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1-1-2010

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Hilberg, Nathan, "Is Originality an Appropriate Requirement for Undergraduate Publication?" (2010). *Honors in Practice -- Online Archive*. Paper 119.
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Is Originality an Appropriate Requirement for Undergraduate Publication?

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As the faculty advisor for the *Pittsburgh Undergraduate Review* (*PUR*), a professionally refereed undergraduate journal devoted to publishing scholarly papers across the disciplines, I found the following passages from Ellen Buckner noteworthy: "It is assumed that the honors work is an original piece of scholarship and prepared according to accepted standards for a written paper . . . " (149); and "the project's scholarly accomplishment . . . " should be conveyed in a summary or abstract (150). I agree that demonstrating scholarly accomplishment is a worthy goal of publishing academic work; I would also emphasize that scholarly accomplishment is different from originality. The significance of this subtle distinction is a central topic of this paper, which includes discussion of whether originality is an appropriate condition for the publication of undergraduate work. Though scholarly accomplishment and originality are different criteria for publication, they have in common the idea that an author is not merely building on someone else's ideas; I shall refer to this common feature as the *independent* character of the work. Note the synthesis making this article a piece of independent work: I am conceiving of this project and composing it on my own; however, it is not original in that the *origin* of the idea about the importance of a work making a scholarly contribution is someone else's article. So even if a given work is not original (e.g., this article), it still can make a scholarly contribution by virtue of its being an instance of independent work. I will argue that emphasizing the scholarly contribution of independent but not necessarily original work sharpens our expectations of good, scholarly (undergraduate) work and avoids the pitfalls associated with requiring that work be original to get published.

My point does not depend on whether Buckner (among others) and I are merely operating on different definitions of "original." My point is that we might be better served by striking the concept of originality as a condition of (undergraduate) publication. Moreover, by replacing originality with independent scholarly contribution as a condition of (undergraduate) publication (and institutional support more broadly), I am not suggesting a merely terminological change. As I will show, these two conditions entail different conceptions of

what constitutes scholarly quality. I wonder if originality, though often invoked in scholarly contexts, has come to lack significant content.

One might find it curious that the faculty advisor of an undergraduate journal is calling originality into question as a criterion for publication when the very journal for which I am the advisor, the *Pittsburgh Undergraduate Review*, states on its website that originality is one of its standards of publication <http://www.pur.honorscollege.pitt.edu/standards.php>. In this case, what the *PUR* staff means by originality is entailed in what I mean by independent scholarly contribution. Their attachment to the concept of originality has to do with its status of having been long been associated with the ideal of intellectual achievement. Since the staff and I are in substantive agreement about what constitutes work that is worthy of publication and our difference in this case is indeed merely terminological, I have not pushed them to change the website. After all, it is their journal; furthermore, originality is such a time-honored scholarly ideal, invoking it on the *PUR* website quickly communicates the type of work the journal seeks. The point of this paper is to examine more closely whether the concept of originality genuinely captures what is valued as a scholarly contribution.

In describing a work as "original," if all we mean is that it has not been done before, I do not see how such a characteristic is necessarily a mark of quality or of intellectual significance. Suppose that a scholar has published what is regarded by people with relevant expertise to be an original paper on the ramifications of n people standing on their heads but that I have written a paper on the ramifications of $n + 1$ people standing on their heads. That this example is intentionally silly does not affect the point since, technically, my paper would still be original if all we mean is that the work has not been done before. Conversely, we have the famous case of Newton and Leibniz *independently* coming up with calculus. Again, if all originality signifies is that something has not been done before, then at least one of these two intellectual giants was unoriginal. This case raises the prospect that perhaps originality is not necessarily the point of intellectual work since it is undeniable that each of these two men made significant scholarly contributions.

A characteristic of independent undergraduate work is that one is doing one's own work. This work may or may not be innovative (read: original), and it may or may not involve the oversight of a faculty mentor. I am suggesting that independent work that makes a scholarly contribution is a more appropriate expectation for undergraduate publication than originality.

One of the pitfalls of emphasizing originality is that good undergraduate work could find itself without support if we hold it up to such a standard. I am also the co-director of an undergraduate research fellowship and informal advisor for many senior theses. In these capacities, I have encountered undergraduate work that has demonstrated identifiable scholarly accomplishments, work that is worthy of publication in scholarly journals, or work that is more generally worthy of support, funding, and an audience. Rarely, though, would I say

that this work was original, if by original we mean that new intellectual ground is being broken or that no one has ever come up with the same basic idea before. Nevertheless, by undertaking these works of independent (as opposed to original) scholarship, students and their audiences benefited from what they learned; that is, their scholarly accomplishment consisted in their ability to do independent work and to convey their findings even if this work would not have measured up to a standard of originality.

At least one goal of having undergraduates do research is to have them grapple with leading scholarship and assess it critically. This goal remains intact even if the emphasis is placed on producing independent rather than original work. In my experience, work that is independent and is worthy of support (including publication) involves students taking a significant part in an intellectual undertaking such that they gain mastery of the subject matter even if the work is not original, as in most undergraduate research within the laboratory sciences. In such cases, the scholarly accomplishment is identifiable: perhaps the student synthesized extant ideas or played a part in a larger undertaking. This work still constitutes a scholarly accomplishment enabled by the independent nature of the work done by the students even if the work is not original. Independent work is characterized by mastery of relevant content in that undergraduates conduct their research and write about it in a manner such that they are not merely following the directives of a principal investigator.

Perhaps the same could be said of original work, but emphasizing the independent nature of the work, rather than its originality, addresses significant problems. As expressed by a no lesser light than Isaac Newton himself, we all stand on the shoulders of giants, so making originality a requirement for publication (especially for undergraduates) seems to me a misplaced concern. Perhaps analysis and synthesis of the works of "giants" is an appropriate goal for (undergraduate) scholarship. As some of the faculty referees for the *PUR* have noted, it is likely beyond undergraduates' ken to indentify originality in scholarship. Accordingly, it strikes me as a questionable expectation to have undergraduates produce original work, especially if the standard of originality disqualifies the work from being considered a scholarly accomplishment and thus from being deemed worthy of institutional support or publication.

In seeking originality, what is our goal? That "the work has not been done before" is a problematic criterion for publishing. Maybe there are good scholarly reasons why it has not been done before; after all, just because something has not been done yet does not mean that it is good. If we valorize "original" work because it makes a contribution to knowledge, this is entirely compatible with "scholarly accomplishment," which is compatible with holding undergraduate publication to the standard of "independent work" as I am recommending.

Even though I have argued for emphasizing independent work rather than originality as an appropriate criterion for assessing the scholarly accomplishment of undergraduate work, I acknowledge that the case I present faces difficulties. In fact, these concerns were voiced when I raised the issues discussed

in this article with the former executive editorial staff of the *PUR* (i.e., the undergraduates who used to run the journal; they have since graduated). One general question they raised was: What is the point of publishing unoriginal work? My answer would be that an author of independent (but not necessarily original) work that constitutes a scholarly accomplishment benefits, as does the audience. The audience benefits by learning from the scholarly accomplishment, and authors benefit from the learning they derive from the independent nature of the work they have done. That is, they learn from doing work that exceeds merely doing what they are told to do by a faculty overseer.

Another reasonable objection to the case I am presenting is that original work admits of being identified objectively while independent work is harder to identify. My response would be that, in keeping with current practice in professional academic journals, scholarly accomplishment can be identified objectively by those with relevant expertise in the field and who are thus able to make such discernments.

What is the scholarly accomplishment of this article? My aim has been to show that the "scholarly accomplishment" associated with independent work is a more appropriate requirement than originality for undergraduate publication. In addition to being a more appropriate goal, focusing on scholarly accomplishment addresses pitfalls associated with making originality the criterion for undergraduate publication. One pitfall is that novelty is not necessarily an indication of quality. More important than this, though, is the idea that emphasizing independent scholarly accomplishment rather than originality will help minimize the chance that good undergraduate work could go unpublished or without institutional support more broadly.

REFERENCE

Buckner, Ellen. "Ten Steps to Honors Publication: How Students Can Prepare their Honors Work for Publication." *Honors in Practice* 3 (2007): 149–55.

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