IS IT HAPPENING? HOW TO AVOID THE DELETERIOUS EFFECTS OF PLAGIARISM AND CHEATING IN YOUR COURSES

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SOME OF MY COLLEAGUES look at me in awe as I copy and scan student projects from semester to semester. “Why take the time to copy student documents?” “Where will they be stored?” “Why bother?” “Will it really make a difference?” I often hear these statements at the end of the semester as I take precious time out of my busy schedule to photocopy, and nowadays electronically scan, student projects to deter others from cheating or plagiarizing in the future. What history and experience have taught me is that many students cheat and plagiarize not because they “have” to but because “they can.”

In my first year of teaching, I was so proud of my students’ work that I wanted to preserve their efforts by photocopying their projects and either use them as examples for future classes or just reflect on how much (or little) effort was exerted to earn a grade. Naively, taking the time to keep and store these projects really paid off for me later. I realized the first payback during my second year of teaching when I was going through a newly submitted student project and déjà vu occurred. Surprisingly, I felt that I had read this paper before. I even remembered some of the typographical and formatting errors that rang bells in my memory. I went to my previous years’ student projects and, voilà, it was the same project, but the focus was on a different, but similar, product; the assignment consisted of a marketing plan for a product/service students were to individually select. I was shocked. I knew students cheated and plagiarized work, but I never thought it would be so blatant, because of the “creativity” I tried to build into the project. These marketing plans allowed students to use their imaginations to develop a new product or service while they were required to provide cited evidence from retailers, consumers, advocacy groups, government,
and so on for the need and relevancy of this “new” and “creative” idea. From that moment on, I realized that if I didn’t take preventative actions, these tendencies for students to cheat and plagiarize may continue to occur and possibly flourish because of my lack of action or concern.

As a junior faculty member, I was up for the challenge to make my students explicitly aware of the expectations, procedures, and consequences related to plagiarism and cheating in my courses. I did not want to gain the reputation of being the professor who taught courses students felt they could “ace” or take “shortcuts” to get an exceptional grade without putting in a lot of effort or being able to cheat or plagiarize because of my ignorance, lack of care, or indifference to student learning. I went on a proverbial crusade against cheating and plagiarism.

At the very beginning of all my classes, students become very aware of policies on cheating and/or plagiarizing in my courses. My course syllabi clearly state that cheating and plagiarizing will not be tolerated and that any student suspected of violating this policy is subject to the institution’s code of academic honor. Specifically,

**Academic Honor.** Students are expected to achieve/maintain the highest standards of academic honesty and excellence. Therefore, the student pledges not to lie, cheat, plagiarize, or steal in the pursuit of study and is encouraged to report students who do (refer to *Student Handbook, Appendix E, “Academic Dishonesty”).* Students who breach the Academic Dishonesty guidelines will receive a “failing” grade in the course.

In addition, students are also made aware that all assignments, and not just major projects, are susceptible to cheating and/or plagiarizing. Therefore, students who decide to “share” their assignments with other students or copy work of others without proper citation are subject to the consequences of violating academic honor; if students share their work, both students will receive a grade of zero.

To go further, in the beginning of the class, I let students know how I appreciate the value of their work and input into completing the required assignments. I explain that I store their work electronically by scanning their assignments into a digital format or having them electronically submit them, so that I can (a) use their work for future class examples with their permission or (b) deter cheating and plagiarism in the future because their work will always be available and stored on
my computer. Stating this fact in the beginning of the semester, I believe, makes the students think twice about sharing their work with others. Having a reputation of “saying what you mean” and “meaning what you say” can go the distance, especially when students may be tempted or try to cheat and plagiarize, because they know the teacher will not tolerate behaviors that they can often get away with in other courses.

Now that I am in my 11th year of college teaching, I do not see a lot of cheating or plagiarism in my courses, which I believe is because of how I construct the projects they are required to complete. In my business communication course, the major project allows students to work in teams to create a proposal and presentation consisting of making recommendations to a professional organization to improve its communication levels in areas of image, membership, and conference attendance. This project includes research elements that require the teams to find articles and information, usually on the Internet, to support and provide evidence backing up the recommendations in their proposal. They must use APA (American Psychological Association) guidelines for citing and formatting. I let the students know at the beginning of the project that they must not copy verbatim from their sources unless they correctly cite the reference. Teaching students correct citation is a daunting process; many times, as I look at my students, their faces indicate that they are clueless or blank. I also give the students examples of “what is plagiarizing” and “how to” properly cite references. They have these guidelines as a handout that they refer to throughout the project. Additionally, I inform them how plagiarizing others’ work without proper referencing is cheating, and that I will enforce the consequences of violating the academic honor code, located in the course syllabus: The entire team will forfeit the project grade.

As a part of the project, the students complete a checklist handout, which acts as an instrument that allows each team member to be accountable for his or her contributions to the project by indicating (a) the recommendation, (b) location of the evidence supporting the recommendation, (c) how she or he incorporated this reference into the recommendation, and (d) the actual citation in proper APA format. Not only does this process allow students to check one another for plagiarism, but it also allows the student who creates the final reference
section of the proposal to have correct information that is properly formatted. The checklist is a win-win-win situation: a win for the individual students, a win for the entire team, and a win for the professor as the students demonstrate their understanding of how citation works and why it is vital to use resources and references responsibly.

In summary, plagiarism can be “plaguing” if it is not discussed, understood, and enforced by the professor right at the beginning of the course and throughout the semester. Students usually don’t “have” to cheat or plagiarize; they do so mainly because “they can.” Professors who turn a deaf ear or a blind eye to students who plagiarize create deleterious effects that can prove disturbing to the entire academic profession, regardless of the discipline. The more students practice with plagiarism, the lazier they become because they can “get away” without proper citing. It hurts all professors requiring research and written work from their students. Do your part in developing student integrity and honor by paying close attention to students tempted to plagiarize, and enforce your policies with strict consequences that deter these types of behaviors. It may mean that you have to do a little more work, but in the end, the payoff is priceless.

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