

On Talking about Plagiarism

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One of the most sensitive classroom issues is plagiarism. In an effort to ease the awkwardness that so often surrounds discussing plagiarism with students, I have approached faculty at Queens College and at other universities and colleges, asking them to share their experiences interfacing with students about plagiarism. Here, I have compiled a mini-anthology of their feedback and have grouped feedback into a list of tips for things one might consider when discussing suspected plagiarism with students. The tips generated are in no way definitive or sanctioned Queens College policy, but rather, this is a compilation of well-intentioned suggestions based on instructor experiences.

I've delineated the anecdotal responses into five overarching suggestions:

- (1) Consider ways to prevent plagiarism via assignment construction and classroom instruction.
- (2) Consider first providing an opportunity for confession.
- (3) Try to start the conversation in an open-ended manner even if you feel certain plagiarism has occurred.
- (4) Make a plan, to a point, for how the conversation will go while allowing multiple potential student responses. (Re)familiarize yourself with departmental and college policy, and decide where you may and may not have leeway in your verbal and formal response to this incident.
- (5) Be aware that plagiarism is often an act of confusion. Some students are genuinely confused about academic citation.

I've come to realize, through the process of gathering responses from teacher friends, it is not just awkward to talk with students about plagiarism. It can also be uncomfortable to speak with fellow teachers about our experiences with (suspected) plagiarism in our classrooms. Most of the feedback I received was prefaced by comments such as: "My experiences addressing students about plagiarism have never been particularly positive," "I'm having a bit of trouble getting started (or even producing this)," or "I hate this part of teaching the most." I am hoping that presenting some honest and thoughtful reflections will help alleviate the unease teachers and students tend to feel both about plagiarism generally and in conversations about plagiarism.

- (1) Consider ways to prevent plagiarism via assignment construction and classroom instruction.**

My best advice to avoid plagiarism is to really teach writing as a process and give early feedback. If they have to write in steps, and you are checking in early in the process, they are less likely to try it, in my humble opinion.

--Elon University, Education

I have developed techniques that I use to encourage students' learning and writing competency in ways that also help them practice and produce writing that avoids plagiarism. In teaching classes that were 90-150 students, I would typically assign a couple short papers that involved using an article and observations from a film to respond to a prompt, and a research paper (using a few articles) on a relevant topic in child development. To prepare students to write these papers, I would review APA citation and emphasize that students should avoid quoting and put their summaries and analyses of research articles into their own words, which is both an APA stylistic convention and essential for students' development of coherent thinking about complex theoretical concepts and dense academic studies. I would have students submit their papers to Turnitin.com, and I would also provide direct feedback on their writing. In three years of teaching at Hunter, I never had an issue with a student plagiarizing, and found that students' writing often improved overall in significant ways from focusing on the issue of "translating" academic discourse into understandable language.

This year, I am teaching smaller classes of graduate students, and thus the affordances for assigning and responding to student writing are greater. This semester, for example, students have been working towards completing a literature review on a topic in child literacy development and a short proposal for future research. Interestingly, while I have been able to hold lengthy in-class writing workshops addressing proper citation and strategies for paraphrasing and summarizing, many students have encountered considerable trouble letting go of relying on quotations, or directly lifting strings of dense terminology from the article, in their writing. Although they often express considerable concern about whether or not I will "deduct points" for them plagiarizing- they email me with paragraphs or drafts and ask "did I plagiarize here?"- helping them directly engage with improving their writing in ways that is inherently "plagiarism free" has been considerably more difficult.

--CUNY, Psychology and Education

(2) Consider providing an opportunity for self-motivated confession.

I suspected two students of working together on an individual assignment without permission because both students produced similar and/or identical phrases that I considered highly unique. I told my whole class the next day what I suspected and why without naming names. I then told my class that I would be in my office for two hours after class and that if the two students came to me to confess, I would be more lenient on them. They came. This made the conversation easier from the start because I knew that they knew they did something wrong and were willing to address it. I was prepared to approach them after the next class if they did not come to me. However, because they came, we did not need to deal with as many grey areas as we might have had to engage otherwise. Instead, we could discuss how this happened, why, and what they could and could not do in the future. The students received a failing grade on the assignment, but I did not report them to upper channels.

--Queens College, English

(3) Try to start the conversation in an open-ended manner even if you feel certain plagiarism has occurred.

First off, institutions will likely have their own penalties and procedures. You should know those ahead of time, because you don't want to write checks you can't cash ("You will fail this course automatically if you plagiarize") Sometimes those procedures will want you to report it and get out of the way, but I haven't always found that to be the most satisfactory. If it's open-and-shut and you don't want to bother, then go ahead and send it along, but my most useful and instructive episodes have been those "gray area cases" where students have some sort of plausible deniability.

In general, here's what I do. Make sure that you have enough material to be suspicious--at least a few sentences and paragraphs. Bring them in for a chat, but phrase it as "something I want to clear up." When they come in, ask a lot of open-ended questions. "Can you tell me why you chose this line of argument?" "What sorts of resources did you use to write this" And so on. . . At some point, you need to spring it on them . . . Then, be as gentle as possible. "Well, I brought you in because this passage is too close to this other one, and you didn't cite it. This one, too." From there, you want to be conciliatory but firm. I have to report this--it's a requirement of my job--but I want my report to be as sympathetic to you as possible. For that to work, though, you need to be as honest as you can with me. Are there any other sections that you pulled from other sources?" And, to the degree possible (depending on your institution), intimate that the penalty will be a lot less if they cooperate (or even self-report).

In general, my most successful ones have come when I keep it open-ended, and the students basically have to choose between the good prof (Disappointed, but we can work on this) and the unknowable (well, we'll send it to the Honor Committee and see what they say). Given the choice, they seem to take the lesser of two evils. My worst have been when I got too adversarial right away (and over email, so impersonal). The student got hostile, assumed I was out to get him, and it was a much worse experience.

--Georgetown University, History

My experiences addressing students about plagiarism have never been particularly positive. Most of the time, it's because I've never had what I always hope to be a candid conversation with them about their reasons for doing it (when they do it deliberately). Often when I ask a student point blank why he/she plagiarized I get "I don't know" as a response, which is the most frustrating response I could get. I suspect that the question overwhelms students because they think I'm testing them, but I'm often genuinely curious!

--CUNY, Music

- (4) (Re)familiarize yourself with both your department and the college policies. Try to make a plan, to a point, while allowing multiple potential student responses. Decide where you may and may not have leeway in your response. Consider if you are willing to be more lenient if the student openly admits guilt. Consider how you will react if a student blames you or your teaching style. Plan what you will say if a student completely denies any wrongdoing. Weigh these options against whether or not you feel you have solid, concrete proof of any offense.**

I think the most positive interaction I had with a student about plagiarism was in a 110 class with a freshman. I pulled her aside and pointed to a few specific sections of an essay that I'd found were taken verbatim from a New Yorker article. I reminded her of the class plagiarism policy and standards of academic honesty and proper citation. She asked for the chance to revise the paper to cite these passages properly and since they were discrete instances and not endemic to the paper as a whole, I let her have that chance. Her revised paper didn't seem to have any plagiarism and her subsequent work followed the same improved pattern. I think the fact that she was a freshman led me to treat her more leniently than an older student I'd expect to be more familiar with academic standards. The fact that she immediately accepted her mistake and discussed her options for correction also helped. Other students who've been defensive, who've maintained their dishonesty despite my evidence of it, or who've simply provided excuses rather than owning up to their transgression haven't inspired the same understanding attitude on my part.

--Queens College, English

I have had some student cheating to deal with in class and none of them have denied it or become belligerent or disrespectful. I have found if you very calmly present in writing the academic honesty policy for the university, the evidence you have for their cheating, and their penalty, they will sign a statement admitting they did it and that they understand the penalty.

In my class, we have pretty much always had evidence. I've only had one student cheat on an exam and get caught -- it was a final exam, and when one student turned it in told me that the person next to her had something in his pocket that he was looking at, so after he turned in the exam I talked to him in the hallway and asked what was in his pocket and he took it out and gave it to me. So that was pretty straightforward. The other cases have all been in lab, where one student turns in a lab discussion that matches word-for-word (including typos) with another student, so we have copies of both students' work. Now we use TurnItIn which is supposed to catch plagiarism, and haven't had as many problems.

If we just have a hunch (they are looking around the room a lot while taking an exam), we usually try to just move them to a different spot during the exam, because it is a lot harder to be confident with those types of cases.

--Gonzaga University, Chemistry

In my now five years of teaching, I have actually “caught” only about a handful of students with papers that were plagiarized with the clear intent to deceive. Mostly, students paraphrased insufficiently, or were genuinely confused about citation rules. And while almost all of the students I caught red-handed were quick to admit their mistakes, allowing us to move on, once (and only once) did one of my students vehemently deny any wrong-doing. That student remained defiant even after I had—first merely conversationally, then by presenting the evidence—pointed out to her that she had taken entire assignments from the web.

When this happened, I found myself in a bit of a predicament. As a Ph.D. student, I usually have to wait for my reappointment as adjunct lecturer until very late in the semester or even beyond. My department is not transparent about the reappointment process, which results in me feeling quite precarious in my position, especially as funding is rare anyway. This means that, even though my department has shown me every conceivable support in past dealings with difficult students, I usually try to avoid any kind of trouble, which could draw negative attention to me, at all cost.

In the case mentioned above, even though my syllabus contains a very elaborate statement explaining the various forms of plagiarizing which I had asked my students to familiarize themselves with repeatedly, and even though my student’s misconduct was so obvious (all but ten words of her latest 700 word blog post had been copied and pasted from an online source), I instantly began to scrutinize my own conduct, looking for instances of potential negligence. It was an advanced course, but still: Why had I not dedicated class time to discuss plagiarism policies? Had I cornered my student too much when I addressed the issue face-to-face after class? Should I have reached out to her in an email first?

In the end, I contacted my department, got all the advice and support I desired, and just before I could reach out to the official at Student’s Affairs who was responsible for such cases, my student came around and when I gave her a second chance, she “confessed” her errors, and we turned a page.

--CUNY, English

(5) Remember that although potential plagiarism might feel motivated by a lack of respect for you as a teacher, it is often an act of confusion.

My suggestion would be that with plagiarism especially, the teacher can never go wrong by assuming it's inadvertent until proven otherwise. These kids especially live in such a cut-and-paste world -- the assumptions are totally different than the ones I had as a high school and college student. So that's my tip, to be extra careful with plagiarism to presume innocence. I remind myself: they're students, not famous journalists.

-- CUNY, English

I'm having a bit of trouble getting started (or even producing this) as it's been quite a few years since I've had to deal with a plagiarist and I've always towed the punitive line. Once there were tears and another time a young man dropped the course. But our

discussions have made me re-think the kind of black-and-white policies that I've always instituted (like all the other policies on the syllabi we've examined), in the sense of the idea that there can be a continuum of intent -from misunderstanding citation to purposefully cheating. Anyway, I don't really have any experiences that would reflect this as I've just now started thinking about it.

--Queens College, English

On being a student falsely accused of plagiarism: When the teacher realized that he was receiving plagiarized papers, rather than trying to determine how it was plagiarized or questioning the offending student, he immediately blamed me for authoring the offending paper, in front of other students. In my shock, I simply denied it, but when I crossed his path later in the day, I very sharply told him how what he had done was inappropriate. In hindsight, a teacher should never, ever be put in a position to be reprimanded by a student. Arguments I suppose will occasionally arise, but this was a situation which should never have happened.

On the topic of plagiarism, and how to approach a student, I simply agree with most of what we had been openly discussing. . . Question the student; allow them to confess, in the face of mounting evidence. A phrase is stolen or a significant patch of writing paraphrased may surprise some students to learn that it is plagiarism, but an entirely unoriginal body of work must surely be understood as cheating by all. Beyond this line of education on the topic of plagiarism, though, remembering that the students are in college to get an education from which they should benefit for a lifetime should be in the back of an educator's mind as occurrences of cheating take place.

--Queens College, Music

A student in an upper-level course on the nineteenth-century novel wrote a blog post that was full of apparently plagiarized language from two scholarly articles. I wrote her an email, pointing out the problem and asking her about it, leaving room in my note for the possibility that the plagiarism was inadvertent. She responded that she hadn't realized the "rules" of citation applied to blogs. We had an interesting and productive discussion of the ways bloggers tend to cite--through linking mostly--and about the fact that she had used the words of other writers without quoting them, which wouldn't fly on a blog or in an academic essay. She revised and corrected the problem. But then she did it again in her next assigned blog post. It became clear that she was genuinely confused about the boundary between her ideas and those of other writers.

I believe that confusion was genuine, even though I don't understand it. We discussed this second case, and she recognized the problem when I pointed it out. She revised again. For her third assigned blog entry, she sent me a draft in advance of publishing, to check with me about whether her citations were adequate. They were more than adequate. She had integrated sources gracefully and cited them properly. Even more important, she

used those sources to help her think in new ways about new ideas. She'd written a really original post. While I still don't really have my mind around the root of this student's problem--why some students struggle to understand the distinction between another writer's language and their own--I am convinced that the solution is repeated practice and revision.

--Queens College, English