

LIBRARY ETHICS COLUMN

The Surrogate Researcher

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"The Surrogate Researcher" inaugurates a new column, "Library Ethics," in *New Jersey Libraries*. Although the traditional problems of censorship and intellectual freedom are familiar to most librarians, emerging technology, the information explosion, and a new generation of library users have given rise to a host of new and complex ethical issues that librarians have to deal with. Academic integrity, electronic plagiarism, and political correctness are just some of the issues increasingly under professional scrutiny. It is the aim of this column to explore as many of these issues as possible.

Readers are invited to submit comments and articles to: Robert Wolk, Askew Library, William Paterson College, 300 Pompton Road, Wayne, NJ 07470.

CASE STUDY: THE SURROGATE RESEARCHER

The following case study was initially presented at a staff meeting of William Paterson College librarians. The study generated a lively discussion that resulted in a video taped forum where librarians and faculty debated the meaning of academic integrity.

From his seat at the Information Desk Dennis Anderson enjoyed a commanding view of the Royce Library reference area. Occasionally looking up from the latest issue of *Beyond Libraries*, he caught the eye of a student flipping through the cards of the subject catalog. Before he could finish the first article, he was approached by Cindy Sharmin, a frustrated sophomore transfer student.

"Hi, can you help me?"

Dennis looked up and nodded.

"I need information on women in the Industrial Revolution."

"Are you writing a paper?"

"Yeah."

"What class is this for?"

"Uh...I'm not sure."

"Is it a history class or Racism and Sexism?"

"I think so."

"Well, you have an interesting topic."

Dennis tried to sound enthusiastic as he led her back to the subject catalog.

"Now, are you referring to the Industrial Revolution in England or the United States?"

"I guess it doesn't matter."

"You know this is a large topic. Are you focusing on one aspect of the Industrial Revolution, for example, one group of workers?"

Cindy looked puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"You might want to focus on girls employed in sweat shops, or the origins of Child Labor laws, or you might want to concentrate on working conditions?"

"No, I just need something on women."

"Well, industrialization didn't happen overnight. It started in England in the Eighteenth Century, and conditions were different in each country."

"No, just women."

Cindy slouched against the catalog drawers as she shifted an oversized tote bag onto her other shoulder.

"Before you attempt to write a paper you should have a clear idea about what you're writing. You selected a topic; now you need to narrow it down, to focus. I suggested a few things, but you should try to write about something that interests you." Dennis pointed to a nearby chair. "Let me make a suggestion. Why don't you sit down over here and ask yourself a few questions that you want to know about women in the Industrial Revolution. You might want to put those questions in the form of an outline. Your research will then try to answer those

questions. That's what I mean by focusing."

"I don't have time for that," Cindy shrugged, "its really not for me. My boyfriend is doing a paper and he asked me to get something on women."

"Did he give you any other information?"

"Not really."

Dennis sighed deeply. "You're not providing me with sufficient information to help you or your friend. I don't think I can properly answer your question without speaking to him."

"But he's too busy to come here. He has football practice, and anyway I'm going to help him with the paper since..."

"I understand," Dennis interrupted, "But it's really not fair to you or your friend or to me. I'm not sure what he really needs, and I wouldn't want to give you or him information that wouldn't be helpful. I suggest you have him contact me."

"I'm a student here," Cindy persisted, "why can't you just help me?"

Dennis patiently explained that research was a personal matter, and that he would need further information that only Cindy's friend could provide. Acknowledging the blank stare of another student who needed assistance, he excused himself and reminded Cindy that her friend could come to the library anytime to seek help himself.

The following morning as he walked to his office, Dennis was stopped by Herb Gribenas, his longtime Reference Supervisor.

"Good morning Dennis, come by to see me when you have some time."

In a few minutes Dennis positioned himself in a comfortable chair in Herb's tiny office.

"How's everything going Dennis?"

"Fine, only three weeks left to this semester. It will start getting busy soon."

"Well, I know you'll be prepared. Dennis, I received a call yesterday from a student...Sharmin...Cindy Sharmin...who said you refused to help her conduct research... something about women."

"This was a rather unusual reference situation. The student indicated that she was doing research for her boyfriend. She wasn't very clear about what she wanted. I tried to get her to focus on a manageable topic, but she seemed indifferent. Then she said that she would be writing the paper with him. As you know, the Faculty Senate just passed a resolution on Academic Integrity, so I drew the line when she told me about collaboration."

"Will you make me a copy of that resolution?"

After a few minutes Dennis returned with the document.

"Here it is Herb, look at paragraph number two."

Collusion is working together in preparing separate course assignments in ways not authorized by the instructor. Academic work produced through a cooperative (collaborative) effort of two or more students is permissible only upon the explicit consent of the professor. The collaboration must also be acknowledged in stating the authorship of the report.

"I see what you mean Dennis," Herb said as he perused the document further. "But we really don't have a smoking gun here. The student's expressed intention to help her friend is one thing, but without a written paper where we can document that assistance, it seems a rather moot point. Besides, getting a book for someone to read is not in itself proof of collusion. Otherwise, all librarians would be implicated."

"Broadly speaking you're right, Herb, but everything pointed to unauthorized collaboration. This was a judgment call."

"I understand Dennis, and I'm not questioning your judgment. This policy seems to be directed toward Faculty, and I think some clarifications need be incorporated for librarians. I'll put this matter on the agenda for our next staff meeting. In the meantime, you take care of reference, and I'll speak to Cindy."