Can I Use the Same Paper for Multiple College Courses?

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When I was in college, I’d sometimes write a single paper that would satisfy assignments in more than one course. For instance, I once wrote a paper on how “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” expressed satire; I submitted it for assignments in both my poetry course as well as my completely separate satire course. I did not disclose this to either professor. When I share this with people, half call the practice cheating, and the other half call it genius. My niece told me it would certainly be grounds for expulsion at her college. In my mind, I was adding a level of intellectual complexity to my studies. Was this an ethical practice, or was I cheating? JOE, CONNECTICUT

As I read and reread this question, I find myself fixated on the idea that this must be unethical, somehow. I suppose my knee-jerk reaction could be described like this: Every professor is operating from the position that any assignment she makes is exclusive to that particular class, even if she doesn’t expressly say so at the onset (in other words, it’s simply assumed that work done for a specific class will be used only for that specific class). It’s as if you were breaking a rule that was so over-the-top obvious it may not have been overtly outlined. But you know what? The more I think this over, the more I
find myself agreeing with your position. I don’t think this is cheating. I wouldn’t say it qualifies as “genius,” and it might get you expelled from some universities. Yet I can’t isolate anything about this practice that harms other people, provides you with an unfair advantage or engenders an unjustified reward.

I look at it like this: You were essentially asked two questions that shared a common answer. The fact that you could see commonalities between unrelated intellectual disciplines is a point in your favor. Some might call your actions self-plagiarism, but the very premise of stealing your own creative property is absurd. You’re not betraying the public’s trust. It seems strange only because the assignments involve a degree of creativity. If this had been a multiple-choice physics test you failed to study for — yet were still able to pass, based on knowledge you acquired from an applied-math class taken the previous semester — no one would question your veracity.

It’s possible to argue that you were “cheating yourself” and wasting your own academic experience — but that’s not an ethical crossroads. That’s more of an existential dilemma over the purpose of a college education that (in all probability) you paid for. In the abstract, the notion of using the same paper twice feels wrong — and if you contacted your old school and told them this anecdote, it would most likely cite some rule of conduct you unknowingly broke. But fuzzy personal feelings and institutional rules do not dictate ethics. You fulfilled both assignments with your own work. You’re a clever, lazy person.

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