



INTRODUCTION

Fraud and Fundamental Misunderstandings

BY SHANE BORROWMAN

What I was seeing didn't make any sense.

I was teaching an online writing class, and students were required to take part in regular discussions of the essays we were reading, responding to a question and then responding to one another, all within the same virtual thread of conversation. It didn't take me long to get a sense of people from their posts: James was a nonsense sort of guy, answering the question in exactly the number of required words. No more, no less. Lisbon took the same approach when she responded to her peers, quoting their original answers in well-chosen snippets and then explaining, in exacting detail, why she agreed or disagreed. Randi was playful, taking a teasing tone but always staying on task. Chris wandered away from the question and the reading and often had to be asked pointed questions by his peers, just to clarify the meaning of his posts. Some folks didn't use any capital letters or punctuation, so reading required an extra act of translation, at least at first.

There was always baseline consistency. James sounded like James, whether he was answering questions about "Resurrecting the Champ" or responding to Lisbon's rough draft of her memoir. Randi was always Randi—joking with Chris about his negative feelings toward boxing during a discussion of "Who Killed Benny Paret?" or gently chiding herself for struggling to punctuate properly when coordinating conjunctions separated complete sentences.

But Tina sounded different—not different from James or Lisbon or Randi or Chris but different from Tina. Responding to an essay about the need for

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greater regulation of sports involving animals—such as greyhound racing—Tina might engage with the text in a careful, insightful way, noting how the argument that was presented was weak because of its heavy reliance on emotional appeals. Responding to another student’s writing, she might be dismissive and callous, ignoring both the strong features of the text and the feelings of its writer. But stress happens in all lives, and everyone responds differently. I assumed that the erratic responses were a reaction to the stress of our class and possibly stresses beyond class—and other students made this same assumption, responding to Tina in consistent and professional ways across the weeks and the work.

Then Jerry changed everything. In a discussion of “The Men We Carry in Our Minds,” Tina’s post was short, vague, and off task. Responding to Tina’s discussion post, Jerry noted that it would have been possible to write such a string of generalizations without even reading the essay. Tina exploded: “I don’t care what you think about me since you have two kids and no job and no man.” Tina had the facts straight in her insult; Jerry, when she introduced herself, told everyone that she was unmarried, unemployed, and the mother of two children. But this post was inappropriate and unprofessional, and it violated the school’s policy regarding how students could and could not interact with each other.

I contacted Tina, noting that she’d agreed to abide by all of the relevant policies by enrolling in the course and explaining that I was required to file an Incident Report (which would have no effect on her grade in the class, unless a pattern of such interactions was established).

My email was met with silence, and the Incident Report prompted no outburst. I assumed (despite knowing what happens when assumptions are made) that the matter was closed. The class continued, and the discussions went on.

Then Tina submitted an essay that was plagiarized from an easily identifiable online source.

I contacted her again, explaining the process I’d followed to establish that plagiarism was committed, explaining the consequences, and explaining her rights to appeal the matter. While plagiarism was more serious than unprofessional/combatative postings to discussion forums, the incident still affected only her grade on this specific assignment. She could, I assured her, still pass the class.

“Thank you,” Tina responded, “for informing me of this matter. I have been working extra hours at work, and my husband and daughter have been doing my classes for me. I didn’t know that this essay had been plagiarized.”

Suddenly, I was at the center of a perfect storm.

Tina’s posts in class discussions were erratic from the start because Tina wasn’t Tina at all. She was Tina’s Husband and Tina’s Daughter. Her essay was from an online source, plagiarized by either the husband or daughter. And she’d just confessed to me that she wasn’t doing any of the work at all, although her “Thank you” seemed to imply that she’d be fixing the plagiarism issue soon.

But plagiarism had become only part of the issue. Tina was defrauding the school, enrolling in classes but not actually taking them—at least in this case. She was lying to her classmates by presenting “Tina” to them—when “Tina” was truly a corporate being made up of at least Tina, the daughter, and the husband. She—or her daughter/husband—was stealing content from an online source and presenting it as her/their own writing—an act of fraud aimed squarely at me, specifically, the members of the class, and the school, generally. Tina’s existence in the class had all the truth of a padded resume, an exaggerated dating profile, a ghost-written book. Less, really. A padded resume would still include facts—just facts that were stretched to (and maybe slightly beyond) the breaking point. An exaggerated dating profile still represents a real person in most ways—just a polished version of that person, a version crafted to be more appealing to potential partners. And a ghost-written book would exist within a long tradition of ghost writing, one where it’s understood that John F. Kennedy had only nominal involvement with his Profiles in Courage and, at the other end of the spectrum, a reality television star incapable of speaking in complete sentences could publish her/his autobiography within only weeks of becoming famous.

There was no authentic level on which Tina, her participation in the class, or her enrollment at the school could be understood or even verified—beyond the existence of a birth certificate and Social Security number, neither of which is universally accepted in America as proof of legitimate existence. Even Tina’s tuition was being paid in a fraudulent way, given that she’d taken out loans to cover the education that she was/wasn’t earning. She was obtaining loans that, at a minimum, required her to attend the classes the money was paying for—and if she stopped attending at any point, she was legally required to pay

back a portion of her loan amount. But how could anyone, ever, determine if Tina had attended the class at all? I did what a corporate structure calls for in a situation with so many variables: I forwarded the whole matter to my supervisor—who passed it to her supervisor, along with a ton of supporting documentation of “Tina” and her/their work—and Tina was suspended for a year. After the suspension was complete, she could petition for re-admittance.

Tina’s final email to me and to the Dean of Students was concise and clear: “Fuck you. Fraud.” I’m not sure if that came from her, her daughter, or her husband, though.

To me, the response was irrelevant, ultimately, and is memorable only because of its absurdity and childishness. Except for that last single-word accusation: “Fraud.” Who? Me or the Dean? How? Since a fraud is someone who deceives in order to achieve an advantage, this seems like an unlikely charge for Tina to level against either me or the dean who suspended her. What advantage did either of us seek at this intersection of online education, false representation, and plagiarism?

What my mind goes back to again and again, year after year, is the underlying question, though: “Why would Tina tell me this?” After more than two decades of teaching, I can’t imagine a student coming to my office to tell me, face-to-face, that he/she had not done any of the work, had relied on others to do all of the work, and had created circumstances where plagiarism would or could be committed in his/her name.

For Tina to feel that such an admission could be made to me, a fundamental misunderstanding of our relationship, and of the entire situation, had to occur. Tina was a student at a reputable for-profit university, one that took its educational role seriously and designed its classes to demand much of the students. But Tina, I think, saw herself first and foremost as a customer—one of many customers, in fact. According to the Federal Government, by 2008 nearly 1.8 million students were enrolled annually at for-profit post-secondary schools. Tina applied for and received student loans, using them to pay her tuition at a school that she may never have attended—literally, in the sense that it existed only in virtual space, and metaphorically, in the sense that she may not have done any of the work required in the classes in which she was enrolled.

Tina bought an education, for all intents and purposes, in the same way she would have financed a used Buick. Except she probably would have driven the Buick herself.

The virtual space of the university was an authentic one—placing demands on students and holding them to high standards. But Tina used the possibilities of online space to enlist the direct assistance of her husband and daughter who, quite literally, stood in for her (attending class, in the sense of participating in class discussions as “Tina” rather than themselves).

But the misunderstanding went beyond the corporate creation of “Tina” as a student. For her to confess to me, she had to deeply misread the relationship between us, the relationship between professor and student. I was there to instruct, to mentor, to guide, and to grade. She was there, well, to be instructed, mentored, guided, graded. We were there to work together toward a shared goal: making Tina a more successful writer. I was, of course, also charged by the corporation with enforcing course and school policies—regarding student conduct, plagiarism, and significant acts of academic dishonesty.

It would never, ever have occurred to me that Tina—that anyone—could misunderstand this, but, of course, the matter is easily misunderstood when it’s reframed. In a face-to-face educational setting, Tina would have been more likely to see me as the representative of the educational system (along with other things, including her seeing my role as helper, hopefully). But in a for-profit, online setting, I suddenly became someone charged not with enforcing policies but with delivering product. Without my knowledge, at least initially, Tina changed the nature of our relationship by allowing “Tina” to do her work for her, but she assumed that this wasn’t a problem. She paid for the class, negotiated her non-participation with the aid of her husband and daughter, and thanked me for calling her attention to the fact that they weren’t living up to their part of this devil’s bargain.

But “Tina” left me to consider my own authenticity in the online space. My students knew only what I told them, such as vague statements about where I lived—northern Nevada, at the time—and what I liked to do in my spare time (yard work). They knew I had twins but didn’t know I was struggling desperately to manage my role as stay-at-home father, a struggle I felt I was losing daily. They knew I liked to work around the home—painting and making small improvements—but didn’t know that I’d given this work up almost entirely, once my home, purchased for \$233,000 was revalued at \$70,000 in the collapsed housing market. And they didn’t know that they were, all of them, spread thin on my plate of professional responsibility.

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I was teaching more than twenty students in the class “Tina” was attending. I was teaching another twenty in a second class for that same school. I was also working for two other online for-profit universities, and I was teaching a total of thirteen classes at a time. The amount of work I was putting into any one class—or any one student—was negligible. I sat at my desk for as many as fifteen hours at a stretch, responding to hundreds of student papers, emails, etc. I was presenting a professional face to all of these students, and I was doing almost nothing behind that facade—nothing that would truly qualify as teaching. I was delivering prescribed course content in prescribed ways, and I was making no effort at all to go beyond that. For each school, I located the basement of expectations, the absolute lowest level at which I could function without being fired, and I set up my office there.

My class, like “Tina,” was only a real class in the most general sense. Students did almost all of the learning on their own, with me providing only the required amount of feedback. Failure rates were spectacularly high (in my class and across each university), and plagiarism occurred in more than half of assignments, according to one often-whispered statistic.

Despite all of these factors, some students did succeed. They learned to write, learned to be better readers, learned to think critically about their sources as they performed research. Many of those students thanked me for helping them so much. Some even praised me as one of the best online teachers they’d ever had.

I felt like a fraud. I’m pretty sure I was a fraud, at least by my own definitions of professional responsibility. I rationalized my situation financially: Teaching so many classes for so many schools was the only way I could make enough money to support my family. It was an irrationalization at the worst, scant comfort at best.

I negotiated a fictional “Dr. Borrowman” in every class, for every school, to every student—one no more related to my real abilities than “Tina” was related to the actual student in her class.

These sorts of negotiations and (mis)representations are at the heart of Authenticity, beginning with “In Business,” an unpublished manuscript by famed author Norman Maclean. In his most highly regarded work, the novella “A River Runs Through It,” Maclean tells the story of his family, specifically

the story of his murdered brother, Paul. He tells the truth as he lived it and as he wants readers to experience it—the truth of the experience and its familial fallout; his story is all the stronger for his infidelity to facts. In “In Business,” written much earlier in Maclean’s career and never completed, he considers the legend of George Armstrong Custer, arguing that tourism and beer sales combined and conspired to make the fallen cavalry officer a legend, despite any reality to the contrary.

The readings in *Authenticity* go well beyond the legend of Custer and his last stand, naturally. Matters of authenticity are matters of accuracy, matters of truthfulness, matters of reliability and legitimacy. These are the issues discussed here—in a range of contexts. While *Authenticity* begins with Custer and questions about his legend’s reliability (when tourists and saloon patrons are being rhetorically targeted), it moves through issues of creativity and nonfiction, ghostwriting and grade inflation, padded resumes and online dating. In the end, *Authenticity* considers, via Plato, the question as old as Western philosophy itself: How do we know that anything we know is, in fact, real?

Beyond its readings, *Authenticity* includes a range of research, invention, and composing prompts that will guide you through aspects of the prewriting, writing, and rewriting processes—all designed to help you hone both your critical thinking and critical writing skills in relation to matters of fact versus



fiction, reality vs. fantasy, truth vs. Truth. To begin this process of analysis and investigation, consider the exploration activity that follows this introduction, an activity that asks you to consider something you know...and how it might be right or wrong.



Consider a memorable event from your past—the birthday party when you turned eighteen, a wedding ceremony, a family reunion, etc. Regardless of the memory you choose, be sure to select something that at least two other people are likely to remember.

In writing, describe the memory in as much detail as possible. What came before the event you've chosen? What happened after? Who was present and how did they look, act? What did you and others who were there say to one another? Tell the story of this memory, start to finish.

After you have written your description of this memory, discuss it with one or more classmates. Tell them the story. Read aloud what you've written, but be sure to make notes of any other details you add as you speak to your peers. Often, the act of writing and then speaking will lead to more details, more nuances, more substance. Jot these additions down before you lose them.

Later today, call someone else who was present in the specific memory you described in writing and to your peers. Do not share your writing (at first). Instead, ask this person to describe the event you've chosen. What does he/she remember?

Be sure to take notes on how this person remembers the event you described. It's fine to tell him/her that you're doing this as a class assignment, and it's fine to share your writing after he/she has had a chance to respond. But don't read your description first, as that will influence how this other person's memory of the event is communicated.

Before returning to class, describe how this other participant in the memory remembers the event you chose. Where did his/her memory align with yours? What differences were there between the ways the two of you remembered the event? What do you think might account for the similarities and differences in how the two of you remember the same event?

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As you consider these questions, remember that memory is rarely a matter of being right or wrong. More often than not, every participant in a given event has his/her own memories, some of which align with “what actually happened” and some of which are flawed—because, for example, people tend to remember best the moments that are their worst (thus over-emphasizing moments where they were embarrassed or where they did something that they now regret or find painful).

After all this writing and discussing, what aspects of your own memory of the event do you now worry may be inauthentic in some way?



As a class, generate a list of major events that have occurred during your lifetimes—from Superbowl victories to natural disasters. In small groups, select one event and take ten minutes for each member to describe, in writing, what he/she remembers about this event. Then share your writing: Where do your memories of the event coincide? Where do they diverge?