Odin and Thor

An Honor Council Academic Trial

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Introduction:

Odin and Thor were students in Germanic Paganism 365 at Haverford. Towards the end of the semester, Professor Freyja confronted the pair about a possible Honor Code violation. She was concerned about Odin and Thor’s joint effort on an assignment. Due to various time delays, the trial did not take place until the following semester.

Fact Finding:¹

Odin and Thor explained that on the assignment in question Thor did not remember how to complete a Germanic incantation, which was necessary for one step in the assignment. Odin showed Thor how to complete this incantation in SpellWriter 2.0.

Odin explained that he did not remember exactly how to do the incantation either, so he had devised a set of “weird steps” to complete the process. The pair worked together through Odin’s explanation, both working on one SpellWriter 2.0 document. While working in SpellWriter, the pair noticed that the answer was not matching the one provided by the professor in her answer guide. They decided to change the answer so that it matched the professor’s. Both Odin and Thor then printed out the shared SpellWriter document and used it to finish the rest of their assignment, which they completed individually. Odin and Thor explained that when handing in an assignment, each student should hand in their own individual SpellWriter document and own written work.

When asked about their awareness of the collaboration procedures, the pair replied that the procedures are consistent throughout the Ancient Germanic Studies department and they both had been familiar with them since their first years at Haverford. Both of them had taken many Ancient Germanic Studies classes before taking this class. Odin mentioned that Professor Freyja did not hand out a copy of the collaboration policy at the start of the semester because it was assumed that everyone in such a high-level course would be familiar with the policy. Thor mentioned that while he sees questionable collaboration occur frequently, he believes that the fundamental spirit is that one should turn in his/her own work.

Odin and Thor said that the problem they saw was that Odin showed Thor how to do the actual incantation and that they then handed in joint work. They recognized that the way it should have been done was for Odin to show Thor how to do the incantation using a different incantation for

¹ The professor was not available for the trial.
demonstration purposes. They then should have thrown out the demonstration work and done the incantation all over again on their own.

Thor, Odin, and Professor Freyja’s statements note that both students received 0 credit for the parts of the incantation that were questioned, resulting in both students losing approximately two thirds of the points on the assignment. Professor Freyja explained to Odin and Thor, and in her written statement, that she did not feel that they had violated her trust. She sent the case to Council so it could judge whether Odin and Thor had violated the trust of the community. Additionally, she expressed concern about how much Thor had learned in the course, given how much he relied on Odin.

When asked if they felt they had violated the community's trust, Odin replied that he did not believe there had been a breach of trust. Thor believed there had been: “I didn’t say I’m going to break the code, but I didn’t know how to do [the incantation], and I asked Odin. That was wrong. I feel that I need to repair something.”

**Statement of Violation and Discussion:**

The jury then began a discussion of whether a violation of the Honor Code had occurred. One juror immediately stated that this was a violation of the Honor Code. Another juror agreed and pointed out that when Odin and Thor were asked if they felt there had been a breach of trust with the community, Thor said he felt that there had been and that he “had something to atone for.”

One member of the jury disagreed and noted that this type of inappropriate collaboration happens frequently and that it was not really fair that these students in particular were being called out. Another student agreed with this point and brought up the idea that there is a fine line between appropriate and inappropriate collaboration.

A fifth member of the jury reiterated that the confronted parties themselves said that they should have gone back after the collaboration session and done the incantation individually, which they failed to do. He believed that this was indicative of their acceptance of a violation.

The first juror quoted from the Honor Code that “representing another’s work or ideas as his or her own” is a violation. He believed that the inappropriate collaboration led to the representation of their combined work as individual work, which violates the Code.

Two jurors repeated that this type of inappropriate collaboration happens all of the time, and asked why this instance should be pursued.

A member of the jury stated that Odin and Thor knew how they should have collaborated appropriately, but failed to do so. If they did not know the steps, the Code says that it is their responsibility to find out.

One juror admitted that although this was not the most egregious violation of the Code, it was still a violation and needed to be addressed. The juror believed it was a violation because Thor could not have completed the assignment without Odin's help.
The jury consented to the following statement of violation:

*In submitting an assignment with portions that did not follow the class collaboration policy, the confronted parties violated the Honor Code by representing another person’s work as their own.*

**Circumstantial Portion:**

The confronted parties were asked to elaborate on the circumstances that surrounded the incident.

Odin and Thor felt that most of the circumstances had come out during the fact-finding portion. They both wanted to reiterate that they did not feel that they were under any additional pressure that week. They were working on the incantation in the wee hours of the morning the day it was due, but that was not uncommon for these incantations.

Thor had mentioned in his statement that he had not been feeling well and had a busy work schedule. The jury asked if these factors had affected his work on this assignment, and he said that they had not.

It was clarified that Professor Freyja's concern about their collaboration was that that Odin and Thor handed in the same SpellWriter document without citing the other’s help. Because Thor had copied Odin's unique method, it became clear that they had collaborated inappropriately.

**Tentative Resolutions:**

*Thor and Odin proposed:*

1. Writing a letter to the community explaining their case and the problems they have found with the collaboration policy.
2. Making themselves available to the community to talk about the deterioration of the collaboration policy.
3. Working with the Ancient Germanic Studies department to fix and improve the collaboration policy.

Both Thor and Odin expressed that they wanted to break their own confidentiality to better educate the community. The jury had no further questions and the confronted parties were asked to leave the room.

The jury was very impressed by the resolutions the confronted parties put forward, especially by the amount of thought that Odin and Thor had put into their resolutions. The two main issues that came up were whether the grade for the class needed to be discussed, and whether Odin and Thor should be asked to break their confidentiality.

The jury moved to discuss the grade first. Professor Freyja had given Odin and Thor no credit on the incantation in question, but had given the pair credit on the portions of the assignment they had completed independently. One juror said they should get a 0 on the assignment, because if someone plagiarized even a part of a paper, the paper as a whole would be given a 0.
Another juror pointed out that a paper is different from an incantation assignment; they are graded differently and should be treated differently. She asked, “What is achieved by changing the final grade on the assignment to a 0?” Another juror agreed and said that it was petty to change the grade on the assignment because the individual assignment grade was such an insignificant part of the overall grade for the course.

A juror expressed her discomfort that because their assignments were different Ancient Germanic Studies students were held to a different standard than other departments. She thought that like a paper, an incantation assignment should be treated as a whole. Since the jury was split on this issue, the group decided to take a break from this issue and discuss it again later.

The jury moved to a discussion about the question of confidentiality. Although the jury found Odin and Thor's desire to break their own confidentiality admirable, the jury was not comfortable mandating it. The jury wished to express this in the abstract. The jury as a whole agreed that Odin and Thor could uphold most of their resolutions without breaking their confidentiality.

Before returning to the grade resolution, the jury finished discussing the other resolutions. The jury kept the other resolutions that Odin and Thor had suggested, eliminating the necessity of breaking confidentiality. Thus, the jury believed that Odin and Thor should write a letter to the community and that the parties should engage in a dialogue with the Ancient Germanic Studies department (or just the professor involved so as to not break confidentiality) in order to improve the content or execution of the collaboration policy. The jury agreed that no specific directions were necessary for the letter since Odin and Thor had demonstrated that they had thought carefully about the issue. The jury consented on these two resolutions.

The jury then returned to the issue of the grade. One juror suggested that Odin and Thor might feel that getting no credit for the assignment would be more appropriate. The jurors continued to debate whether giving them a 0 on the assignment would be petty or appropriate, reiterating reasons that had been brought up earlier. Those in favor voiced consistency between cases, those opposed voiced the fact that Odin and Thor had already received very little credit on the assignment; taking away the few points remaining would serve no purpose. Those opposed expressed a concern that changing the grade on the incantation might affect Odin and Thor's overall grades for the course. Those in favor of changing the assignment grade agreed that a change to the overall course grade was not ideal.

One juror suggested that the resolution be constructed with a proviso. The jury would change the assignment grade to a 0 only if it had no effect on the overall course grade. The Chair would call Professor Freyja to determine whether the course grade would be affected by the assignment grade change and report at the next meeting of the jury. The jury consented on this resolution with two jurors standing outside.

The tentative resolutions at the end of this meeting were as follows:

1. The confronted parties write a letter to the community
2. We recommend that the confronted parties engage in a dialogue with the department (or just the professor involved) in order to improve the content or execution of the collaboration policy.
3. We recommend that the confronted parties receive a 0 on the assignment in question.²

Presentation of Resolutions:

The Chair informed the jury that Professor Freyja had said that changing the assignment grade to a 0 would not affect the overall course grade. The chair then asked whether anyone's feelings had changed about the resolutions since the last meeting. The jurors consented again on the third resolution with one juror standing outside.

The Chair brought Odin and Thor into the room. The Chair read the resolutions and explained that although Honor Council was impressed with their willingness to break their confidentiality for the benefit of the community, the jury was not going to ask them to do so. The Chair presented the three resolutions to Odin and Thor, explaining that the third resolution would not change their course grade. Odin and Thor expressed no concerns about the resolutions.

Final Resolutions:
Since Odin and Thor had no issues with the resolutions, the jury consented to the following resolutions:
1. The confronted parties write a letter to the community to be released with the abstract.
2. We recommend that the confronted parties engage in a dialogue with the department (or just the professor involved) in order to improve the content or execution of the collaboration policy.
3. We recommend that the confronted parties receive a 0 on the assignment in question.

Discussion Questions
1. What impact does the frequency of an infraction have on the perception of community standards? Where do you draw the line between a common minor infraction and a breach of the Code?
2. How can you collaborate without breaking the code?
3. What is the value of breaking confidentiality? What might the effect be of having the confronted party at the abstract discussion?

² Only if receiving a 0 on the assignment would not change the final grade.
Thor’s Letter
Dear Haverford,

This letter marks the end of a long and difficult process. It started a year ago when I was confronted by a professor about collaborating too closely with another student on a homework assignment. Writing this has been harder than any class assignment I’ve had, and I think it’s fair to say that I’ve thought more (and thought more deeply) throughout this process than I ever have for a class. Now, that may just be a reflection of my relatively meager academic ambitions, but I know that going through an Honor Council trial has been one of the defining moments of my Haverford career.

I’ve read a lot of abstracts and letters to the community over the years, so I know the different tacks I can take: I could try to place blame on others; I could decry an unfair system; I could continue to make excuses for my behavior; I could throw myself on the mercy of the community, insincerely begging for forgiveness; I could forget how to spell; or, most commonly, I could simply not write a letter. None of these seem like things that I would be comfortable doing, so I chose to take a new route.

You see, none of these allow for personal accountability, which is something I believe in very strongly. That’s why my co-confrontee (if that’s even a word — probably not, but at least it’s a Haver-word) and I have decided to break our confidentiality in these letters. You can skip ahead to find out who I am now if you can’t stand the suspense.

Ever since I came here three years ago, I’ve considered the Code to be the most important aspect of Haverford. Being on trial only reinforced this feeling. Everywhere in the process, from the professor to the Honor Council co-chairs to my friends who supported me to the jury, I encountered thoughtful, deliberate people who believed in the Code as much as I did. I’m not going to say that being on trial was a great experience, nor was it fun by any means, but it was enriching.

I don’t have a lot to add to what’s in the abstract. I don’t dispute any of the facts there, and it is a far better re-telling of the events of the trial than I can hope for a month after the fact. Rather than rehash points made there, I will focus on the most important part of the process: what I learned. Confronted parties learning something is, I think, the most important part of the Honor Code.

I learned how easy it is to slip up. I didn’t mean to cheat, and I still hesitate to even use that word; I don’t consider myself to be a cheater. So what can I call it? A momentary lapse? A small mistake? I turned in work that wasn’t my own, and I’m not into euphemisms: I cheated. I hope you understand how strange it is for me to write that sentence. So please, be careful when you’re working in groups. Collaboration is an important part of academic work, but I learned just how easy it is to go too far.

If you have any questions or thoughts about anything in the abstract or anything I’ve said here, please feel free to contact me.

Dave Merrell ’09
Odin’s Letter:

Dear Haverford students:

In the recent past I went through a process fundamental to our institution. Now, sufficiently removed from this process, I have the opportunity to share some of the sentiments which accompanied me, along with the aftertaste of such an event. In my reflection I hope to cover several central ideas and emotions which I developed and in some cases dismissed over the course of this journey.

Hoping to maintain somewhat of a chronological order, so that the reader may more easily fit inside my shoes, I will start with the incident and the confrontation. I know by this point you have read the fact finding and know the plot, so I will try to develop my own character.

Interlaced with a strong and reasonable sensation of guilt, was an emotional but not completely irrational sense that my actions did not warrant such extreme measures. I found myself floating in the morally reprehensible stream of everyone-does-it-ness. I did not like this position and the sour taste of every letter to the community I had read seemed more real than I had ever hoped.

One important perspective given to me by the confronting professor, which I had either not thought of or was intentionally avoiding, was that different students had different amounts of collaboration at their disposal. Moreover, the rule that I had broken was in place to ensure that two students of similar aptitude and motivation had similar potential to achieve strong grades in the course, independent of their collaboration resources. This I feel is in large part the source of my remorse, not having broken a rule, but having unfairly placed other students at a disadvantage in the course.

During the trial itself, the jury seemed to respond as though the guilt that I had endured was of an appropriate magnitude, and that my "everyone-does-it-ness" was not completely ill-founded.

Drawing from their own experience the attitude of the jury (at least my perception of it) was that, while we did quite clearly break a rule, it was largely an effect of the global abuse of this rule, which may even be symptomatic of a lack of necessity for this rule. I disagree with the latter characterization, and after speaking with members of the department I agree that this rule, or a rule of similar effect but increased clarity is imperative for the learning of mathematics. It is for precisely this reason that my partner and I suggested as a resolution that dialogue begin to either modify this rule, or at the very least make its motivations obvious and the reality of its enforcement known.

Lastly, I would like to remark on the silver lining of this reasonably terrifying experience. This was for me, a supreme demonstration that Haverford College selects and produces a community in which, any twelve members collected will have the maturity, intelligence, and compassion to appropriately judge their peers. Moments before first entering the room I prayed that I would be judged not by students but by administrators, whose experience I could trust and whose authority I could more readily accept. However, after spending several hours with the jury selected, it became clear to me that I was in the best hands in which I could be. Half-ironically and half-reasonably, I have never felt more essentially connected to this institution then I did in those days. I am grateful and apologetic.

Most sincerely,

Jon Lima '10