Back to the Future:  
An Honor Council Academic Trial  
Released Spring 2014

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Key:
Confronted Party: Marty McFly  
Confronting Party: Professor “Doc” Brown  
Course: Time Travel 200

Summary/Pre-Trial:
At the end of the semester, Marty McFly, a student in Professor Doc’s Time Travel 200 course, submitted a final research paper. When grading the paper, Professor Doc noticed that the paper lacked footnotes and a proper bibliography. He submitted Marty’s grade in the course as incomplete. As Marty was applying to go abroad, he noticed that his grade in Time Travel 200 was still incomplete, asked Professor Doc about the grade, and hoped to remove the incomplete from his transcript so that he could successfully apply to an abroad program. After brief email communication, Doc met with Marty at the beginning of the following semester to discuss the paper and the incomplete grade. Marty said that the lack of citation in his paper was due to a technological issue and could not find many of the notes he had used to write the paper. After discussing Professor Doc’s expectations for citation, Marty agreed to fix the problems in citation and resubmit the paper. Upon receiving Marty’s revised paper, Professor Doc was still concerned because he had only cited primary sources when his writing appeared to have been influenced by the works of other scholars. Professor Doc then asked that Marty contact Honor Council, who subsequently collected statements from both parties.

Trial proceedings were significantly slowed by scheduling conflicts. With Marty abroad and Professor Doc not being on campus during many late meeting times, jurors met infrequently, and at times had to cancel and reschedule meetings with Marty after he was unable to be reached via video chat.

Fact Finding:
Professor Doc began by explaining the information in his statement. When Marty, an international student in his Time Travel 200 course turned in a final paper without footnotes, Professor Doc was concerned that perhaps Marty had forgotten to include citations to some of the references he had consulted. He submitted Marty’s grade for the course as incomplete and met with Marty at the beginning of the next semester to discuss the paper and Marty’s citation style. After this meeting, he asked that Marty consult an online resource to help him understand plagiarism and citation and resubmit
the paper with footnotes and a bibliography, along with the URLs of online sources he had used to write the paper. The second draft of the paper Marty submitted contained footnotes, all of which were primary sources.

While Marty had been a great student in the class, Professor Doc still found the paper’s thesis, argument, and tone to be too advanced for an undergraduate to have come on his own without consulting secondary sources. He stated that he did not think Marty had intentionally plagiarized but saw evidence that some sort of violation had occurred.

Marty explained that he did use the primary sources he cited to write the paper, all of which were online, and that he had not consulted additional sources. He saw a potential issue in the way in which he cited his sources but maintained that he had not plagiarized. He stated that he believed that Professor Doc thought he had plagiarized intentionally. He said that his research process included trying to connect personal thoughts and “well-known historical facts,” which he saw as the point of the assignment.

Professor Doc said that while the paper was impressive, it was not in the context of the class discussions, and that he wished he knew where Marty had found his information and assessment of the topic. Marty said he found some of his information through links on Google and Wikipedia. Professor Doc said that Marty had indeed delved into good material, but it hadn’t been covered in class, and the primary sources Marty cited would not have led him to his argument. Instead, Professor Doc noted that in his paper, Marty had joined in an ongoing scholarly debate and [George]’s work (a secondary source) could have led him to his argument. Marty disagreed that his argument was the same as [George]’s and suggested that Professor Doc could have been misreading his essay and giving him too much credit.

Professor Doc pointed out that Marty used the term “flux capacitor,” an obscure term not contained in the primary sources Marty had cited or discussed in class. In the paper it was not cited and Marty had used it as though it were a common term. Marty responded that he did look it up before writing the paper, but that he didn’t remember how he initially came across the term.

Professor Doc also explained that the paper’s tone differed from Marty’s other assignments; while in the past he came across as “a young scholar entering the debate,” there was no hesitation or lack of complete conviction in this paper.

The Trial Chair then summarized the professor’s concerns for Marty: the final paper was significantly different from Marty’s previous work, and the original paper’s lack of footnotes and the lack of attribution of ideas in both drafts made it implausible that some form of plagiarism had not occurred. Marty pointed out that while the original paper did not have footnotes, it did contain parenthetical citations and a bibliography.

A juror asked if Marty had encountered the course material in another setting, which could explain his apparent familiarity with such advanced topics. Marty said that he came to college with some ideas from high school about the basics of electricity in time travel. Professor Doc said he felt that Marty didn’t understand the gravity of the lack of footnotes, especially because Marty had not before expressed that he had an expert-level understanding of these terms. Professor Doc felt that Marty’s additions to the second draft of the paper he submitted were not sufficient; substantial secondary sources were needed to support Marty’s claims and instead he felt that Marty had just added footnotes to appease him. Marty countered that he hadn’t changed the paper too much because he felt that would have been admitting plagiarism. He thought the paper was meant to find facts, form an opinion, and mount as strong a defense as he could.

Professor Doc said that while his instructions made it very clear that he wanted his students to
defend their arguments, Marty’s voice in the paper was not what he expected; he appeared as too much of an expert on the history of time travel not to have taken a serious class on the subject, and he consulted primary sources which were not in line with topics of class discussion or readings. He expressed his concern that Marty had copied and pasted.

Marty said that he didn’t know that the lack of footnotes meant that he had plagiarized, as long as some citations had happened in the paper. Professor Doc stated that unless you specifically say which writing is your argument and which is another’s argument, it is considered plagiarism. None of his classmates had written with that much authority, and he didn’t expect students to consult the primary sources Marty had worked with, including [Biff Tannen], which Marty said he did not see as an obscure reference. Professor Doc felt that there was no way for Marty to write the paper he submitted without using secondary sources.

Marty said that he did look at secondary sources while working on the assignment, but didn’t explicitly use any of the material in his paper, so he didn’t cite them. Professor Doc responded that in the paper, Marty had offered interpretation of primary sources instead of finding a secondary source’s opinion. He was skeptical of how Marty knew where to find these sources, and said that the paper should be published if Marty’s story were true.

Jury Deliberations/Statement of Violation:

Many jurors felt that a violation had occurred but were unsure if it had been intentional. One juror pointed out that Marty seemed to have no defense for his paper, and that he refused to rewrite the paper on the grounds that it would make him look guilty. The jury discussed what Marty should have done differently in revising his paper, and how he and Professor Doc seemed to be on different pages for the second draft. One juror pointed out that while there was no proof that Marty had plagiarized, he definitely needed help with citation for future writing. Another was suspicious and disliked how Marty’s behavior after submitting the paper had apparently upset Professor Doc. Jurors mentioned that, while they should try their best to trust Marty and make an effort to see his side of the story, their trust need not extend unreasonably.

The jury discussed whether Marty’s apparent plagiarism could have been due to lack of knowledge of the subject area. One juror stated that ignorance was not an excuse; Marty had used unoriginal ideas in the paper whether he had looked them up or not. The question was raised of whether learning something eventually makes it yours. Jurors pointed out that the point of education is internalizing ideas, but since Marty could not now reproduce these ideas for Professor Doc or the jury, it seemed that this kind of learning had not taken place.

Another juror said that Marty was aware that Professor Doc thought he had plagiarized and found it strange that Marty had not then cited material properly when given a second chance. The Trial Chair suggested that in this case the second draft of the paper might be disregarded because Marty and Professor Doc had such different understandings of what was intended; the first paper was the real subject of violation. Most jurors felt that a violation had occurred, but some disagreed or were unsure of what the violation was. The jury ultimately agreed to use the notion of ‘unoriginal ideas,’ for it could include material from class discussions and readings, in addition to intentional research. The jury then consented to the following statement of violation:

Marty McFly violated the Honor Code by consistently failing to properly attribute unoriginal ideas to their sources in his final research paper. (All jurors consent)
Circumstantial Portion:

The Trial Chair explained that while the jury did not think there had been malicious intent, something seemed wrong with Marty’s paper. The Trial Chair pointed out that the jury did not believe that this case was the result of copying and pasting, but that it was much more nuanced. Marty stated that he didn’t remember being in a big hurry to finish the assignment; he usually worked on papers in one or two main sessions. When asked about his experience with plagiarism education, Marty said that he’d had basic conversations on the subject and had read the Honor Code. After his first meeting with Professor Doc, he had also read Maud McInerney’s essay at his professor’s suggestion.

When the conversation turned to tentative resolutions, Marty said that he saw a definite breach of trust with Professor Doc, and potentially with the community as well. He expressed a desire to repair those relationships but had no ideas of how to do this. When asked whether he felt a grade change was appropriate, Marty stated that Professor Doc had a strong conviction that he had plagiarized and that his apparent “no tolerance” policy seemed to mandate an F in the course.

Marty said that the Writing Center could be a useful tool for him in avoiding this situation in the future. Marty also said that, from his reading of past abstracts, a letter could be helpful to both him and the community. When asked about his relationship with Professor Doc, Marty said that he thought a mediation between the two of them would be helpful.

Jury Deliberations and Tentative Resolutions:

The jury agreed that separation did not seem appropriate in this situation. When deciding whether the issue should be reported to other institutions of higher learning, many felt it was important to give graduate schools an accurate representation of Marty as a student. However, since there was no malicious intent and Marty seemed to have learned from the experience, many thought that it might harm Marty’s application unfairly.

The jury largely agreed that Marty would benefit from resolutions aimed at plagiarism education. Suggestions included that he work with the OAR, the Writing Center, or take the online Academic Integrity Tutorial. Since Marty had mentioned that others in the community could benefit from hearing his story, jurors suggested that he write a letter focusing on what he’d learned through the process.

To restore his relationship with Professor Doc, the jury agreed that it would be appropriate for Marty to write another research paper to demonstrate what he has learned about plagiarism and proper citation. Jurors also felt that Marty should receive a grade of 0.0 on the original paper and discussed the possibility of leaving the option for Professor Doc to grade the additional paper and count it toward Marty’s grade in the class. The jury consented to the following tentative resolutions:

1. Marty will receive a grade of 0.0 on the original research paper. (All jurors consent)
2. Marty will write a new research paper on a topic decided upon in collaboration with Professor Doc. (All jurors consent)
3. The jury recommends that the research paper portion of his final grade be the average of the new paper and the original paper. (All jurors consent)
4. Marty will meet with a writing center tutor or OAR staff member at least once to discuss using and citing secondary sources (specifically in regards to resolution 2). (All jurors consent)
5. The jury leaves Marty the option to write a reflective letter to the community to be
released with the abstract. (All jurors consent)

6. Marty will not be separated. (All jurors consent)

7. The jury recommends that that this not be reported to other institutions of higher learning. (All jurors consent)

All jurors consent to the resolutions as a whole.

Finalizing Resolutions:

The Trial Chair informed the jury that Professor Doc agreed with the tentative resolutions via email, but had chosen not to participate in the Finalizing meeting.

Marty said that he also agreed with the resolutions, including the grade change and averaging the grades on the first and second research papers.

Since none of the resolutions required modification, the jury consented to the following final resolutions:

1. The jury recommends that Marty receive a grade of 0.0 on the original research paper. (All jurors consent)
2. Marty will write a new research paper on a topic decided upon in collaboration with Professor Doc. (All jurors consent)
3. The jury recommends that the research paper portion of his final grade be the average of the new paper and the original paper. (All jurors consent)
4. Marty will meet with a writing center tutor or OAR staff member at least once to discuss using and citing secondary sources (specifically in regards to resolution 2). (All jurors consent)
5. The jury leaves Marty the option to write a reflective letter to the community to be released with the abstract. (All jurors consent)
6. Marty will not be separated. (All jurors consent)
7. The jury recommends that that this not be reported to other institutions of higher learning. (All jurors consent)

All jurors consent to the resolutions as a whole.

Post-Trial:

The trial resolutions were not appealed. Marty opted not to write a letter to the community.

Discussion Questions:

1. Do you agree that Marty’s final research paper grade should be the average of the new and original papers?
2. This jury did not consent that plagiarism had occurred in the confronted party’s final paper. How should a jury proceed if they are unable to agree on the violation?
3. What are the relationships between plagiarism, memorization, and internalizing knowledge, in a general sense? How can a jury make this distinction?