Dawson’s Creek – Episode 40:
Honor Council Academic Trial
Spring 2000

Introduction: The involved parties contacted Honor Council after Professor Mitch confronted Dawson and Joey about his suspicions of plagiarism. Professor Mitch believed there had been excessive collaboration on the students’ large project paper. The parties had communicated before contacting Council. Honor Council was contacted and a suspicion of violation was reached.

Fact-Finding: The jury first heard opening statements from Professor Mitch, Dawson, and Joey.

Professor Mitch’s Statement: Professor Mitch began by describing the setup of the class and his guidelines for homework collaboration. He felt that the way in which Joey and Dawson worked together had been “pushing the limits” of appropriate collaboration all semester but had not felt the need to confront them before this incident. He mentioned a time beforehand when he had approached Dawson and Joey while they were working on an assignment together. When asked whether that was their final paper, they said no. Professor Mitch felt that his question had implied what his expectations regarding final project were. He felt that based on their project papers, the amount of partnership had exceeded his instructions. Professor Mitch had envisioned their assignments as being completely unique in approach and wording and felt that the work done by Joey and Dawson had been too similar to be their own products. He brought in their papers and the papers of several other students for the jury to consider in their deliberation. He included a paper of another student, Jack, whom he had known collaborated with them, but he believed that Jack had not gone beyond the acceptable means of collaboration with them. Professor Mitch believed that they must have shared the papers they handed in, which would account for the similarities.

Joey’s Statement: Joey described the way in which she and Dawson had completed the assignment. She said that they had worked on it by themselves prior to their meeting and completed the first part of the assignment. When they met together, they discussed the second part, working on scratch paper while talking. Joey said they stayed in the room while they both finished writing up the assignment. She also said
that she and Dawson had received positive feedback throughout the semester regarding their work together and had been told by Professor Mitch that they were a “good working group.” She said that the way in which they had completed this assignment was how they had done other projects in the past.

Dawson’s Statement: Dawson agreed with Joey’s statement of the events that took place. He added that in his phone conversation with Professor Mitch, after the initial confrontation, Professor Mitch said that Dawson and Joey had been “approaching a fine line” all semester. He also mentioned that the structure of the assignment allowed for similarities to occur and that they were encouraged to work together on this difficult project. They worked in an environment where other students and Professors could walk in and that they in no way were hiding their work or their level of collaboration. He felt that if he and Joey had been told that their working together exceeded an appropriate level of collaboration, then they would have changed the way they worked together, but because they had only received positive feedback, they didn’t think that there was any reason to change.

The jury then asked a number of clarifying questions regarding the paper. When Joey and Dawson were asked whether they collaborated while writing the final copy of the assignment, they said that they had communicated verbally but had not shared any written information. They explained that they never passed any written notes to each other while writing out their final project papers, but had their notes from class and their own sets of separate notes available while writing out their papers. When Professor Mitch was asked how he had envisioned the assignment, he explained again his intentions, and showed the assignments done by students who did not work with Joey and Dawson as evidence. Professor Mitch cited parts that he felt were line by line identical in nature. He explained that he expected them to share the notes they may have used in communicating with each other prior to composing their final drafts and that they were not to be used to entirely compose their papers. He felt that there was no other way there could have been so many similarities in their papers without their consultation of each others notes. He mentioned that even their examples were the same. Dawson and Joey said that it did not state in the guidelines to not use the notes they had drafted at all. They were unaware that this was what Professor Mitch had in mind and that they did not entirely share their notes, but had drafted their own separate sets of notes. They explained that there were only a few examples that were applicable to this paper and that they had used the same example, but that this in no way reflected that they cannot think on their own or that they copied straight from their notes. Professor Mitch said that his expectations were implied and that a problem with collaboration had not occurred with other students.
Jury Deliberations:

The jury discussed the implicit instructions versus the explicit instructions. Some jury members felt that even though their level of collaboration was different from what Professor Mitch had expected that that did not necessarily constitute their actions as a violation. The instructions may not have been clear enough. The encouragement Professor Mitch had given them contributed to the impression that their approach to collaboration was okay. Jurors felt that there was no intent to deceive or manipulate the guidelines, but that this did not mean that lack of intent meant that a violation did not occur. One juror cited where the Honor Code says that it is the responsibility of the students to follow the professors instructions, but in this case they did not feel there was a need for any clarification of the instructions because they thought they understood them.

One juror mentioned that the intent is to see if the students had a grasp of the knowledge. Other felt that the similarities were so egregious that it looked as if collaboration had never ceased and that they did not exhibit the ability to think individually. They also compared Jack’s paper that had some similarities in the beginning, but which seemed very different in structure and thought throughout.

Questions arose as to how much aid they had given to one another, if they had communicated at all during their final drafts of the papers, and their use of common materials. There was debate as to whether or not this could be considered co-authorship of a paper versus a case of plagiarism, thus they exhibited knowledge of the material, but it was joint knowledge.

Calling in another Professor was considered to give judgment as to whether or not these papers could have been written separately despite their similarities. It was decided that calling in another professor would not be necessary because another professor would not have the same experience with the subject matter presented in this very specific paper and would perhaps judge incorrectly and not be objective. However, consensus was reached upon holding another fact-finding session.

Fact Finding #2: The parties were called in for this portion, however, Professor Mitch was unable to attend. The jurors presented several questions about the role of Jack in collaborating with Dawson and Joey. One juror inquired as to how many sessions they collaborated with each other and how many of those collaboration sessions included Jack. How long were those collaboration sessions? Was Jack present during the completion of the assignment?

Joey explained that they had met twice, but that their collaboration with Jack was limited to no more than a half hour and that Jack had finished his paper privately. They had spent 4 hours working separately and maybe 4 hours working in the same room. Dawson brought up that due to their similar background in the subject and their previous working together it could be expected that the language they used would be
very similar and that a lot of the language they used was taken out of lecture or out of the book. Joey and Dawson were asked if they ever felt uneasy or unclear about what they were doing. They responded that they did not, and that while they were writing they would ask each other questions as to whether or not the way they framed things in their paper sounded clear and made sense. Sometimes they would change the way they worded things if the other said it was not written well.

Jury Deliberation #2:

The jury met for many hours discussing several points of view. Some thoughts that were brought up were:

Collaboration never ceased and there was a verbal sharing of their final papers. Some saw that their papers were co-authored and that they might have a co-dependent academic relationship. The students may have violated the intent of the instructions, but not the letter of the instructions. One juror brought up that part of the spirit of the Code is to make sure that there is a “level academic playing field” and that this violated that because others in the class did not collaborate to such a degree. However, just because others didn’t collaborate, should Joey and Dawson be penalized? Could they be expected to understand the implications of the guidelines Professor Mitch wanted? If they did their work separately but asked each other to proofread their paper is that cheating? One juror outlined their vision of how in comparing their papers they violated the guidelines of collaboration:

1.) They were given the assignment and they worked on it separately first.

2.) They collaborated on the assignment.

3.) Upon their completion, it is possible to proofread but show individual thought. However, once they begin to compare their papers they no longer can be objective or show individual thought and begin to go back to step #2 to collaborate again, not following the order of completion they were outlined to do and then …

4.) They turned the assignment in for graded evaluation.

It was decided that the process of completion was evident in the syllabus guidelines. The jury eventually reached consensus that there was a violation and they reached consensus on the…

Statement of Violation:
The confronted parties violated the Honor Code by not following the guidelines regarding the completion of Homework assignments as set forth in the syllabus, which specified that students not share the final drafts of their work.

The parties involved accepted this statement.

Circumstantial and Proposed Resolutions:

The parties were called in, however, Professor Mitch was not present, but submitted a written response. Dawson and Joey explained that they felt that Professor Mitch did not seek to understand their side or give them a chance to explain when he confronted them. Dawson said that Professor Mitch did not follow the procedure of confrontation as outlined in the Code, but instead of trying to achieve understanding he immediately found them “guilty” and brought them to Honor Council. They felt that there was a miscommunication as to what was appropriate in collaboration. Joey felt that she and Dawson were presented as “bad guys” in comparison to Jack. Joey and Dawson wanted Professor Mitch to acknowledge their understanding of the material. Both of them felt attacked and as if the intention was for them to be punished.

Dawson and Joey brought up their ideas for resolutions. Writing a full description of what Professor Mitch’s expectations are now as they now see them to clarify things to other students in the future was mentioned. It was suggested that they write a reflective letter about misunderstanding and miscommunication. They brought up their concerns that future encounters with Professor Mitch could be very difficult because they no longer communicated well.

Professor Mitch wrote that he did not feel that they exhibited understanding of the material and the suggestion was made to do another assignment to prove what they know or a grade reduction. He also questioned their previous assignments because it seemed to him that they had collaborated in an inappropriate way all semester from what they said during the fact finding.

Joey and Dawson felt that doing another assignment would not show their knowledge because the class had been over for a while and that doing another assignment would be a waste of their time during their busy schedules. They felt that they should be trusted and that going back to past assignments when they were never questioned to begin with is not appropriate.

Deliberations:

In forming resolutions the jury worked to address:
1) Education of the individual and the community
2) Repairing the breach of trust between the individuals directly involved and the individual and the community
3) Accountability

The jury agreed that a grade change would be appropriate, but were unsure as to what type of grade change. One juror was concerned that by changing their final grade on the assignment, they could fail the course. It was determined that this was not the case, and some of the jury only felt comfortable addressing only the one assignment presented in question. The jury also wanted to help repair the working relationship with the parties, but that it was not necessary for them to always be on friendly terms.

Consensus was reached over the following…

Resolutions:

1. Dawson, Joey and Professor Mitch will participate in a dialogue with a jury appointed facilitator. The goal of this dialogue is to repair the academic and working relationship between the parties.

2. After the facilitated dialogue, Dawson and Joey will write a letter to the community. This letter must include but is not limited to reflections on their actions, the resolutions and the facilitated dialogue. We also encourage Professor Mitch to write a similar letter sharing his thoughts.

3. Dawson and Joey will receive a 0.0 on the assignment.

Presentation of Resolutions:

The resolutions were presented to Professor Mitch, Joey and Dawson and they were all called in after the jury took a 24-hour period of reflection. The jury explained their individual reasons for coming to consensus and purpose behind each of the resolutions.

Professor Mitch had questions about his suspicions regarding previous work. One jury member explained that because of the statement of violation and what was initially presented to them they did not feel comfortable addressing a grade change for all of their work in the class, and thus decided to only change the one assignment in question. At some points this process became uncomfortable due to the discussion that ensued with Professor Mitch and the students.

Joey and Dawson asked about their final grades, but were told that their grades would not change due to the grade change in the resolutions. But due to questions
about previous assignments Professor Mitch had a considerable amount of distrust in
them and their work.

The jury took into consideration all that was said. Some felt that due to the tense nature
of the resolution presentation, a facilitated dialogue might not be a good idea. However,
it was decided that it would perhaps make the relationship better so they could
communicate better than they had been. The jury came to final consensus over the
resolutions.

QUESTIONS:

1.)
Can students be objective in judging an academic trial?

2.)
Should a Professor be able to change the grades to a students’ previous work after a
statement of violation has been reached?

3.)
What are the differences between co-authorship, collaboration and plagiarism?

4.)
Would calling in a third party or professor in this case undermine the process of the
trial?

5.)
Does the lack of intention to violate instructions and the Code warrant it not as a
violation?

Juror Responses:

Juror #1: As students who live under the Honor Code I feel we have the responsibility to
ensure that individually we uphold ourselves to the standards of the code while at the
same time ensuring that our peers uphold them as well. However, our professors are
not considered our peers. I think they need to be under the honor for it is a
contradiction for those who are not under the code to bring up charges against those
who are but those who are can not bring up charges against those who are not. Look at
it this way, if you went to a foreign country and killed someone by international law that
country has the option to charge you for murder under their laws, regardless of your
nationality. Here at Haverford if a professor is in action of confrontation with a student
and does not uphold to the required method of confrontation the accused parties, like in
this case, do not have a medium for confronting them. The professor in this case from
the initial confrontation to the end of the trial acted in a way that was unproductive and
unprofessional. It failed to uphold his end of the honor code, and that is confrontation
with the intention of finding a resolution and the unspoken rule of confrontation with the idea that one is innocent until proven guilty. The professor in this case failed to meet these standards. From this experience I think that we as a community needs to think about our professor student relationship under the Code. For I feel there maybe other professors who may or may not act with such un-professionalism and eventual self-sovereignty from wrong as this professor did. If professors we under the code I think it would add to the strength of the foundation and walls of and not poke holes in the community structure.

Juror #2: I am one of the two jurors who stood outside of consensus on this trial. My reason for standing outside has to do with the final resolution: that the two parties involved will receive no credit for the assignment in question. This resolution was not strong enough for me. The two papers that were handed in by these students were not a result of collaboration; they were clearly co-authored. We counted numerous instances (the majority of the assignment) of sentences that were exactly the same. For me, this constituted an egregious violation of the code. The professor had clearly outlined on the syllabus that students were allowed to collaborate, but that the final work was to be their own. These two students handed in pretty much the same paper; it’s clear that the work wasn’t their own. In the course of our deliberations, most jury members felt that since we only found the parties in violation of this particular assignment, we could only take away as much credit as the assignment was worth. This is poor logic. Imagine that I blatantly plagiarize on a response paper I have to do for one of my classes. This response paper is only worth one percent of my final grade. Does this mean that I should only lose credit for one percent of the course? The answer is, quite simply, no. Our responses to violations should be consistent with the degree to which we feel the action violated the norms of our community. Many of the jurors thought that I was being “punitive” in my wanting to be more severe in regards the final resolution. That was not my intent. I thought that the violation was blatant; it warranted an appropriate response. If the jurors had said to me, “this resolution is consistent with how severe I see the violation,” I would have been happier. But this was not the case. They consistently said, “we can only look at this assignment.” I encourage the community to consider my concern. I recognize that juries are meant to consider accountability, breach of trust, and education when making resolutions. However, we should also recognize that our resolutions should be consistent with how severe we find the violation to be. This is not “being punitive,” it is establishing community standards, and reinforcing our commitment to them.

Juror #3:

I’d like to start by saying that this trial had me torn between both sides for most of the time. While I felt from the beginning that the two students had interpreted the syllabus more liberally than I would have, I was unwilling to say that the students were in violation merely for not matching my own interpretation. But as time went on, and the two homework assignments were compared more closely, the resemblance between the two became increasingly striking. I had trouble imagining two homework assignments from even simple math classes looking so similar.
In comparing the two homework assignments, I was finally convinced that there had been a violation because in many ways, it seemed as if the two students had turned in only one assignment—that they had co-authored their assignment. This seemed to directly violate the professor's syllabus, as it did not allow for co-authorship at all. Additionally, I feel the students overstepped the boundaries allowed by the professor when they continued to talk and ask questions while writing out their final drafts. While proofreading is allowed (and encouraged) in almost all departments, it is important to differentiate what is "proofreading" and what is "co-authorship." It is one thing to ask a friend to look over an assignment once you've finished an assignment. But to sit there and ask questions as you write out an assignment and while they have their assignment right in front of them is more than proofreading, it's collaboration never stopping. For these reasons, I finally agreed that a violation had occurred.

As far as the professor's statement that he had suspicions of the students collaboration all semester, I believe he should have gone to the students and raised his concerns when they first arose. I believe the students would have changed their behavior immediately and this whole trial could have been avoided. While I agree that it was ultimately the students who are responsible for following professors' instructions, I think that the professor in this case could have avoided the issue by simply sitting down and talking to the students early on. I hope he will consider doing this in the future. Finally, I'd like to say that I do not believe that the students were doing anything in violation of the Honor Code or the professor's instructions, but that they instead misunderstood them. Hopefully this abstract will encourage other students to clarify professors' instructions with regards to collaboration and completing assignments. I like to thing it will also encourage the faculty to make their instructions as clear as possible, especially when it comes to collaboration (which it seems is often a confusing issue).

Juror #4:

While I sympathize with the situation that these two students faced, I felt that their actions were not in accordance with the professor's instructions. I think that what ensued could have been avoided had either the students clarified initially what they could and could not do OR the professor had voiced his concerns to them as soon as he noticed a problem. I hope that both students and faculty take one thing from this and that is to communicate.