

Plagiarism and What You Can Do about It



Plagiarism is a serious learning classroom management problem for all faculty.

Problems—Solutions

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A mentor once remarked that life is just a series of problems and the successful person becomes adept at continuously finding and implementing new solutions. And further that most businesses experience difficulties and challenges on a regular basis, and that these challenges can be expected to arise every six months or so.

I have certainly found this to be true running Pentronics Publishing. If you are a regular reader of *TFS*, then you are probably wondering what happened. Why have I not seen a new issue for the last four months?

The short and simple answer is that renewals have fallen off sharply and left me with the challenge of how to rapidly

replace *TFS* subscription sales with other products directed at new markets outside of education.

The only reason I have been able to cope with this sudden and unexpected change in business is that I have relied on 20 years of learning about success principles, strategies and formulae. The good news is that success strategies are not all hype and developed to be a quick sell and short-term fix. There are foundations to success that anyone can learn and use to enrich and develop their careers and personal lives. Even after 20 years of study and practice, at times, I still feel like I'm in Success 101 still trying to master the basics.

Similarly in teaching and learning there is always more to know, more to try and more to master. Success is really mastering the cycle of problem—solution; problem solution. In this issue we look at the problem of plagiarism and solutions that work.

The Problem of Plagiarism and What to Do about It

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In this article, I do not intend to replace or duplicate previous works that meticulously address the issue of plagiarism. However, I will share strategies that will benefit you.

If you are new to teaching in higher education you may find this article to be an eye-opener and well as a resource to become better prepared to deal with a modern reality of increased plagiarism opportunities.

If you are experienced and looking for effectual ways to ensure academic integrity in your classroom, studying this article will be of particular benefit to you and to your students.

This is important information to know no matter in what discipline you teach.

Make Integrity an Outcome

First, writing integrity should be identified as a learning outcome. Making the effort to ensure that all of your students complete all writing assignments honestly is a goal that benefits both you and your students.

Only when integrity is maintained can you feel confident in the efficacy of your teaching. When you are sure your students legitimately generate their own writing, you can be sure your students have gained invaluable academic skills and an awareness of scruples, that they need to succeed in their future professional and personal lives.

Thus, it's an important part of your responsibility as an instructor to implement a system to monitor you students writing and continuously evaluate it to determine whether they are fairly and successfully producing writing samples that demonstrate their authentic writing abilities.

I noticed, the other day, a well-known business training company was offering a seminar on how to compose email messages, I knew either students are not learning

how to write or they are not able to transfer their skills to the completion of an everyday work task. Integrity is foundational.

Why Students Cheat

To begin with, you need to confront the problem honestly to understand why your students would cheat on writing assignments?

When you have to deal with a student who has cheated, you may experience feelings of shock and betrayal especially when you find it necessary to discipline your student. (You do have a Positive Discipline plan in place that covers cheating don't you?

If not, see the **TFS QuickCourse, "Ensuring Positive Discipline"** also available through Teaching For Success.) The question, "Why do they cheat?" arises again with urgency.

You can easily attribute a student's rationale for cheating to a morally and ethically bankrupt society that believes in getting ahead. However, that explanation is too negatively pat. The following points shed some light on what motivates a student to cheat.

The student may have been

placed in an English course that he/she is not yet prepared to take. Placement tests are not foolproof; therefore, a student may be placed in a level, sometimes two, above the appropriate class that fits his/her needs. Since the student does not want to fail, he/she resorts to whatever means are necessary to pass the class, regardless of academic codes or morals. In addition, even if the student is informed that a developmental course would best meet his current writing level, the student's ego may sometimes override this obvious truth. Thus, the student may stubbornly remain in the class since he/she believes that an academic and social stigma is attached to necessary developmental courses.

Competition

Many schools and programs, especially ones that are science and medical-based, receive a high number of applicants. Those who are accepted in the programs usually have the highest GPAs. The rigorous standards can convince the student that he/she must receive a "B" or higher in

every course. Thus, to guarantee this grade, the student may resort to any means necessary.

Wrong perceptions

A student enrolled in a composition course may believe it is all right to seek substantial help from others when composing essays.

However, students need to be informed that the act of writing an essay is a solitary act. Donald McCabe nicely articulates this view: “It is also important for teachers to clarify their expectations for students.

For example, many teachers fail to explain what level of collaboration is permissible on assignments.

When they don’t, students must decide for themselves, and, more often than not, they conclude that whatever had not been specifically prohibited is acceptable.

Any teacher who penalizes a student for collaboration when the teacher has not clarified his or her expectations is probably on very weak ground” (42).

You must also be sensitive to the fact that many international students are accustomed to group learning communities in which they worked with fellow students on class projects in their native countries.

In order to anticipate and prevent any unfortunate misunderstanding that may occur, you must clearly emphasize to all students that they are expected to write their essays without assistance from other students.

The Need for Approval

Since parents pay tuition costs in many students’ situations, they may hold certain expectations for their children, sometimes demanding that the children maintain a specific minimum GPA if the children wish to continue having their schooling funded.

The students then go to any extreme in order to please their parents and to continue their education.

With this knowledge in place, you can begin to recognize and prevent academic dishonesty in developmental and compositional writing courses.



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Considering Developmental Courses

New instructors of developmental writing particularly face many new teaching issues during each class period.

In addition to the struggle of learning how to effectively manage the course and address learning differences, they must consider the potentiality of cheating.

Antiplagerism Strategies

Fortunately, there are strategies that address and eliminate the possibility of academic dishonesty.

The problem is a basic one: when you administer paper exams, you must, naturally, make sure that students keep all textbooks, copybooks, and notes in their school bags.

Acceptable materials that may be openly used during an exam can include a dictionary, thesaurus, and blank paper that you distribute.

These materials can be used to generate prewriting tasks such as outlining and clustering.

If you use a computer lab for testing I recommend that you proctor examinations from the

center of the back of the lab. This centralized vantage point allows you to keep a watchful eye on all computer screens and all possible dishonest scenarios.

Online Courses Present Unique Problems

For example, an online-course student could quickly go on the Internet, e-mail the test topic to a friend, who would then write the paragraph for him and immediately e-mail the finished piece to the student as an attachment.

The student could then open the attachment, put his/her name on it, and present it to you as his/her own writing.

A solution to this problem may be for you to sit at a computer console at the back row of the lab and have the students log onto Net Op, which can allow you to monitor students' writing and freeze their screens if necessary.

The program is traditionally used for instructor commentary during practice paragraphs, but it could also be used to remind students that you are constantly keeping a watchful eye on their progress during testing.

Prewritten Materials

Another problem that may occur is students having pre-written paragraphs on their college-provided network drives, which can be accessed from any computer on campus.

Since many English departments use a set list of approved topics for developmental testing, it is inevitable that topics are used in several classrooms during testing.

Students may become aware of this procedure and communicate with students who are also enrolled in developmental courses to the extent that they exchange graded passing paragraphs with each another, storing them in their Word document file for future possible use.

The solution to this problem is to customize the approved list of paragraph topics, pending departmental approval.

In addition, after you have allowed students to see their graded paragraphs so that they are aware of the areas of their writing in which they need to improve, you should collect the paragraphs a second time to prevent the students from sharing their paragraphs with other students.

Composition Courses

I encourage my students to employ several proofreading techniques for their essays, which include reading from the last line of their essays' texts to the first line, reading their essays aloud to themselves or someone else, or having someone read their essays to them.

However, I tell my students that a suggestion or two for improvement is acceptable, but the act of someone else proofreading and rewriting their essays is not.

Since I am not omnipresent in their lives, I cannot always monitor all of my students' actions during the writing process, short of assigning all in-class essays for the semester, which would have an overall detrimental effect on the quality of their writing for the semester.

Nevertheless, I do ask them one pertinent question to emphasize the need for academic integrity in their essays: "Is your family member/friend going to write all of your papers throughout the rest of your college career?"

More importantly, is this

person going to write for you the rest of your life, composing your e-mails, resumes, and business reports?"

This emphasis on the honor code and self-sufficiency thus is an act of faith on the instructor's part, believing that the students realize that an education is for their self-improvement as writers and citizens.

The textbooks we use for teaching composition supply dozens of interesting essay topics for each pattern of development. So instructors are sensible when they utilized these topics when assigning essays.

After all, the topics have been proven to be successful since they are generated by instructors whose combined experience represents decades of teaching composition.

Unfortunately, the advent of the Internet has led to sites (e.g., <http://www.schoolsucks.com>) that offer pre-written essays, sometimes for free, oftentimes for money, to students who are eager not to do their own work.

Chances are, the textbooks most of us teach from are used across the country.

The essay topics found in the textbooks, which are universally used in college classrooms, then become fodder for cheat sites. In addressing these problems, instructors have several options.

Encourage Students to Broaden Their Vocabularies

Students sometimes plagiarize because they have a limited vocabulary and they fear the language.

Requiring that students purchase and use dictionaries and thesauruses is one way of building their confidence in speaking and writing the language.

The more students know and feel empowered by words, the less chance there is that they will feel the need to plagiarize. If a student is technologically oriented, Merriam-Webster Online (<http://www.m-w.com/>) is an excellent resource that addresses this visual learner's needs since it supplies both an online dictionary and thesaurus.

Furthermore, students can receive an electronic "Word of the day" by either looking at Merriam-Webster's front web page on a

daily basis or by subscribing to a free daily e-mail offered by the site.

With a continual stream of words floating into students' minds, they are bound to feel more confident when they write.

Employ Turnitin Software (<http://www.turnitin.com/>)

Having students submit essays to Turnitin is a great strategy for eliminating plagiarism.

After they have handed in their essays, you should have them attach to their essays their receipts from the Turnitin site, acknowledging they have submitted the essay for review.

Customize Textbook Essay Topics.

Turnitin can identify many plagiarized essays, but it does not contain all essays ever written by college students.



Having students submit essays to Turnitin is a great strategy for eliminating plagiarism.

One solution is for you to customize textbook essay topics by either further limiting the topics or gearing the topics to students' lives so they respond with their unique, personal experiences.

This strategy also gives students incentive not to cheat. Robert Harris writes, "Students are faced with too many choices, so they put off low priorities. With so many things to do (both of an academic and recreational nature), many students put off assignments that do not interest them.

A remedy here would be to customize the research topic to include something of real interest to the students

or to offer topics with intrinsic interest to them” (Harris 1).

Thus, when students have a personal incentive to write, they are less likely to plagiarize.

Assign Personal Narratives

In addition to customizing textbook essay topics, I believe that the optimal way of steering students towards better structure, details, grammar and self-enlightenment is to assign personal narratives.

At the beginning of the semester in my English Composition I classes, I inform the students that the majority of their essays will be personal narratives.

For many of them, it is the first time they have been granted the opportunity to use themselves as the subject matter of their writing.

In introducing them to this writing strategy, I apply an art metaphor, telling them that in a basic drawing class the most interesting and challenging assignment is the self-portrait.

Likewise, in writing a personal narrative, students are turning the metaphorical mirrors upon themselves in order to better

understand themselves before attempting to understand the world around them.

Thus, if a student forms a firm conception of one’s own person, he/she then has the tools and apparatus for the effective objective analysis of other subjects.

The application of personal narratives also allows students to concentrate on the craft and mechanics of writing rather than being burdened by the added task of conducting research.

When I assign the argumentation-persuasion essay at the end of the term, I offer them the option of conducting research. However, since research is emphasized in English Composition II at Montgomery County Community College (MCCC), I prefer to concentrate on building and strengthening my students’ abilities to write on a college level in English Composition I.

Occasionally, students write essays that are extremely personal in tone but which need to be graded nonetheless.

When you assign essay topics, you should politely inform your

students that regardless of the essays’ content, the essays still must be marked for unity, support, and coherence.

If this criterion is clearly stated, and essays are read objectively, without any judgment being passed on students’ lifestyles, experiences, and opinions, students will feel comfortable in submitting personal narratives.

Furthermore, personal narratives are interesting, lively, amusing, and poignant as they allow you a finer understanding of students and add another dimension to the teacher-student dynamic.

Thesis Paragraphs in Class

When assigning potential essays topics, you can monitor the writing process from the first step of the rough draft process by requesting that students compose the thesis paragraph of each essay during class.

After the students have spent a portion of the class period working on their thesis paragraphs, you can spend the remainder of the period evaluating the students’ progress so far. Finally, offer suggestions that can improve and refine their writing.

Then, you should have them attach this first attempt at the thesis paragraph to their rough and final drafts.

If a draft greatly differs from the initial thesis paragraph, it is up to you to determine if the student did his/her own writing in the subsequent steps of the process.

Schedule Writers’ Workshops

After the students have completed their thesis paragraphs, the next step is for them to write a rough draft and then to bring a type-written version of this draft to a writers’ workshop, in which both their fellow students and you can comment upon their essays.

Peer evaluation allows them to receive helpful advice from the other students and to gain objective critical and proofreading skills they can apply to their own writing.

Not all student advice will be correct, so that is why it is necessary for you to offer the final word on any questionable peer evaluation commentary. Furthermore, when I run writers’ workshops, students will occasionally not have a type-written draft of their writing.

Because I am sympathetic to situations in students' lives that may prevent them from having their rough drafts completed, I instruct the students to compose their rough drafts over the course of the period.

However, if a student repeatedly reports to writers' workshops without a type-written draft, I then suspect that the student is not doing his/her own writing.

I then request that the student compose the entirety of the draft in my presence during office hours in order to reassure me that the student is capable of completing an essay on his/her own.

Assign In-class Essays

When faced with writing an in-class essay, students may react with fear and apprehension.

In order to ease their testing anxiety, you should introduce students to testing strategies, such as outlining before writing, pacing oneself during the time allotment for the assignment, and carefully proofreading one's writing.

Additionally, remind students that tests are a sometimes painful yet inevitable fact of

life, that they will encounter throughout college and career since employers will wish to evaluate the knowledge and skill levels of potential employees.

In order to give the student sufficient time to prepare for the in-class essay, supply the students with several potential test questions.

On the day of the in-class essay, choose one or two of the questions. A good student, of course, will outline/prewrite all of the potential essay topics.

At the very least, students cannot complain that they were not given sufficient time to prepare.

Monitoring Research

During the last several semesters at my college, the English Department, in a collaborative effort with the libraries, ran a pilot project for their English Composition II courses that were taught by adjunct faculty.

The English Department's goal of ensuring that students write well, effectively organize a paper, and accurately cite a source was aligned with the Libraries' focus on information

literacy, that is concerned with students gaining the skills to locate appropriate information for research and to think critically as they apply the information to their papers' arguments.

As an English Composition II instructor, I was able to witness the efficacy of this project, that sets parameters for the research component of the course in two parts.

Using Proper Standards

For the first part, documentation, the students learn how to properly employ the MLA parenthetical citation style when they incorporate secondary sources, selected by the instructor, in a paper.

For the second part, the research process, students are required to write a research paper of 1000-1400 words in length. The paper cannot exceed 1400 words.

This word limitation immediately decreases the chance of plagiarism, because students who attempt to find an already written paper can only search for papers that meet that word requirement.

A list of topics chosen by the instructor also limits the focus of their research, and the students must complete question sheets that are designed to both facilitate and monitor students' progress during the research process.

Furthermore, students are required to incorporate a minimum of four sources; these sources can include a book, a journal, and an Internet source, which can be a free Internet source and/or a college-vetted database.

Most importantly, one of the required sources includes a reference source specifically found in the MCCC Libraries. Thus, the chances of plagiarism occurring in these research papers are greatly reduced.

An interview can serve as a fifth source. Allow students to also include a personal interview with an expert or authority in their research, since "an interview creates both a current and a checkable source" (Harris 7).

In addition to these helpful strategies, having students attach copies of the articles/book pages/Internet sources from which

they have quoted/paraphrased helps reassure us that our students are composing their own papers.

I ask my students to highlight the passages that they have used in their papers. This request serves a twofold purpose:

- It allows me to ascertain if they are precisely quoting/paraphrasing the source material.
- It reassures me that they are composing their own papers.

See Robert Harris' article, "Anti-Plagiarism Strategies for Research Papers" (<http://www.virtualsalt.com/antiplag.htm>). It offers detailed reasons for why and how students plagiarize their research papers.

Harris also supplies good strategies instructors can employ to detect and deter plagiarism.

For a link to the MCCC Libraries' full description of the research process, see <http://www.mc3.edu/sa/lib/infolit/research.htm>.

Penalties for Academic Dishonesty

Depending on the rules established for academic dishonesty at your college/university, you must establish their individualized penalties for plagiarism.

If you suspect a student has committed plagiarism, common sense dictates that you proceed cautiously in handling the situation, meaning that you confront the students only after absolute or strong circumstantial evidence has established the student's writing as being plagiarized.

At MCCC, the administration has implemented a Student Academic Code of Ethics that specifies, "Options for dealing with academic dishonesty are at the discretion of the instructor" (2). Furthermore, the code warns that an "instructor-imposed sanction may include..." a student "receiving a failing grade for the course with a notation of academic misconduct on the student's transcript"(2) .

This failing grade for plagiarism is an "XF." I inform students that if they receive such a grade,

it essentially functions as an indelible mark on their future careers as students and potential employees, since academic admissions officers and potential employees will see the grade if they read a student's transcripts.

In my experience, this severe penalty alone deters students from considering submitting plagiarized papers.

If you are aware of the various permutations of cheating/plagiarism that exist, you will be able to anticipate and prevent academic dishonesty in their classroom.

You must be aware, however, that students are ever-evolving, especially in relationship to our increasingly proficient technological society.

Finally, you must be patient, energetic, and flexible when enforcing policies that uphold and preserve academic integrity.

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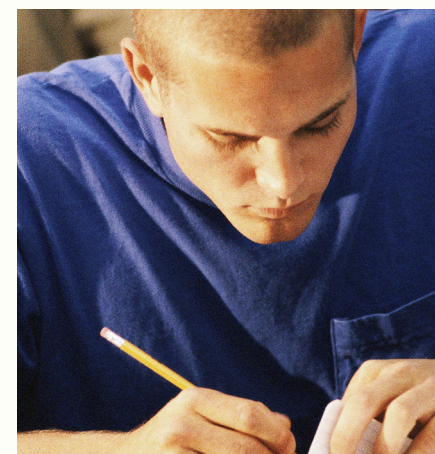
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For interesting reading on how the University of Colorado solved its plagiarism problem, go to: <http://turnitin.com/static/home.html>

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