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What do you do when your student plagiarizes a minor assignment?

By Norman Eng, Ed.D.

My heart skipped a beat. Could it be?

The paper sounded ...*familiar*.

Just like the words a former student wrote. I remember, because they were so eloquently written, so descriptive, so *specific*.*

What do you do?

I knew what I *should* do. The university policy on academic integrity is clear: Talk to the student first. If there is enough to conclude the student was academically dishonest and that this incident would affect his/her final course grade, the instructor would fill out a report. Here an academic integrity officer, appointed by the college, would investigate and determine if academic and disciplinary sanctions are warranted.

But because this “reading response” was ungraded—I used checkmarks to indicate completion—it would not affect the final course grade.

I thought, by not assigning a numbered grade, students would engage more authentically with the text and discouraged plagiarism. Ironic.

If this was a test or a finals paper, I would have filled out a report and involved the academic integrity officer.

But this was a minor assignment. Is it worth going nuts over?

I started thinking about this particular student. He seemed earnest and genial—participating in class, asking me questions individually before and after class—in sum, a typical decent student. Someone opposite of what I imagined a plagiarizer would look like: a disinterested, struggling individual. Of course, I knew better. Yet it still shocked **me that a “good” student would do such a thing.**

I thought about my population. It was diverse—a good mix of Latino(a), white, Black, and Asian students. Typically, they come from working class families. Many of them worked part-time, took care of siblings, commuted to school, and took five courses per semester to qualify for financial aid. Some have kids.

Is it possible this student was just overwhelmed and took the easy route? But why then would he plagiarize an assignment that wasn't even a big deal?

Time to ask the class, I thought.

In the K-12 classroom, teachers do this all the time. When patterns of behavior occur, **such as bullying or tattling, the best teachers call for “community meetings.”** Here, the class discuss questions such as:

Have you noticed such incidents?

What do you all think?

What are some solutions?

I decided to pose the last two questions to a different class—not the one with the suspected plagiarizer. My bigger priority was to help him.

Students were simultaneously sympathetic and harsh. “He needs to know early on that copying is not acceptable. What if he thinks he can get away and continues to plagiarize?” asked one.

“Yeah, but why did he think he *had to* plagiarize? Shouldn't we find out why?” asked others.

“For me,” I added, **“the bigger issue is trust. If I suspect a student has plagiarized, I'm going to scrutinize *every single piece of his or her work the rest of the term.* Is it worth it? Is that what he or she wants?”**

“And do students think long-term about their relationship with the professor? You jeopardize any future consideration for recommendations—whether for graduate school, scholarships, or jobs.”

One student said, “Wow, I hadn't thought of that.” Others nodded in agreement.

The benefits of “community meetings” are obvious. They build trust. In fact, students appeared shocked any professor would consult them on an issue like this.

Bringing up this incident also served as a cautionary tale. If any had thoughts of plagiarism before, I'm sure they vanished after today. I hope.

I probably could have avoided this whole incident, however. Time to assign *new* articles **next term. Also, I won't give short shrift to the academic integrity policy like I usually do** on the first day of class. This incident will be my new cautionary tale.

So what did I do with the suspected plagiarizer?

When I handed the assignment back to the student next class, I pointed to the **paragraph and quietly said, "This sounds very familiar. Where did you get this from?"** He stayed silent.

I walked away.

What would you have done?