

Copyright Violations in the Classroom: When Beg, Borrow, and Steal Turns into a Crime

Educator Barnes – 5/29/19

When you are a newbie teacher entering the profession, a veteran will pull you to the side and say, “It is okay to beg, borrow, and steal.” It is a teacher right of passage to be told this knowledge and to implement it. Because many schools across the United States are lacking the appropriate resources for teachers to deliver instruction effectively, it becomes a necessity and habit for some.

Beg

On Friday, I will wrap up the 13th year of my teaching career. For 12 of those school years, I have taught in urban school districts where most of the schools serve students who qualify for free and reduced lunch. Some of those schools lacked appropriate resources. I have been an English teacher for most of my career, and I have taught in schools where there were no novel sets, so I begged. I begged the administration for funds. I created [Donor Choose](#) grants and begged the public to fund my novel sets. I begged parents to buy novels. I begged community members to donate books they weren't using. Yes, I had some grants funded and books donated, but that wasn't enough, so I turned to the next step, borrow.

Borrow

When begging doesn't work, we borrow. Teachers borrow resources from other teachers. We check out resources from the public library and pray that our students don't damage or lose them. We borrow from mentors and friends to be able to offer our students the best education possible. When begging and borrowing doesn't work, we turn to the last option – steal. This can be a dangerous option.

Steal

As I have mentioned, teachers actually recommend stealing. In teacher land, that means copying resources with or without permission. Yes, as educators we get a bit of freedom. At times, we are allowed to use a resource as long as it is for educational purposes. I'm not going to lie. I have copied resources as a last resort. Sometimes there are no grants, no funds, no one to beg or borrow from, but we cross the line when we are copying and sharing those resources online and take action to hide the copyright statement or logo. A school district in Texas discovered this the hard way.

Houston Independent School District (HISD) was sued by DynaStudy, and Dyna Study won a \$9.2 million settlement over copyright violations by HISD staff. Teachers not only

shared materials online, but they also covered up the copyright before posting the resources online. According to a [recent article by the Houston Chronicle](#):

Jurors found HISD employees violated copyright laws hundreds of times over a decade, improperly using 36 study guides created by DynaStudy. In its lawsuit, the company described various methods of skirting copyright rules, often validating the claims with email exchanges or Internet postings made by employees.

In one case, a teacher at Heights High School cropped off DynaStudy's name and copyright warning from a biology guide, then shared the document with other HISD educators...DynaStudy's lawyers found the guide publicly posted online in 28 Texas school districts, as well as districts in Indiana, New Jersey and North Carolina.

As an English teacher, I have to teach about plagiarism and as a current librarian, I have taught about copyright. When you are cropping out the copyright logo, you have gone too far. When you are posting online a resource you have to purchase to obtain, you are causing the creator to lose revenue. It is against the law, and teachers should know and do better.

If you have posted a copyrighted resource online or are sharing via email, especially school email which is a public record, do not do it! It is not worth the consequences. Where is the \$9.2 million going to come from to pay this settlement? That's a lot of money going out of the window that could be going to resources or teacher salaries. My advice is to stick to begging and borrowing; cross stealing out as an option.