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Penn professor encourages plagiarism

by JULIE XIE

Coming up with an original thesis for a paper is something that almost every Penn student must contend with over the course of college. But not in Kenneth Goldsmith's "Uncreative Writing" class, where plagiarism is permitted and encouraged.

"In my class, it would be cheating not to plagiarize," Goldsmith, a Creative Writing professor, said.

Goldsmith, author of *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age*, explains a new literary trend in which writers appropriate existing content on the internet and re-purpose it as their own. He added that computers and technology have brought on this new "literary revolution."

Goldsmith teaches "Uncreative Writing," and "Writing through Culture and Art," which are offered every other year. He is also a poet and senior editor of PennSound, a website that hosts free and downloadable poetry recordings. Last May, Goldsmith was one of eight artists invited to perform at the White House's "Evening of Poetry."

"Uncreative Writing" explores historical and cultural examples of forgery and plagiarism. It instructs students to appropriate, replicate and plagiarize in creating their own compositions.

One class assignment asks students to retype five pages of content of their choice. Students who type out everything from restaurant menus to presidential speeches often find the assignment relaxing, Goldsmith said. It's the first time they can just focus on the act of typing, instead of struggling to argue a thesis or create an original piece of work, he added.

Other assignments require students to write a screenplay for an existing film or video, compose poetry by transcribing a Project Runway episode and transcribe a piece of audio and denote where the speaker pauses, speaks in a low volume or is interrupted.

The assignments also extend outside the classroom. Students chose a slogan to graffiti in a public space. Some scrawled it in lipstick on a mirror and others in pen on a banana.

Last month, students in his fall class, "Writing through Culture and Art," were asked to create greeting cards, adhere authentic bar codes on them and place them among real cards in CVS. Students were then asked to see if their cards were ever purchased.

2008 College graduate Steve McLaughlin took five semesters of class with Goldsmith. He said he learned more from Goldsmith than any other professor at Penn.

“[Goldsmith’s classes] didn’t make me love the Romantics any less, and they made me love Cervantes, Borges, Melville, Sterne, Joyce and other such ‘real’ writers even more,” he said.

However, Goldsmith has received a lot of criticism for his unique style of pedagogy, to which he responds, “it’s easy for people to criticize something when they don’t know what the experience is like.”

In a column published in the *Harvard Crimson*, Harvard senior Isabel Kaplan argued against Goldsmith’s method. Kaplan called the process of plagiarism and appropriation “offensive.”

“Just because the internet provides you with the ability to purchase an academic paper written by someone else does not mean that you should,” she wrote. “More importantly, however, doing so doesn’t make you a writer.”

Goldsmith, however, argues that his classes promote self-expression and creativity more so than typical creative writing classes.

“People actually express themselves in new, richer and deeper ways than they would going through some kind of creative writing exercise that doesn’t mean anything to them because they’ve done it a thousand times,” Goldsmith said. “People come out of the class alive and invigorated by not having done the same thing.”

He cites many examples of appropriation in popular culture: people would rather listen to Britney Spears lip-sync to a pre-recorded album and blue-chip artists appropriate art that they did not create for a living.

“It’s no big deal. It’s used everywhere except the pristine and staid halls of literature and academia,” he said.

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