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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

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and copying that have allegedly "reached epidemic proportions" in student writing (Purdy). However, there are issues of intellectual property involved in using such sites—once a student uploads his or her paper, it becomes part of the database used to check for future plagiarism cases. The intellectual property caucus of the Conference on College Composition and Communication generally advises against the use of plagiarism detection services as a policing tool. After all, we are teachers, not police, so many of us dutifully teach our students how to cite sources, then are disheartened when we must enforce harsh penalties for those students who are unwilling (or don't know how) to give credit where credit is due.

The digital intimacy cultivated in virtual communities may conflict with those of academic English.

The consequences of plagiarism are what Rebecca Moore Howard famously characterized as the "academic death penalty." Margaret Price further characterizes the tone of plagiarism policies in many of our writing classrooms as "gotcha!" pedagogy. Price observes that "plagiarism is not only a phenomenon that *can* be mastered by students new to academic writing, such policies announce, it *must* be mastered" (89; italics added). The consequences for even unwitting student plagiarists are often severe, ranging from failing grades on assignments to expulsion from a course or even a school.

Students and scholars are expected to cite all instances of others' ideas and creativity in their work, but teachers—and this might bear further exploration—are not expected to cite the contributions of others in our teaching materials. The rules and norms of one community or group may be distinct from those of another (Swales). In this way, perhaps our students are not unlike us. As digital natives, some students may be engaged in digital writing in contexts where norms of integrity are quite different from those assumed by classroom teachers (Prensky). The adolescents in our classrooms, many of whom were born just as the World Wide Web exploded (or later), regularly use social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter, as well as blogs, wikis, instant messaging, texting, and YouTube. Before they were old enough for a Facebook account, many elementary school–age children were initiated into collaborative multimodal composing with the debut of the Nintendo DSi in April 2009, which allowed instant sharing of Flipnotes and other digital compositions all over the world. Today's children and young adults use these forms of communication to engage in textual and visual production that is collaborative, patched together with pastiche and allusions, and shared in what has been characterized as environments of *digital intimacy* (Thompson). Although both digital literacy and digital intimacy can be used to scaffold student learning of written genres that are privileged in schools, the virtual communities where these projects are shaped have their own ever-evolving rules, norms, and assumptions about integrity and what constitutes appropriate authorship. For example, on many fanfiction sites, participants are using the characters, plot, symbols, etc. of a well-known work, but these authors are not immune to charges of plagiarism. The digital intimacy cultivated in virtual communities may conflict with those of academic English. Traditional writing tasks, such as timed, high-stakes writing tests, put tremendous pressure on students to perform. Left unexamined, conflicts between the intellectual property conventions of traditional forms of writing and highly social, multimodal compositions boil over into difficult conversations. Therefore, talking and teaching about academic integrity in high school English classrooms may lead to an ethical dilemma—a dilemma in need of an effective resolution.

Jane's Ethical Dilemma: Talking about Plagiarism with Students

Ebony, the first author of this article, first met Jane Bradshaw while teaching ninth grade at a new school. At the time, Ebony's teaching practices were being researched by a doctoral student, Kelly, the second author of this article (Sassi and Thomas). After the study was concluded, Kelly and Ebony wrote about how they resolved ethical dilemmas that arose during the teaching of multicultural literature through the intervention of a "privilege walk" (Sassi and Thomas). Two years later, Ebony returned to Rainfield High School to conduct her own dissertation research on ethical dilemmas that other English teachers might face (Thomas). To find out what kinds of topics teachers were hav-

ing difficulty talking about with their students, she convened a series of professional development workshops for ninth- and tenth-grade English teachers. Teachers were invited to learn about discourse analysis while recording the talk in one of their classes for a month. One of the primary texts used was Lesley A. Rex and Laura Schiller's *Using Discourse Analysis to Improve Classroom Interaction,* which provided a framework for teachers interested in investigating their own discourse. Each teacher in the group then selected a conflict-laden moment to analyze, and then reflected on what they learned.

All of the teachers had different kinds of dilemmas that they were wrestling with in their classrooms. One of Ebony's colleagues who wrestled most with how to talk with her students about plagiarism was Jane Bradshaw. Jane's dilemma that she talked about during the workshops was, *How do you negotiate classroom norms with students who choose to define ethics, originality, and plagiarism very differently than you do?* Her students were devising increasingly creative ways to cheat on quizzes and papers. Jane responded to this initially by remaining firm about her values and convictions about academic integrity in the English classroom, and she was discouraged that even after an initial conversation surfacing her concerns, students continued to justify their behaviors and choices. She was clearly frustrated with the increase in academic dishonesty and voiced her frustrations in our workshops, but she was not sure about how to proceed other than to enforce consequences.

Jane's ethical dilemma is a common one among English teachers. English class is the site where secondary students are first introduced to the humanities. As such, it has the humanistic goal of creating a citizen who is not only literate but also ethical and cosmopolitan (Alsup et al.). Through our teaching of literature and writing, we also teach the ethical values of our society. As such, what is taught in English classrooms and how it is taught is highly contested and often politicized. Australian language and literacy educators Frances Christie and Mary Macken-Horarik propose that the reason why English can be so contested is because the main goal for our students is the acquisition of an acceptable *shared ethical position.* Students not only demonstrate their proficiency in English studies through their knowledge of language, literature, and writing but also through demonstrating that one shares and has internalized prevailing social and cultural norms (Christie and Macken-Horarik). One of these norms is that of academic integrity, which consists of sole authorship and attributing all sources that contribute to a written work.

When teachers like Jane are attempting to establish a shared ethical position, ideological dilemmas are often a source of conflict. Yet through talking about points of difference, tension, and conflict, often teachers and students are able to find common ground. Some teachers even learn to welcome conflict as generative for critical teaching and learning (Dakin; Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, and Tejeda; Souto-Manning).

As Ebony listened to Jane share about her students' academic dishonesty during the discourse workshops, she began to consider whether Jane and her students were on the same page about what terms such as *plagiarism* and *academic integrity* meant. From her previous experiences teaching at Rainfield and her teacher research with Kelly, she knew that effective cross-cultural and cross-contextual communication was complex at this increasingly diverse school. To that end, she suggested that Jane have a brief conversation with her students about how they were thinking about these ideas. Ebony would record and transcribe the conversation, and together she and Jane would then analyze the ways that students were talking about plagiarism and academic integrity. Jane agreed and graciously allowed Ebony to visit her ninth-grade honors/pre-AP classroom as a participant and observer. Students read the last scene of act 2 of *Romeo and Juliet,* and then Jane shifted into talking about plagiarism.

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Jane opened the discussion by explaining what they would be talking about and why it was important both now and in the future:

> **Jane:** OK, good. *(pauses)* I know that this comes to mind for me a lot, and I've mentioned it a couple of times already this year, but I think that it's a good time to mention

> it again. Because tomorrow we're having a quiz on act 3. I've told you [academic dishonesty] has been an extra concern to me this year for my ninth graders. One thing that's important to reinforce . . . is the whole idea of how you're shaping your future . . . how you're shaping the person that you want to be. Sometimes, there might be a difference in opinion about *what exactly is academic dishonesty.* So when I say that term, what do you think of?

Jane set up the talk by shifting the focus from the literature under study to the ethics that her students needed to learn. They needed to consider how they were "shaping their future" and "the person that you want to be" when they were engaged in academic dishonesty. She expressed to them that it is "an extra concern to me this year for my ninth graders," reinforcing her ethic of care in the classroom. She also showed that she valued her students' opinions by asking them what they thought about plagiarizing and cheating on assignments.

When the discussion turned to consideration of plagiarism, the conversation shifted from consequences *for* academic dishonesty to teaching *about* academic integrity.

At first, students were reluctant to speak. The classroom atmosphere and students' body language seemed tense. After the first few minutes, students began to speak more freely. Below, we categorize some of the ways that Jane and her students talked about academic integrity.

How Jane's Students Defined Academic Dishonesty

Some of the terms generated during Jane's discussion included *texting during tests, plagiarism,* and *copying.* We use these terms to categorize what students said because it is important to not only teach students about policies and provide examples of citations but to also understand their preconceived notions about what constitutes academic integrity.

Texting during Tests

> **Elise:** Texting during tests. That's cheating.
>
> **Jane:** Texting during tests . . . cheating is another way of saying academic dishonesty. I'm talking about not cheating on your income tax, but rather cheating . . . throughout your education.

Jane redefined her student's label of "cheating" with the more scholarly term *academic dishonesty.* She gave the term more weight by describing academic dishonesty in the same vein as cheating the IRS. Her "but rather" positioned cheating "throughout your education" as the equivalent to (or even greater than) the felony of tax evasion. Her choice of words emphasized the gravity of texting *anything* during a test for students who may not have understood that their usual digital literate practice was not just a minor crime but also a serious breach of academic integrity.

Plagiarism

> **Jane:** Plagiarism? Can you tell us a little more about what that is?
>
> **Mia:** It's like . . . instead of doing your own thing, you go and get someone else's off the Internet or something?
>
> **Jane:** Right! It's fairly easy these days for teachers to check on that. There are some software packages, but in addition to that, there are other really quick ways to type in a phrase, you know. Teachers are pretty good at noticing the way that students express themselves. . . . Another good point is that . . . yes, if it's a direct quotation, you need to cite that source, but . . . any kind of paraphrase . . . you still have to cite the source.

When the discussion turned to consideration of plagiarism, the conversation shifted from consequences *for* academic dishonesty to teaching *about* academic integrity. Jane first alluded to software programs that detect plagiarism, then began to chat about what kinds of information need attribution. This points to Jane's interest in punishing her students but also teaching them the conventions of the field.

Copying

> **Aidan:** Copying?
>
> **Jane:** Copying. So kind of looking at someone else's answers during a test. But what about copying, like study guides, if it's not,

> like, a group project or something like that? Does that . . . is that what you're thinking?
>
> **Aidan:** It's . . . *still cheating.*
>
> **Jane:** It's cheating in what way?
>
> **Aidan:** Um, you're not doing it yourself, so you're cheating yourself.
>
> **Jane:** It's all about setting our own standards . . . the worst thing in the world is to cheat ourselves.

Jane distinguished between two different kinds of "copying." The first kind was copying answers from someone else's test. The second was copying verbatim from study guides and other materials, but a qualification was added—"a group project or something like that." This pointed to one category of assignment where students *could* engage in what in other contexts might be considered copying. Although this distinction was not explicitly stated, Jane advises students to "set their own standards" so that they will not "cheat" themselves.

How Jane's Students Rationalized Academic Dishonesty

As the conversation progressed, Jane's students began to rationalize their choices about whether or not to engage in what their teacher believed was academic dishonesty. One of Jane's major concerns was that information about her literature quizzes was being provided from students who had already taken her class.

The conversation continued for several more minutes. Students repeatedly drew distinctions between knowledge of test content and degree of difficulty, and providing actual questions and prompts. Although Jane insisted that both categories constituted academic dishonesty, students did not understand why asking "How was the test?" or "What kinds of topics were covered?" was considered cheating by Jane. Even one student, Elise, who acknowledged that teachers "can't give all their classes the same test at the same time," drew these distinctions.

The discussion ended with talk about changes in ethics over time. Samantha, another student, expressed frustration, saying, "I don't get why it's cheating when it's just polite conversation!" may seem like excuse-making for those like Jane (who "deliberately avoided that kind of conversation"), but for teens growing up during an age where digital intimacy means that some teens tweet, text, Facebook, and video their way through the day, dishing about what a teacher wanted you to know about Shakespeare is considered a kind of collective sharing. Amelie rejects the deficit framing of the conversation as "academic dishonesty" by telling her teacher that "values . . . have changed a lot." She pointed out the differences between the expectations of students when Jane was in high school and the pressures that she and her peers face today.

What Jane Learned from Analyzing Her Teacher Talk

After Jane talked about academic integrity with her students, she sat down with Ebony to view the video and to examine the differences between the ways that she defined and characterized academic integrity, academic dishonesty, and plagiarism, and how her students did so. Together, Jane and Ebony generated the categories delineated above. Jane then wrote a brief reflection about the experience, listing her ideas and notes for teaching:

Jane's Thoughts

> It's important to highlight ways in which academic dishonesty can be expressed (different forms).
>
> Students' positioning and relationships to academic integrity are interesting to observe.
>
> Underlying values are relevant.
>
> Do students care? To what extent and about what? Getting caught—or?
>
> What are other directions this conversation might have taken?
>
> Language that invites open listening as opposed to defensive positioning on the part of students is important. (Even with neutral, as opposed to accusatory, language, they seem to "defend" the value of academic dishonesty! Curious about why they tried to justify it.)
>
> Language addressing values and morals can be inflammatory—it is important to keep emotions out as much as possible and yet sometimes it is important to dramatize strong feelings.

Jane concluded by writing, "Students seemed open, and they demonstrated the ability to think critically (at least some did). Some students were not operating in the realm of logic. It is important to listen to them and show respect even when I disagree with their opinions. It takes patience and restraint to listen and then draw ideas together."

Conclusion: Uploading Plagiarism 2.0

How we handle academic integrity with our students has implications beyond our individual classrooms. As educators, we make important distinctions when we evaluate student assignments for different purposes. We may ask our students to bring in direct quotes about a topic or from a novel, and for doing so, they receive full credit on an assignment. To us, the distinctions between smaller assignments that build student understanding, help stimulate ideas for prewriting, or develop collaborative skills, and essays, projects, and exams intended for final, independent evaluation of student capabilities, are clear. For our students, they may not be. Although, like Jane's student Aidan, they may parrot our rationales—"you're cheating yourself"—whether or not all students fully understand them (and the ethics that underpin them) is questionable.

Our aim as teachers of writing is to develop students' ability to put "ideas, questions, and problems into words, mulling them over so they can see them from different angles and reason their way . . . to where they want to stand" (Rex, Thomas, and Engel 56). To that end, Price and Howard offer insight into how, like Jane, we might shift our writing pedagogy from merely policing plagiarism toward engaging in rich conversations with students about academic integrity:

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1. Socialize students into discourse communities of academic writing by providing invitations for students to "question and discuss plagiarism" (Price 105).
2. Acknowledge that what constitutes plagiarism is context dependent. Indicate in written policies that citation is a convention, and "conventions shift across time and locations" (Price 106).
3. Provide clarity about the historical origins of and contemporary rationales for citations in academic writing (Howard 789).
4. Acknowledge alternate ideas about authorship, including oral traditions and voice merging, and other perceptions about originality that come from nonwestern cultures, which many of our students and their families come from (Howard 792).
5. Invite students to practice different kinds of ways of attributing outside sources and their own work (Price 108–09).

The ways that we talk about plagiarism and academic integrity in the digital age pose new challenges never seen before in the profession. High school teachers are grappling with the same issues that college composition instructors are taking up; see, for example, the CCCC statement on "Transforming Our Understanding of Copyright and Fair Use" (http://www.ncte.org/cccc/committees/ip/ipreports/transforming). It is difficult to anticipate what new ethical dilemmas will arise. For example, while multimodal composing has brought with it an acknowledgment of patchwriting as a strategy that digital natives often use, there are still situations—writing on demand is one of them—when students will have to write convincingly without the aid of the Internet and access to the ideas of others (Gere, Christenbury, and Sassi). While not engaged in this kind of academic writing, however, students may choose to make their work public in a number of ways. For example, they may choose to use the tools in the creative commons to publish their work. The designers of Creative Commons "work to increase the amount of creativity (cultural, educational, and scientific content) in 'the commons'—the body of work that is available to the public for free and legal sharing, use, repurposing, and remixing" ("What"). Just as we have always had an obligation to teach students the positive traits that help them avoid plagiarism, such as citing sources correctly, we now need to learn what kinds of materials are free for the remixing that is a hallmark of students' digital literacy.

It's time to upload Plagiarism 2.0—the old rules no longer apply.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION — **Lisa Storm Fink, RWT**

In "Technology and Copyright Law: A 'Futurespective,'" students research past copyright disputes and their relation to technology innovations before predicting future copyright disputes that may arise from technological advancements. Students sort images of technology advancements into chronological order and compare them with changes in copyright law. Next, students research and report on several instances that show how copyright laws have adapted to encompass new technologies and discuss the role of technology innovations in recent copyright disputes. Students brainstorm emerging technologies or technologies that they think will be adapted or invented in the future. Finally, they write newspaper articles predicting the outcome of current copyright disputes related to technology and predicting copyright issues that may arise with new and future technologies. http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/technology-copyright-futurespective-1075.html