

WRITING CENTER TUTORS TAKE ON PLAGIARISM

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John had been working with a student on a research paper and had serious doubts about whether this student was writing the words she was presenting as her own. Each time they met, the student would bring in a professional-looking draft. John often referenced the previous draft as they discussed the way the student had built meaning within her body paragraphs. It became increasingly evident that this student had not read the material, as she was not cognizant of her own concepts on the page. John tried to get the student to notice her organizational pattern and continue the logical progression of her work. To do so, he referenced the previous paragraphs and led her along the cognitive cobblestones by saying, “If this is so, and *this* is so, then this must also be so. You’ve built a good deduction.” Wide-eyed, the student surprisingly responded, “But, I don’t think that [first statement] is true,” referring to her own paper. John replied, “Well, you do say that here, and here. Also, here,” as he scrolled to where she had “written” the very positions she was denying. “I didn’t mean that,” she said, appalled. Gently, John explained that if the student disagreed with the positions that she had spent the last page-and-a-half confirming, that would be a very innovative way to support her argument. It was clear that this student had not written the draft she was representing as her own. Moreover, she had not even read the work she had put her name on and planned to submit.

Ida was working with a student when she quickly realized that the student had copied and pasted an entire article into the paper. Spending a good portion of the appointment, Ida explained the concept of plagiarism and the severe consequences that it might incur. The student, taken aback, responded that this was how she and other students wrote papers in Iran. Taking note of the cultural difference at hand, Ida advised the student on the importance of paraphrasing, quoting, and properly citing sources.

Deena asked a student to read his paper aloud during an appointment. Deena soon noticed that the student was mispronouncing a number of words. For instance, when reading the word “discreet,” the student said “different.” The words that he chose did not flow smoothly or sound natural; this led Deena to suspect that the student had not written the paper. Deena

asked if the student had let a friend “edit” or “peer review” his paper, to which the student admitted that a friend from another university had peer edited his paper to make it “sound more professional.” Deena informed the student that the peer editing may have gone too far and submitting someone else’s work as his own, even if only borrowing words/phrases from another student, could be considered a form of moderate plagiarism. She explained that it is acceptable for writers to bounce around ideas, but it is important to incorporate those ideas into the paper using their own voice, which is only done when they fully understand the meaning of any words used. Further, he could get in trouble if his teacher were to compare this piece of writing to others that he had previously submitted.

John, Ida, and Deena are not the only tutors to experience these kinds of scenarios in the College’s writing center. In fact, these examples and misconceptions of plagiarism are a few of the many that writing tutors witness while working with students. Considering that plagiarism is the use of someone else’s words or ideas without giving credit through proper citation, writing tutors see a large population of students who, perhaps unintentionally, plagiarize but are able to slip through the cracks of adhering to plagiarism rules.

The question of what to do about plagiarism—intentional or not—has long plagued educators, tutors, and writing center directors alike. Betty Hoskins, founder of the Writing Lab at James Madison University, reflects upon the delicate relationship between tutor and faculty in her 2007 article, “Ethics and Empathy in the Writing Center.” Hoskins admits to being “suspicious of a paper that uses words that seem out of place or of a paper that ‘sounds too good’” (20). Although, instead of alerting faculty of such suspicions, Hoskins stresses to the student the importance of providing credit where it is due and leaves it to the student to correct the matter. Director of the University Writing Center at California State University, Lise Buranen, takes into account both the student’s and tutor’s perspectives on plagiarism in her 2009 article, “A Safe Place: The Role of Librarians and Writing Centers in Addressing Citation Practices and Plagiarism.” Through discussion with her tutors,

Buranen concludes that some cases of plagiarism arise from students' "naiveté" of proper citation conventions (27). Furthermore, Buranen finds tutors to be more forgiving "of the subtleties and complications of plagiarism and issues of intertextuality" than faculty members, as she believes tutors are better able to relate to the students (32). In her 2018 article, "Reframing Anti-Plagiarism Efforts in the Academic Library," Dalton State College Librarian Amy Burger refers to the point of view of Rebecca Moore Howard, director of the Writing Center at Syracuse University. Howard asserts that some methods of plagiarism are "a necessary and productive step in students' development of proper citation skills" (Burger). Rather than penalize students that have plagiarized, Howard views circumstances of plagiarism as learning opportunities. Hoskins, Buranen, and Howard hold different beliefs and maintain different approaches in regards to addressing plagiarism in their writing centers, but all could agree that plagiarism is a persistent problem. The problems that exist for tutors include faculty being allowed to decide how to handle plagiarism violations, confusion following instructors' interpretations of standard citation rules, and the roadblocks presented by cultural differences and various comprehension levels.

Ultimately, faculty have a responsibility to decide how to handle students' academic dishonesty as they see fit. Depending on the faculty member, consequences can be anything from a warning to expulsion from the class or university. After meeting with a student suspected of plagiarizing, if it is determined that the violation was unintended, the faculty member may offer a chance to advance the student's learning and not impose a sanction. This means that one student could potentially get a hand slap, under the guise of a learning experience multiple times throughout their academic career, while another receives a permanent black mark on their academic record. It makes one wonder: How many students claim to be unaware of plagiarism rules even after repeated learning experiences, and what, if anything, can be done to keep this from happening? Should the rules regarding plagiarism infractions be more concrete, so each student faces the same consequences, rather than allowing each faculty member to subjectively decide?

The fact that faculty have a right to alter citation requirements to fit assignments can further lead to student confusion and result in acts of plagiarism. Students may carry those altered versions of citation rules onto their next class and beyond, even if they no longer apply in a different setting. One writing tutor, Deanna, had an extreme case of this involving a

student who came to the writing center because he was confused by his instructor's version of self-plagiarizing. The student was warned that repeating quotes he had used in an earlier paper—quotes that included an interview with his father—would be considered self-plagiarism and reason to fail the class. The student was so afraid of breaking confusing plagiarism rules that he put the majority of his essay in quotes because he was terrified of the instructor's threat that anyone caught plagiarizing would fail the class. In fairness to the student, Deanna recognized that he had come in the writing center doing something that he did not understand, but she could not talk him out of over-quoting material. Personally, part of her could not blame the student. Often times, tutors share the students' vexation with assignments that require challenging citations.

Moreover, specific assignments may require perplexing citations, which can result in a circular pattern of confusion. One such assignment might ask students to choose a specific topic—for example, a particular disease—for an informative research paper in a science-based class, leaving little to no room for the writer's voice. This type of assignment has always confused one of our tutors, so she attended a citation workshop offered through the library. Our tutor thought this was the perfect opportunity to ask the presenter how to avoid over-citing research papers for science-based classes, like nursing. The presenter paused for a moment and said that would be a question for the writing center. The tutor then informed her that she *was* from the writing center. Faculty members' altered interpretations of citation rules can also present a challenge for tutors because they are encouraged to follow the most recent editions of MLA and APA formatting, as well as the college library's website and OWL Purdue's website.

In the struggle to combat student plagiarism, writing tutors face a variety of roadblocks while trying to enforce academic honesty. The first roadblock encountered is the discomfort of addressing plagiarism suspicions. After inquiring where the information came from and then explaining the definition of plagiarism and importance of citing, tutors are often unsure how far they can go when questioning a student's authenticity.

The second roadblock consists of cultural differences, as demonstrated in the vignette of Ida and the Iranian student. Because some cultures view using another's work as a sign of respect and do not hold the same idea that other people's work/ideas need(s) to be cited, unintentional acts of plagiarism may occur. Regardless of intent, these students may be penalized just the same.

The third roadblock occurs with some assignments and requirements that may be beyond a student's comprehension level or ability. The problem arises when these students receive extra "help" from parents or peers. I once worked with a student who, I saw, faced extreme difficulty constructing one complete sentence. One day, after weeks of working together, going over each sentence, the student came in with perfectly constructed paragraphs, full of vocabulary that he had never used before. Moreover, very little of the work that was done together was present in the draft. I asked the student if he had gotten help with his paper, and he said that his mother had "helped" him. When asked how, the student volunteered, "She wrote it," with no comprehension that this was not allowed. I informed the student that this could be considered plagiarism, and his instructor might also detect this change in work if he were to compare the student's essay to in-class work. Before the student left, I printed the College's plagiarism policies and encouraged him to schedule a follow-up appointment. Unfortunately, the student never came back.

On a mission to improve how tutors help students that are struggling with plagiarism issues, our writing center staff met to figure out if there was anything else that we could do. A new plagiarism policy based on a three-strike model has been created in order to better serve the students in terms of how plagiarism is handled in the writing center. The policy had to best serve the tutors so that their role was not to judge a student's authenticity, but rather to educate and provide every resource available to help students improve in this area. After piloting the new plagiarism policy for the duration of one semester, our tutors were more diligent in informing students of plagiarism guidelines and more expressive with plagiarism concerns, resulting in a number of students placed on a plagiarism-monitoring list. We have, through our new policy, created a program that gives tutors a clear path on how to handle, record, and report plagiarism suspicions, while providing lessons and monitoring where needed. Policies that encourage learning opportunities may not only help students in their understanding of plagiarism and its consequences, but also guide writing tutors in addressing this ongoing issue.

Works Cited

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