Mrs. Puff’s Boating School: An Honor Council Academic Trial
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Key:
Confronted Party: Spongebob Squarepants
Confronting Party: Professor of Boating 388, Mrs. Puff
Course: Boating 388

Summary/Pre-Trial:
Spongebob contacted Honor Council after being confronted by Mrs. Puff, one of the professors of his Boating 388 class, about plagiarism in his boating paper. After reviewing statements from both parties, Honor Council consented to send the case to an academic trial.

Fact Finding:
Spongebob’s description of the events that transpired were brief. He noted that he made a mistake in including sentences from the original boating article in his boating paper. Mrs. Puff described the fact that she and the other two professors of the course had devoted a great deal of time to plagiarism education at the start of the semester, since plagiarism had been a serious problem in the class over the last couple of years. They had students do readings on plagiarism, gave a lecture on avoiding plagiarism, and had students work on a mock summary assignment to practice these skills. Mrs. Puff noted that this was the most severe case of plagiarism she had seen, in that Spongebob had strung together sentences from the boating article without using quotation marks or paraphrasing at all. Spongebob described feeling that there was a misunderstanding on his part about what constitutes plagiarism and remarked that he has used this method of writing papers in the past for other courses and had not received any feedback about the fact that it was plagiarism. He felt that since he understood the boating article and that it was a short paper there was no issue with the way he wrote it, noting that he felt the expectations in this class were different than others he has experienced.
The jury then spoke to Mrs. Puff alone. She expressed being upset and angered by Spongebob’s actions, finding that his way of stringing plagiarised phrases together to be deceptive. She had not initially caught it in the first boating paper and Spongebob had received the highest grade in the class, which would have had an impact on everyone else who did their work honestly once the grades were curved. She felt there was no reason Spongebob should have been confused about what constitutes plagiarism after all of the hard work she and her colleagues had done to educate him and the rest of the class. She was upset that Spongebob had implied that it was her high standards and not his wrongdoing that brought them to trial.

The jury then spoke to Spongebob alone and he classified his violation as carelessness. He noted appreciation for the fact that this happened early on with a small assignment.

Spongebob and Mrs. Puff left and the jury began deliberating on a statement. They unanimously felt a violation had occurred and discussed how much detail to include in their statement. Some jurors felt that Spongebob’s misunderstanding of the role of assignment size and intention on the violation should be somehow included, but they ultimately decided that these were issues to be addressed by resolutions and came to the following statement.

**Statement of Violation:**

[Spongebob] violated the Honor Code by including many direct quotes without citation in his [boating paper], which constitutes an act of plagiarism (9 Jurors consent, 1 stands outside in absentia)

**Circumstantial Day 1:**

Spongebob did not have much more to add in regards to the circumstances of the violation, noting he would not make the same mistake again. Jurors asked about the effectiveness of the plagiarism education in class, and Spongebob noted that it was effective but he did not think it had applied to this specific type of assignment. When asked he said that he felt that a 0.0 on the assignment would be an appropriate grade change. Spongebob left and the chair read an email from Mrs. Puff which expressed the opinion that Spongebob receive a 0.0 in the course. Her reason for this grade change was the egregiousness of the plagiarism, despite significant efforts in education against it. She also expressed that the size of the assignment or intention to plagiarize should not influence the consequences. The jury discussed Mrs. Puff’s proposal and some people felt that it might be appropriate, particularly given that Spongebob did not seem to understand the seriousness of his actions. However, concerns about his ability to graduate on time and possible ramifications on his status as a full time student, left many jurors feeling unprepared to make a decision without more information. They ended their meeting, and the chair contacted Spongebob and the appropriate administrative office for more information about the potential effects of such a grade change.

**Circumstantial Day 2:**
The chair read an email from Spongebob in which he expressed the negative impacts failing the class would have on him. He noted that it would affect his ability to graduate on time, his conditional acceptance into an [elite boating program], and his scholarships. Since the assignment was a short paper with only one source that Mrs. Puff, the only intended reader, knew, he described how he was not trying to deceive anyone by taking the actions that he did. The jury discussed the various aspects of what Spongebob had to say and had differing views about what was important for them to take into account when crafting resolutions. The jury all agreed that they did not want to fail him entirely due to his special circumstances and wanted to give him the opportunity to earn credit toward his major, but they were undecided about what form that should take. The jury felt accountable for him graduating on time, but didn’t feel accountable for his chances at being accepted into the elite boating program. Their reasoning behind this was that if he had not told them about applying to the elite boating program, the jury would not have taken his future prospects into consideration when determining an appropriate grade change. It was perhaps an unfortunate consequence, but not one that should prevent them from holding Spongebob accountable in an appropriate way.

The jury turned to discussion of other resolutions. They wanted Spongebob to do some serious reflection on these assignments, as well as others where he may have plagiarized. They decided he should also work with the Writing Center to develop better writing habits. The jury also discussed the fact that plagiarism education needs to be bettered at several levels—something Spongebob had remarked on during the trial—and felt that Spongebob could help to serve that goal by working with HCOs and Honor Council on plagiarism education. They felt that if he wrote a letter to Writing Seminar students about the impact of plagiarism on the whole community, that community education and further reflection on Spongebob’s part could be achieved. Then, they returned to the issue of a grade change. Symbolically, most jurors felt that he should receive a 0.0 on both summary assignments. They also felt that an additional grade change between 1.0 and 2.0 would be appropriate. After debating the pros and cons of a variety of possibilities in that range, they decided on a deduction of 1.3. The jury consented to the following tentative resolutions and statement on reporting.

**Jury Deliberations and Tentative Resolutions:**

1. *The jury recommends that [Spongebob] receive a 0 on both [boating papers], and an additional grade reduction of 1.3 in the course (e.g. from 4.0 to 2.7). (8 consent; 2 stand outside in absentia)*

2. *[Spongebob] will have a meeting with [Mrs. Puff], if she is willing, and a representative from the jury, mediated by a member of Honor Council, by the end of the [semester]. (8 consent; 2 stand outside in absentia)*

3. *[Spongebob] will meet with the Writing Center weekly for the remainder of the [current and following semesters]. (8 consent; 2 stand outside in absentia)*
4. [Spongebob] will re-do his first two [boating papers] and write a commentary on what he specifically did wrong the first time around by the beginning of the [semester]. (8 consent; 2 stand outside in absentia)

5. [Spongebob] will meet with a person of his choosing (to be discussed in the finalizing meeting) to reflect on these [boating papers] and the assignments from previous classes in which he may have plagiarized by [date]. (8 consent; 2 stand outside in absentia)

6. With the guidance of the Honor Council Librarian:
   a. [Spongebob] will write a letter to Writing Seminar students, by the end of the [semester], about what he has learned about plagiarism and its impacts on the wider community.
   b. [Spongebob] will work with Honor Council to develop a lesson plan on plagiarism intended for use by HCOs, by [date]. (8 consent; 2 stand outside in absentia)

7. The jury will write a letter, to be appended to the abstract, outlining their thoughts on this case. (8 consent; 2 stand outside in absentia)

8. If [Spongebob] is ever brought to an Honor Council trial in the future, this jury recommends that the future jury is made aware of this case. (8 consent; 2 stand outside in absentia)

On Resolutions as a whole: (8 consent; 2 stand outside in absentia)

Statement on Reporting:
The jury recommends that this incident be reported to other institutions of higher learning (8 consent; 2 stand outside in absentia)

Finalizing Resolutions:
The jury met with Spongebob, who expressed concern about the impact of the grade change resolution and statement on reporting on his elite boating program prospects. He reiterated that his actions did not come with any mal-intent. The jury explained some of their thinking behind these decisions, and Spongebob encouraged them to reconsider. After Spongebob left, the chair read feedback from Mrs. Puff, who supported the resolutions and asked that she be kept up to date on the completion of Spongebob’s resolutions. She also suggested that the jury’s letter be released separately from the abstract with the hope that more people might read it in that form. The jury added resolution (7) as a result of Mrs. Puff’s first suggestion. They discussed releasing the letter separately from the abstract and felt that given the content of the letter would be closely tied to the abstract it might not make sense on its own, but decided to highlight the letter in the abstract release email.

The jury discussed Spongebob’s concerns and felt they should not change their resolution. They also felt that some of Spongebob’s comments demonstrated a lack of
understanding of the role of intent in plagiarism. Thus, they decided to add to their statement on reporting to better emphasize the serious nature of plagiarism.

**Final Resolutions:**

1. The jury recommends that [Spongebob] receive a 0 on both [boating papers], and an additional grade reduction of 1.3 in the course (e.g. from 4.0 to 2.7). (9 consent; 1 stands outside in absentia)
2. [Spongebob] will have a meeting with [Mrs. Puff], if she is willing, and a representative from the jury, mediated by a member of Honor Council, by the end of the [semester]. (9 consent; 1 stands outside in absentia)
3. [Spongebob] will meet with the Writing Center weekly for the remainder of the [current and following semesters]. (9 consent; 1 stands outside in absentia)
4. [Spongebob] will re-do his first two [boating papers] and write a commentary on what he specifically did wrong the first time around by the beginning of the [semester]. (9 consent; 1 stands outside in absentia)
5. [Spongebob] will meet with the Honor Council Librarian to reflect on these [boating papers] and the assignments from previous classes in which he may have plagiarized by [date]. (9 consent; 1 stands outside in absentia)
6. With the guidance of the Honor Council Librarian:
   a. [Spongebob] will write a letter to Writing Seminar students, by the end of the [semester], about what he has learned about plagiarism and its impacts on the wider community.
   b. [Spongebob] will develop a lesson plan on plagiarism intended for use by HCOs, by [date]. (9 consent; 1 stands outside in absentia)
7. [Mrs. Puff] will be updated on [Spongebob’s] progress towards completion of his resolutions. (9 consent; 1 stands outside in absentia)
8. The jury will write a letter, to be appended to the abstract, outlining their thoughts on this case. This letter will be completed by the end of the [semester]. (9 consent; 1 stands outside in absentia)
9. If [Spongebob] is ever brought to an Honor Council trial in the future, this jury recommends that the future jury is made aware of this case. (9 consent; 1 stands outside in absentia)

**On Resolutions as a whole:** (9 consent; 1 stands outside in absentia)

**Statement on Reporting:**
The jury believes that given the serious nature of plagiarism, regardless of intent, this incident be reported to other institutions of higher learning (9 consent; 1 stands outside in absentia)

**Post-Trial:**
Spongebob completed all his resolutions in a timely fashion.

The mediation between Spongebob and Mrs. Puff focused on Mrs. Puff’s desire to clarify precisely why Spongebob received the grade he did (both because of Resolution 1 and course related factors). Mrs. Puff expressed how fortunate Spongebob was to find himself in the Honor Council process that valued his learning from his mistake. She suggested that plagiarism at other institutions, particularly of the magnitude present in this case, would likely have resulted in Spongebob failing the course and would significantly upset the trajectory of his college career. Spongebob laid out the differences in his thinking about plagiarism now compared with a year beforehand and expressed understanding of Mrs. Puff’s position. Both parties expressed that the process didn’t go as they might have hoped, but that they were satisfied.

The Jury’s Letter to [Spongebob]:

We as a jury struggled a lot in this case with crafting resolutions that would address our goals of accountability, education, and restoration as well as serve the integrity of the Haverford community. We chose to write a letter as we felt the need to share how we came to our resolutions and some of our thoughts about plagiarism that influenced our thinking throughout this trial.

We all felt that this was a serious instance of plagiarism and we found ourselves wondering at many points throughout the trial if [Spongebob] understood the impact of his actions on his professor, classmates, department, and the Haverford community as a whole. We agreed with [Mrs. Puff’s] sentiments that intentionality should not be an issue when discussing plagiarism, especially in a case such as this one where she and the other course instructors offered strong education about plagiarism and how to specifically avoid it in the kinds of assignments that were given in their course. We wanted to be clear through our resolutions that the fact that this assignment was worth a relatively small percentage of [Spongebob’s] final grade did not influence our stance on severity of the violation. Because of this thinking and the egregious nature of [Spongebob’s] plagiarism, we initially considered failing [Spongebob] in the course. We felt that this accurately addressed the violation’s scale in a way that respected Haverford’s integrity as an upstanding academic institution and would be an important step in [Spongebob] taking accountability for what happened and understanding the ways in which plagiarism impacts not only himself and his professor but a much wider community of people.

However, while we felt that, in isolation, such a grade change was an appropriate response to such an egregious case of plagiarism, we found that the consequences that would follow in this specific case verged on punitive. Such a grade change would mean that [Spongebob] would definitely not be able to graduate on time and would possibly affect his ability to graduate at all given his specific situation. We felt that we were not addressing our trial goals if we did not offer him the opportunity to learn from this experience and be reintegrated back into the community. We thus looked for ways to help [Spongebob] reflect on his actions and better understand the ways in which it may have impacted other members of the
community. We hoped that by meeting with, writing to, and working with different community members about his plagiarism, he could begin to understand and take accountability for this violation. To complement this, we decided on a grade change that would allow [Spongebob] to get credit for the class, but that would hopefully help him realize the scale of the violation, as it would likely impact his [elite boating program] applications and possibly other future endeavors. We also hoped that such a grade reduction would incentivize a continued motivation and commitment to strong work in the class. 

We as a jury wanted to honor the trust that [Mrs. Puff] and her department had placed in us to appropriately address this issue and be clear to both [Spongebob] and the Haverford community as a whole that we do not take plagiarism lightly. Balancing that desire with what would best serve [Spongebob] was difficult, and we hope that our resolutions do the job.

Sincerely,
The Jury

Discussion Questions:

1. How do you think the grade change would have differed if Spongebob’s status as a full time student was not dependent on this trial?
2. How do you create resolutions that aren’t purely punitive?
3. Is the jury responsible for considering other similar cases in making their resolutions?
4. Should you look at a case of plagiarism in isolation or in addition to past violations?