the trickster and the fool

A true story:

At the commencement ceremony the university’s president was proudly handing out bachelors’ diplomas to students as they approached her in front of the podium. Everyone was smiling, of course. Yet one student’s smile seemed to suppress a giddiness that went far beyond the other students’ mere happiness. Handing the student a diploma, the president commented, “Isn’t this a happy day?” The student replied, “Yes. And to think that I made it this far without ever having set foot in the library.”

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I shall not dignify this topic with a lot of writing. It is a topic that I would not address unless I believed it necessary. Please forgive me for having to detract from our learning experience by stating the obvious.

The papers that you write in this course should be breaking new ground for you; they should be exercises in which you demonstrate how well you have mastered “the skill.” Unwilling to risk having their own skills evaluated, plagiarists claim someone else’s skills as their own. They delude themselves by calling it “research” when they use others’ arguments. Developing one’s own arguments takes courage and a willingness to risk imperfection as a necessary part of the learning process…. The following are two other unethical—and thus unacceptable—acts:

- Most (if not all) entries in your term paper’s bibliography should be to references that you have read for the first time during this spring semester. “The skill” can only be revealed as you apply it to new material. Please do not limit your term paper to a review of articles/chapters that you read previously.

- Please do not REwrite something (e.g., a paper previously written for another class), or write a paper that you are now writing for another class. Exceptions to this are possible, but only if we discuss your plans beforehand. As always, our discussion will focus on whether the paper you propose will give you an opportunity to demonstrate your mastery of “the skill.”

There are no hidden agendas here. From the first day it has been made clear that this course is about learning a skill, and that your writing assignments have been occasions for you to practice and demonstrate this skill. The only time one needs to state the obvious (as I have done here) is when students’ and teacher’s goals are inconsistent. To the extent that you share my skill-building goal, you will find “the obvious” obvious (and, although distracting, not at all constraining). To the extent that your goal is to get a good grade in this course, it may be a good idea that I restate “the obvious.”

Especially as the end of the semester approaches, time pressures may tempt you to “trick” me into giving you a good grade without your “ever having set foot in the library.”! You could even succeed, undermining my best attempts at a fair reading of your work. But what would that accomplish? The irony here is that such trickery reveals something obvious to everyone except the trickster. Echoing the university president’s words, “It is not me but you who is the fool here, isn’t it?”