

Exorcising academic ghostwriting

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Local media reported this week that the Legislature's Education and Culture Committee has approved an amendment to something phrased in English as the "Act Governing Awarding of Degrees" (TT 5-26-13 p. 3). Let's not go to battle over a Chinese-English translation of the name of this particular law (if "law" it is). We might benefit more by looking at a few questions related to the subject of honesty and academic writing.

The report mentioned above reminds us that serious plagiarizing or forgery of a dissertation or thesis for a graduate degree may result in a university revoking the degree. At issue here, however, is a different question. What should a society do when someone advertises for a ghostwriter of a dissertation or thesis? And how should we react to the ghostwriter?

The new amendment calls for fines for these cheaters.

If graduate students advertise for a ghostwriter, but see the light before it is too late, and do not avail themselves of such "services," I wouldn't fine them. I'd just say, "Get counseling. Work on your sense of ethics, professional and personal. Make a new beginning."

But if a contract has been made for the cheating, whether or not it's a fiat accompli, I see no justice in a mere fine.

Sad to say, there are times when it is only right to expel a student. Passing off a document as significant as a dissertation or thesis as one's own, when it is actually the work of another, deserves the academic ax.

Presumably the ghostwriter claims to be an academic of sorts. A true academic obviously ought to be above such dishonesty. How can there be anything here to argue about? Ghostwriting like this deserves dismissal from an academic post if the writer has one, or expulsion from a graduate program, if he or she is a student.

Minister of Education Chiang Wei-ling was quoted as saying a dissertation or thesis advisor should be able to smell a rat (my term, not yours, and my apology, kind sir) if students were to suddenly turn in a completed work. Student writers typically turn in

sections of a longer manuscript step by step, say in stacks of 10 or 20 pages at a time. The problem, of course, is that incremental turn-ins of material are no guarantee of honesty.

Some of the responsibility here belongs to advisors themselves and, to an extent, our universities. Nowadays, unlike in the past, many educators devote hours of time and precious energy to administrative service on their campuses. One wonders how many advisors have what it takes (not only time, but patience, physical pep, and Sitzfleisch) to read with critical care the pages their writers give them.

The question of the general abilities of some of our graduate students also arises. Being a director for a serious student is an honor, not a burden, and yet in recent years, working with thesis-writers in English, many of us have found the bulk of our "advising" to be largely a matter of waging gruesome war upon fractured grammar and inaccurate vocabulary.

Other realities encourage students to cut corners. Universities in Taiwan have in recent years made serious institutional errors. They have backed themselves into impossible corners by demanding that assistant professors get themselves promoted to higher academic rank the sooner the better, or else lose their jobs. Promotion is not so much a result of teaching well, but of publishing quality scholarly research. It is increasingly difficult to make students and their needs a first priority. How much care can you give to a handful of graduate students when you are fighting a clock that minute by minute brings you closer to your doomsday?

In my experience of directing master's theses, I once believed my students saw their writing and my advising as the sharing of a learning process between us. Students wanted not band-aids to slap on their English mishaps, but a grasp of the patterns of their mistakes so that they could one day write well and be proud of their accomplishments. For a variety of reasons, this type of student is becoming an endangered species.

If this last point seems miles away from the problem of students searching for ghostwriters, put your thinking cap back on.

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