

TEXT, TRANSACTIONS OF THE SOCIETY FOR TEXTUAL SCHOLARSHIP. 6

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An Ethical Dilemma: Talking about Plagiarism and Academic Integrity in the Digital Age

An open, in-depth discussion about academic dishonesty may help students (and teachers) develop ethical approaches to scholarship. Real classroom talk is closely examined and suggestions for discussing plagiarism are offered.

It is every English teacher's dream turned nightmare. One evening after a long day at school, you begin to read an argumentative essay with prose that sings. You put your marking pen down and smile with satisfaction. This particular student has come a long way since her first draft, and you are proud of the tangible evidence of your effective instruction. However, as you continue to read, you begin to experience a creeping sensation of déjà vu. You've read this passage before. A quick Internet search reveals that the passage that you were so riveted by is not the work of your student. Most of it originally appeared in the *New York Times* editorial section two weeks before. A few words have been changed, but most of it looks like blatant copying. Suspicion and dread turn to anger, a sense of betrayal, and the inevitability of confronting the wayward student. You begin to gather your evidence, anticipating (and dreading) the meeting ahead.

The next day, you ask your student to remain after class. You first inquire about her composing process, generating your questions from statements found in her essay's cover letter. Then, you calmly present the evidence of her breach of academic integrity—the clipping from the *Times* and the corresponding passage in the essay, highlighted. The student reads the clipping, glances at the passage, and then reacts with genuine surprise. The teen purportedly had no idea that copying the passage was a breach of ethics, and she did not know that it came from the esteemed *New York Times*. The paragraph was found in the comments section of a popular blog, posted by "Anonymous." Although

the student did not know how to properly cite the passage, she sincerely believed that the passage provided credible evidence for her central claims, and she made the ill-fated decision to include it.

You have no choice. According to school policy, as well as your own personal convictions as an educator, you must assign the student a failing grade for this major assignment. She leaves your classroom, infuriated. You watch the wayward adolescent go, feeling as if young people today just don't have as much integrity as they did in the past.

Plagiarism and Academic Integrity in a Digital Age

This fictional scenario provides one window into the challenges of teaching, talking about, and ultimately enforcing policies about plagiarism and academic integrity in the high school English classrooms of the digital age. Today, many of our students not only access the Internet through desktop and laptop computers at home or at school but also have copious amounts of information at their fingertips via portable devices (e.g., iPods, iPads, netbooks, smartphones). While some teachers welcome the proliferation of portable technologies and easy wireless Internet access, and look for ways to integrate digital literacy and writing into their classrooms, many of us dread the prospect of dealing with more academic dishonesty in student work because of the ease with which it can be done (P. L. Thomas). Overwhelmed, we turn to Google and plagiarism detection services such as TurnItIn.com and Safe Assign, hoping to stop the cheating

English Journal 100.6 (2011): 47-53

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