



## A Reflection on Emotional Responses to Plagiarism

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Has this ever happened to you? You are grading Student X's paper and a great feeling of pride comes upon you. "Wow!" you think, "Student X has really improved! He has applied all of the lessons that we have learned this semester!" (Or, if it's one of those days when you need an ego boost: "I must be an amazing teacher! Look at how much X has learned from me!") Then you read a little more. An uncomfortable niggle begins in your brain, a faint alarm sounds in the distance. A few phrases ring just a little too native-like. Would an international student know how to say "a brush with death"? Probably not. You go back and read the essay again, with your metaphorical deerstalker on. You don't want to, but you boot up the computer. You type in a couple phrases. And as quickly as you can say "cut-and-paste" you find that same sentence on a blog. A blog! Student X didn't even copy from a credible source! Didn't X learn anything this semester? This concern is secondary, of course, but these mini-revelations of betrayal are no time for rationality.

Is betrayal too strong a word? Don't answer. I know it is. I know I sound like the teacher version of the student who says, "I'm flunking because my teacher hates me!" I also know that I shouldn't take acts of academic misconduct personally, but I can't help it. First, I get insulted: Does X think I'm an idiot? Doesn't X know how easy it is to distinguish between his writing and the writing of a professional, native-English speaker? (Rational brain: X didn't think about you for a second when hitting Ctrl-c the first time or the second time or the third time.) Then the righteous voice enters. Doesn't X care at all about her learning? (Rational brain: X is young. She is still doing small-picture thinking—I want a good grade, I have to finish the project—rather than big-picture thinking—become proficient, use English as a tool to improve my life.) Finally, I get hurt. Isn't our relationship built on trust? (Rational brain: go back and read how I answered your first two thoughts.)

This emotional response, of course, puts me in the wrong state of mind for dealing with the problem of academic misconduct. It makes me overreact or underreact when I shouldn't be reacting at all. Or, at least, I don't want to react to it anymore. This year I've set a goal of jumping ahead of the curve—discussing academic misconduct before my students piece together their first paper copied from online sources or submit their first homework assignment copied from a classmate or let their eyes wander during a test or self-plagiarize or overuse the electronic translator or... (well, I think we're all familiar with the list). A challenge in presenting this topic early will be in not creating an adversarial atmosphere in the classroom. Williams (2007) claims that "the emotions that are unleashed by cases of plagiarism, or suspicions of plagiarism, influence how we perceive our students and how we approach teaching them" (p. 350). I need to be wary of setting up a me versus them relationship, if for no other reason than the fact that I look terrible in a deerstalker, even a metaphorical one. Rather than putting my time and energy into sussing out cheaters, I'd prefer to craft assignments which help to build confidence. I want to use SafeAssign as a teaching tool rather than a monitoring device. I want to support students in figuring out the nuances of citations—a concept which U.S. students still grapple with—within Lippincott instead of Learned or Summerfield or those scary buildings on West Campus. And I want them to add an "s" on plural nouns—but I guess that's a whole different battle.

Will all of my good intentions eliminate plagiarism and its sticky pals? Of course not. But if I can reframe it as a process, as a lesson in constant need of recycling, then I may be able to reduce the emotional impact of picking up a paper and getting that uncomfortable, niggling feeling once again.

### References

Williams, B. (2007). Trust, betrayal, and authorship: Plagiarism and how we perceive students. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 51(4), 350-4.

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