

An In-Depth Analysis of Modern Academic Honesty: The Sparkly Princess Poo Theory

By Julie Crabtree

When my daughter started elementary school, I signed up to work in the school's library. I don't need to remind you about the woefully under-budgeted, understaffed mess of public school libraries that made me, with no experience, an instant school librarian. That's a whole other column. Anyway, that first Thursday morning, it was raining. As I lead twenty children single file across the playground to the temporary building that housed the school's modest library, I cautioned them to walk fast without running, watch out for slick pavement, and to keep their books dry. They promptly ran off in squealing clumps, using their books to shelter their heads as they stomped through puddles. I remember trotting after them, my own daughter giving me a worried, sympathetic look and holding my hand as we caught up to the pack. My "career" as a librarian had begun.

The kids were all in line to check out within ten minutes. The first kid had a Harry Potter hardback he could barely lift. These were *kindergarteners*. I volunteered to help him find something he might enjoy being able to read but he got huffy, insisting he could read it. We locked eyes; I cowered and checked it out. The next girl in line had the same Ramona book she'd checked out the week before, and the week before that, according to the child in line behind her. I dared to suggest she might enjoy a different Ramona book, but she liked to check out the *same* book every week. She would not be dissuaded. And so it went. My Rockwellian fantasy of smiling kids sighing in wonder over a beautiful picture book I had shown them, or sitting in a sunny corner instantly entranced by a book I had recommended, went down in flames that first day. Even my own daughter politely declined my literary suggestions in favor of a book about origami that (and I think these were more or less my actual words) she *might* be able to figure out after getting her PhD in structural engineering. It wasn't my best moment as a mom.

After the kids had all checked out their age-inappropriate books, I remember looking at the clock and realizing we still had twenty minutes left, and they were fidgety. The boys in back had begun doing armpit farts, which a seasoned librarian could tell you is a precursor to books getting slammed into heads. It was at that moment that Group Story was born.

I sat them down in a circle and quickly explained the rules: I would start a story, and each child would take a turn building on it. I started with something like, "Twelve trolls really needed a dentist..." Twenty minutes later the trolls had met Superfudge, ridden Ralph's motorcycle, become Gryffindors, had a fight with Judy Moody, and high-fived Captain Underpants in the dentist office of a very hungry alligator.

You are probably wondering what reminiscences about my faltering attempts at librarianship and the Group Story have to do with academic honesty. Stay with me here, and I'll explain. Initially, when I thought about tackling this topic, I made a list of possible subjects: the Web services that use remix and mashup to create "original" term papers, the prevalence of plagiarism in high schools, and the intellectual property legal spats I witnessed during my years working for law firms—too complex for a short column. After several false starts and some disheartening research, I despaired.

Then, right around three in the morning (the insomniac's golden hour), that first day as a "librarian" popped into my head. I had a moment of clarity. You see, after that first Group Story, I made it a rule that the kids could not use any elements from real books. Copycatting is easier, of course, so they were not happy at first. But, after a stuttering, self-conscious start, those kids rose to the occasion. They came up with some insanely brilliant stories.

One memorable plot line involved potty jokes. One kid started it, and then each subsequent child vied to add a more original potty-centered contribution. At one point in the story, a princess had to

go, and she ran behind a tree and pooped sparkles. The royal sparkle poo fertilized a magic seed that, as luck would have it, *needed* princess poop to grow its magic flower. We are talking about some serious creativity going on. The kids *got it*: the pureness, the power of originality (albeit scatological).

This “academic honesty” must start with our young children, even if it takes stories about poop. As the kids get into high school and college, they will have the opportunity to cheat. Maybe they will justify it, maybe it will even get them ahead, and most won’t get caught. We need to create a system of values and beliefs that places great emphasis on respect for creativity and originality. It’s the Sparkly Princess Poo Theory. Once internalized, a child will disdain dishonest work.

In my book *Discovering Pig Magic* one of the characters, thirteen-year-old Ariel, struggles to define this sense of ethics for herself. She enters an “original” recipe contest using a recipe she got from Rachael Ray but changing one ingredient (the type of flour used). When she wins the contest, she is deeply conflicted. First, she attempts to justify the originality, after all, she has *won*, and the recipe *is* different. She also tries a bit of head-in-the-sand denial. Ultimately, she cannot live with her guilt. She confesses to Rachael Ray and withdraws from the contest, but not without consequence.

All young adults will have a series of “Ariel moments,” when they must choose to define their own standards of academic honesty. I believe my story will open up dialogue and invite introspection amongst its young readers as they struggle to figure out just where *they* would draw the line.

I am hopeful, even optimistic, that our kids can and will grow into academic honesty with our help. Remember to apply the Princess Poo Theory. It sparkles.