

Bought Term Papers: Symptom or Challenge
or Using Term Papers to Teach

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The term paper is an academic tradition. Recently the *Duke Law Journal* published an excellent review of the legal issues surrounding the commerce in term papers in the United States.¹ The anonymous authors concluded that it is extremely difficult to find solid legal ground on which to attack the buying and selling of term papers to students. They consider that most of the state laws passed to outlaw the practice are probably unconstitutional. They also find this spate of outraged state legislation rather laughable. They recommend, quite sensibly, that the problem should be resolved by colleges and universities themselves. "Surely, if university students nationwide began to submit Bacon's essays in freshman writing courses, no state would attack the problem by prohibiting the publication or sale of Bacon's work, or at least no [such] state law would be sustained . . ."

You can look at—and condemn—the buying of term papers in many ways. On the face of it, it is a waste of money (tuition). It is an explicit criticism, just or unjust, of the 'relative'-ness of some long-established routines. It may represent a good deal of insight on the part of offending students into what their institution's educational goals actually are, as opposed to what they are advertised or otherwise stated to be. It is probably also a gross overestimate of most teachers' gullibility. On the other hand, it may show that students quite accurately assess

some teachers' indifference and their intolerance of boredom, their haste and manifold preoccupations, the frequently lopsided balance between their teaching and other interests (research, publication), their surrender to idiotic schedules and trivial busywork imposed by a poor administration, their frequent delegation of term-paper evaluation to assistants more harried and preoccupied than themselves. No doubt the whole business is morally reprehensible and fraudulent, even if legally unassailable at the present time. When a student buys a term paper and submits it as his own work, who is the victim? Who is guilty? Those are philosophically and morally interesting questions. I'm not interested in discussing morality here, but rather the stupidity and hypocrisy of it all.

Most bought term papers, so I understand, are of the 'research' variety. I cannot fathom the rationale for buying any other type. For a variety of personal reasons, students may, I suppose, buy papers to satisfy assignments in expository or creative writing. However, most students supposedly do and certainly should want full opportunity to express themselves. To pay course fees for the 'privilege', and then to pay again for relief from the 'burden' is patently inane. But the need for grades and degrees must be kept in mind.

I understand that there is a brisk business in book review type papers. That seems almost as stupid an example

of being 'double-suckered.' I should think that teachers would find the sloppiest reworking of passages from lecture notes, textbooks, or the various available 'notes' and 'study aids' less obvious and less objectionable than a bought book review prepared by a paper-mill 'pro'.

But it is the bought 'research' paper that interests me, as both teacher and information scientist/technologist/engineer. The bought research paper is an objectified comment on confusion in education goals that is by no means confined to students. There has always been a great deal of argument about the goals and purpose of education. There is plenty of material in present scientific editorializing and educational literature to show that the same basic argument continues. It is as far from resolution as it has always been.

In the simplest terms, the argument represents a difference between elitist and egalitarian views. If the purpose of education is refinement of the intellect, then it is by definition ineluctably elitist. Teach the few whom you can how to think. If, on the other hand, the purpose of education is to fill the mind, then education must be, of necessity, egalitarian. Teach all whom you can what they should know, or at least what they should know how to do.

There are many elaborations of this simple opposition, but they are essentially nothing more than elaborations. Thus we can read that universities, to survive, must assume some functions of the technical schools--without, however, damaging whatever it is that makes them universities.² We read that we are a society in danger of deserting the mind,³ that our universities have actually become at best merely bureaucratic (and eroticized) careerist academ-

ies, way-stations on the road to prepared cells in the governmental, industrial and academic hives.⁴ Or, at worst, merely intellectual supermarkets,⁵ adolescence-extenders, holding-operations,⁶ learning boutiques, where the consumer student, "wielding his checkbook in the bursar's office,"⁷ has been set free to make choices about his education that, once upon a time, it was assumed only a completed education would have equipped him to make. "The undergraduate curriculum: what did we do to it?" asks the title of a recent article.^{8,9}

I may seem to have digressed from my subject of bought term papers, but I have not. If the purpose of education is to train young people to think, then any thinking young person who buys a term paper must think that researching its theme isn't going to help him learn to think. If the purpose of education is to teach him what he should know or needs to know in order to fill his cell in one of the societal hives, then the thinking young person must believe that 'researching' his theme in the average university library is a waste of time--in short, the pursuit or practice of a skill for which he will in the future have no use at all. If he hopes to fill one of the more important cells in the societal hives, certainly he will expect--and he will be expected--to be able to buy information along with other commodities and services his function may require.

Consider the usual research-type term paper. The success of the term-paper mills must indicate that a term-paper assignment too often requires that the student merely demonstrate he has dug up an adequate number of pertinent books, articles, reports, etc., and extracted from them enough material

to fill a specified number of pages. I know that at many universities and colleges the length of the paper is specified along with other information on the assignment, even when the choice of topic is left to the student. Indeed, the assignment may be simply "a ten-page paper." In some cases, this 'instruction' is qualified: "typed, double-spaced, inch-and-a-half margins, etc." There is as much prohibition in such an assignment as there is requirement; as much "Please, don't burden me with more than ten pages," as there is, "You must submit at least ten pages." Rarely, as far as I know, is brevity or stylistic precision of any real concern. As they always have been, the demands on a teacher's time today are enormous, but it seems to me that any teacher worth his salt would nevertheless refuse to entertain such a question as, "How long should the paper be?" The answer would be determined by the student's discoveries. The sad fact is that nowadays the student usually doesn't have to ask. He is told, indeed *expects* to be told, "how long it has to be." And so term paper mills charge by the page.

As a scientist I am fully aware of the importance of gathering background material—of doing a preliminary search. As a teacher and librarian I am fully aware also of how inadequately most students are instructed in the science and art of using libraries. As a scholar I regret that so few students have tasted the fascination of exploring for information, the excitement of pinning down a fact, the exhilaration of getting at the truth. But as an information scientist I am appalled that so very few are trained in the use of modern information retrieval techniques. There is certainly merit in the determination of students who will persevere through

reference books, indexes, abstract publications. How much I long to hear a single student demand adequate training in this bibliographical archaeology, and even more, one who will insist, "waving his checkbook in the bursar's office," that his institution give him access to modern data bases and the technology to use them.

If we wish to train students to think, we should make it as easy as possible for them to get information to think about, rather than proceed as if we were training every student to be a scholar. It is hypocritical to be horrified when students decide the quickest and easiest way to get information, *and a bibliography*, is to buy a term paper. Term-paper mills are their modern, if illicit, data banks. If such illicit data banks were legitimized, and properly supervised, they could be used without qualm. Isn't tuition supposed, among other things, to cover some such service on the part of the institution?

If students had convenient and ready access to published information, I wonder how many who now do would avail themselves of the services of these 'dope' peddlers. I should like, as a matter of fact, to do some market research on the subject. I'd like to know, for example, the academic standing and reputation of students who buy term papers. I'd like to see an analysis of their reasons for doing so, and I wonder how it would correlate, for example, with the demonstrated need for and success of extra-institutional 'cram' courses. It is significant that, in my experience, these cram courses are patronized heavily by A students, particularly when grading at their colleges is done 'on the curve'.

I doubt that any such research or analysis will be undertaken in the near

future, but why not in the meantime use the term-paper mills as an instructional tool? I recommend to some adventurous instructor that he or she turn this 'moral' problem into an educational challenge. Let the instructor buy a term paper, distribute it to the class, and require that the students evaluate it. Has the ground been adequately covered? Are the references genuine, accurate, pertinent? What has been missed? Are the conclusions reasonable and valid? Where did the writer go wrong? Where has he shown real skill?

Challenge the student to demonstrate that it is a bought term paper. What recent information does it lack, because it has been in circulation for years? What readily available material in the university library was not used, because the writer's library didn't have it? Where do the students (because of

their previous study and research) suspect outright plagiarism?

Such an assignment will certainly get the student to think about the subject. It will take advantage of that universal readiness to criticize and redo what another has done. Whatever else the bought term paper may be, it is in part a criticism of how little the student has been taught about information retrieval. It may at least offer a method of teaching him something about it, in a roundabout way

And, if by chance, some student has in mind to become a scientist or scholar, such an assignment will offer exercise in constructive criticism, editing, and revision skills. In other words, it may help train him properly not only for his research, but also, as no other assignment could, for the job of refereeing papers by his future colleagues.

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3. Levi, E.H. A society in danger of deserting the mind. *The Washington Post* 24 February 1974, p. C2.
4. Thompson, W.I. Walking out on the university and escaping the grip of the old industrial state. *Harper's* 247(1480):70-6, 1973.
5. Hunt, P.R. Commentary: toward the totalitarian university. *Journal of Canadian Studies* 7(1):57-64, 1973.
6. Redefeer, F.L. A call to the educators of America. *Saturday Review/World* 27 July 1974, p. 49-50.
7. Hungiville, M. & Gustafson, S. Students as consumers of education. *Chronicle of Higher Education* 7(37):16, 1973.
8. Windling, R.C. The undergraduate curriculum: what did we do to it? *AAUP Journal* 59(4):407-10, 1973.
9. Readers interested in the topic will have noted items like the following, along with others, in past issues the *ISI® Press Digest* section of *Current Contents®*. Copies of these and the articles in references 1-8 are available through *ISI's OATS® (Original Article Tear Sheet Service)*.

- a. Enarson, H.L. University or knowledge factory? *Science* 18(1403):897, 1973.
- b. Wilms, W.W. A new look at proprietary schools. *Change* 5(6):6-8, 1973.
- c. Levi, A.W. Homage to the square. *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 7(2):11-34, 1973.
- d. Cottle, T.J. Rationales for relevance in higher education. *Interchange* 4(1):64-78, 1973.
- e. Martin, W.B. The ethical crisis in education. *Change* 6(5):28-33, 1974.
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- i. Freeman, L.D. Management of knowledge in higher education. *Journal of Higher Education* 45(2):81-99, 1974.
- j. Schoenl, W.J. Ortega's *Mission of the University* revisited. *Univ. Coll. Quarterly* 19(3):4-15, 1974.
- k. Wolin, S.S. Gilding the iron cage. *New York Review of Books* 29(21/22):40-2, 24 Jan 1974.
- l. Solmon, L.C. & Taubman, eds. *Does College Matter?* New York: Academic Press, 1973, 415 pp.
- m. Toffler, A. Future shock in education. *Saturday Evening Post* May/June 1973, p. 46 passim.