

On Plagiarism

Did Mary Burke plagiarize her jobs program? As a matter of fact, no she did not!

Plagiarism is the theft of an idea. The word itself comes from a Greek word for kidnapper; a plagiarist is someone who figuratively kidnaps someone else's ideas. Plagiarism occurs when students, assigned to write a report on comets or on the French Revolution, just copy what they find in Wikipedia and turn it in as their own work. They are stealing someone else's report, not writing their own – theft pure and simple.

Mary Burke's jobs program was written by a consultant she hired. The consultant used the exact same wording he'd used in other jobs programs he'd written when he wrote up the one for her. Is reusing your own words theft? Hardly. Indeed, it is such a common practice among consultants, there's a name for it – boilerplate. He used boilerplate in writing up the program. No more and no less.

Boilerplate is used a lot by consultants, who tend to write different versions of the same report over and over again. If I wrote economic impact studies, they would all have the same format: a section about the client (EAA or UWO or whoever), a section about the technique, next come the numbers, and finally the measured impact. Three of those sections will vary from study to study, but the technique won't, so my Section 2 would be mostly just boilerplate, the same wording every time.

Or would it be better if I rewrote Section 2 every time? That would increase my time cost by maybe 5%, so I'd have to charge my client 5% more for the same study drawing the same conclusion. Is that what we really want – a way to make consultant studies even costlier?

In the business world, boilerplate is less the exception and more the rule. No one cares if your business plan uses the same terminology as every other business plan. Indeed, if it doesn't, you'll probably get dinged for it. What's important is whether it addresses all the appropriate issues, and shows that you've prepared for all the appropriate contingencies that may arise. The business world does not care about creative wording; it does however value the creative application of known approaches to foreseeable problems.

And Mary Burke's jobs program does just that. Focusing on economic clusters is at least somewhat innovative, applying well-established economic concepts to actual government practice. Using economic clusters is not something Tommy Thompson or Jim Doyle or Scott Walker did, and while I'm skeptical whether it would actually make a difference, it can't hurt and it might help our economic growth. Yes, there are other states looking at doing the same thing. But if it's a good idea, you'd expect others to also consider it, right?

So is there an ethical issue here? Yes, absolutely yes. The issue is the eighth commandment, "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor." We have here some unprincipled political operatives, who've decided to create the appearance of plagiarism where none actually exists. They're doing this because they believe they can gain politically from the ruse. That is the very definition of "dirty tricks," and suggests a total lack of ethics, an end-justifies-the-means mentality that you should find revolting.

Did Mary Burke plagiarize her jobs program? No, she didn't. Is it unethical to run ads claiming that she did? Yes, it is. Should that influence your voting decision? I know what my moral compass tells me; you'll have to let your own conscience make that call for you.