact that it is an unnatural supplement. The non-cheater admits, under the guise of acting naturally, that he or she would have been a cheater if he or she had not admitted to what was not natural. The paradox of the naturally unnatural student is that every true, non-cheating student is actually a true cheater. The difference between the cheater and the non-cheater is not a difference at all. The only difference between the cheater and non-cheater is simply that the cheater does not admit to cheating while the non-cheater admits to cheating.

To put this in terms of the logic of the supplement, the cheater and non-cheater are actually two sides of the same supplementary coin. The cheater knows that he lacks something, and borrows the work of another in order to fill this lack. The cheater tries by all means to make his or her lack appear natural. The cheater knows that the supplement must supplement — in the sense of actually becoming part of that which it supplements. The non-cheater is, however, a bit more naïve in his or her approach to the supplement. The non-cheater uses the supplement to his or her advantage (as does the cheater), but goes on to make it explicit that the supplement did not actually supplement anything. The non-cheater makes sure that the supplement remains identified as unnatural. The non-cheater makes sure to say, "I used the work, but it will never actually be mine."

The Necessity of Cheaters

It might be objected at this point that we are trying to push an analogy too far, that in education the witting cheater cannot possibly be compared to each and every other student. Indeed, we would not like to push the analogy too far along for the simple reason that it is not an analogy. We are not saying that being educated is like cheating. We are saying something stronger — that education is founded on cheating, that education proceeds by regulating what it means to cheat. Education proceeds on the paradoxical fact that being educated consists, as Rousseau observed, of cheating what is natural to the student in order that the student might become more natural. Education resides in the unreasonable task of making a supplement into something natural, and in two resultant, and paradoxical, consequences — that whatever is made to be natural can never actually be natural, and that whatever is needed to make one natural must always have been unnatural to begin with. Cheating resides precisely in this gap between, on the one hand, a natural use of the unnatural and, on the other, an unnatural use of the natural. And so does education reside in this gap. That this gap is impossible to satiate is precisely why there is cheating, and it is precisely why there is education.

This gap is most easily recognizable in what constitutes the difference between the cheater and the non-cheater. The difference is primarily that the cheater

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understands one side of the educational paradox while the non-cheater understands the other side. But neither the cheater nor the non-cheater understands the paradox itself. Neither of them understands education. The supplement that is supposed to become natural is precisely literalized in the actions of the cheater and the non-cheater, each in his or her own way. The cheater makes sure that the non-naturalness of the supplement is hidden from view. He or she makes sure that no one thinks there is anything unnatural going on. The cheater tries, by any means possible, to turn the unnatural into something completely natural. The cheater ignores any institutional regulations that might deter him or her from this task. The non-cheater, on the other hand, assumes that whatever is deemed unnatural by the educational institution is, in fact, unnatural. The non-cheater goes to great lengths to demarcate the unnatural from the natural. The non-cheater clearly demonstrates the precise, and completely imaginary, line where a magical transmutation from the supplemental to the natural takes place.

This gap between literalization and transmutation is actually central to keeping education alive and flourishing. Thus, we are proposing that the prohibition on cheating is, and will continue to be, an organizing principle of education per se. Cheaters are, and will continue to be, necessary for the educational institution to identify and define. However, cheaters are not necessary for the institution to identify in the sense that cheaters threaten the lifeblood of an educational institution, and that cheaters must be eradicated from the hallowed walls of schools and universities. Cheaters are not necessary to identify, as stated in the above university policy, because they are "ultimately destructive of the values of the University." Rather, the role of the cheater is, and indeed the role of the non-cheater is, to run interference while the paradox of the supplement goes unquestioned.

Indeed, if one looks closely along the entire spectrum of what is called natural and what is called supplementary, one quickly notices that the natural and the unnatural in education are quite impossible to pinpoint on their own. How is "borrowable" material different from what is not "borrowable"? How does one identify which technologies are to be used and which are not? How does one distinguish a copy from the original, especially in this day and age of what Jean Beaudrilliard has termed the "simulacrum"?[6] These are matters that are not at all fixed. It is up to the educational institution and its authorities to decide these matters. The institution and its authorities decide where the natural and the supplementary are located on the spectrum between cheating and not-cheating. It is precisely the cheater and the non-cheater who are used as place-markers to cover, to run interference about, the arbitrariness of this location. The location of the natural vis-à-vis the unnatural, the identification of the supplementary vis-à-vis the non-supplementary, constitute an educational paradox that cannot be decided save for under the cover of the cheater and the honest student.

A Teacher Cheat?

For just one glimpse of this institutional arbitrariness, let us return for a moment to our initial example of the cheating teacher. Or let us not go back there, since a teacher cannot, of course, be a cheater. To the personal example offered earlier,

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something important must be added. The word "cheater" may have been used to describe a teacher who hid what he or she borrowed from others, but a teacher cannot be a cheater in any institutional or curricular sense. The question of the teacher-as-cheater never arises in schools. This is because the cheating teacher is not, like the cheating student, a structural necessity of the educational endeavor. Simply put, cheating teachers are not needed as are cheating students. No one cares if a teacher cheats because, as far as the logic of the supplement is concerned, the teacher has license both to be herself and not be herself. The spectrum from natural to unnatural is not an educationally salient matter when it comes to the teacher side of the equation. Teachers may cheat, but they cannot be called cheaters.

In the teacher's case, as in the case of the student for whom what constitutes cheating is dictated by the authoritative enactment of an institution or an instructor, it should be clear that cheating is not a particular, steadfast act in educational contexts. Cheating, as it is detailed in the sorts of policies and pronouncements quoted above, is only a matter for students. Why this lopsidedness? Precisely because cheating is an institutional place marker rather an act that might be judged somehow steadfast and "natural," or even "unnatural." Cheating is a floating signifier that hovers only around students.

Cheating "On the Rise"

To conclude, it is instructive to look at the current state of educational affairs where cheating is said to be on the rise. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is impossible to read through newspapers and magazines without coming across alarming statistics about the rise of cheating and plagiarism among students, especially in universities. And in response to this increase, universities, especially, have gone to great lengths to enact measures that will reduce the incidences of cheating and plagiarism. A 2010 article in the *New York Times*, entitled, "To Stop Cheats, Colleges Learn Their Trickery," offers the following statistic on cheating: "The extent of student cheating, difficult to measure precisely, appears widespread at colleges. In surveys of 14,000 undergraduates over the last four years, an average of 61 percent admitted to cheating on assignments and exams."[7] And the article also notes that "the eternal temptation of students to cheat has gone high-tech — not just on exams, but also by cutting and pasting from the Internet and sharing of homework online like music files."[8]

Interestingly, the act of educational cheating in accounts such as this *New York Times* article is decontextualized to such an extent that it is sometimes hard to remember that these sorts of university students are cheating at something. Phrases like "the eternal temptation" moralize cheating to such an extent that educational questions — questions that might suggest an educationally salient role for cheating — about cheating are difficult to pursue. But these students are not just cheating in general; they are cheating in classrooms, and according to the regulations of particular educational institutions. If our above analysis of the educational centrality of cheating rings true at all, it must serve to put the cheater back into an educational context. The cheater in school cheats at education. And as such, we have tried to show that the cheater is named a cheater because there is an educational necessity

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to naming cheaters and non-cheaters. Can cheating really be on the rise in such a situation? Absolutely. Cheating can be on the rise and probably is on the rise. The borderline between the natural and the unnatural, the borderline between the originary and the supplement, has become increasingly unstable. When it is possible to use the Internet and hand-held devices in order to quickly access ideas and information that have been heretofore more difficult to access, the result is not only that cheating has become easier and more accessible.

In addition, and perhaps more importantly, the result of easy access to ideas and information means that the boundary between what one knows and what one doesn't know, between what is "naturally" known and what is "unnaturally" known — this boundary has become all the more tenuous. If one plagiarizes a piece of writing from the Internet and passes it off as one's own, must it be the case that one has cut-and-pasted without understanding the text that has been taken? Or, might it be the case that the person has made the text his or her own, has read through it thoroughly, and has chosen it on the merits of its argument? Might it be the case that one has indeed naturalized the text before submitting it as one's own? The assumption made by popular media accounts, and by accounts in educational policy, is, of course, that the text being borrowed remains foreign and unnatural to the student who is borrowing it. The irony, of course, about this assumption, is that it is very simple — and one might go so far as to say very educational — for a student first to borrow a text quickly, and then to spend a lot of time making sure that the text is fitting and informed with regard to the paper or project that has been assigned. It is not unthinkable, especially in this day and age of quick access, that many a cheater has become educated along the way. The cheater may have become educated even while the cheater's position marks out a supplementary space that is deemed un-educated.

If cheating is on the rise, it is because that which is at the center of education is, in a sense, "on the rise." But what does it mean to say that this center is on the rise? It means that, today, the natural and the unnatural are more entangled than ever. It means that access to another's knowledge is easier than it has been in the past. But this does not only mean that it is easier to cheat. It means also that it is easier to become educated. Ultimately, one must understand that the so-called "crisis" of cheating is not a moral crisis. It is a crisis at the very center of education. The current "problem" of cheating is structurally equivalent to the current "problem" of education. As opportunities for education become more and more ubiquitous, educators are more and more at pains to define what exactly is different about what they do and how what they do might be different, if at all, from what the cheater does.

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1. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. Barbara Foxley (London: Guernsey Press, 1986), 11.

2. Ibid., 13.

3. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 146. This work will be cited as *OG* in the text for all subsequent references.

4. This policy is available at http://www.sfu.ca/policies/gazette/student/s10-01.html.

5. Ibid.

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6. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

7. Trip Gabriel, "To Stop Cheats, Colleges Learn Their Trickery," *New York Times*, July 5, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/06/education/06cheat.html?r=1.

8. Ibid.

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