

A Reflection on Plagiarism by a First-Time Instructor

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PREPARING FOR my first semester of teaching, I devoted much of my time to my syllabi, PowerPoint slides, and course calendars. Like most instructors on a university campus, I included a statement that addressed academic integrity. To make my efforts more pronounced, I used the official statement from the University. In my mind this was just a formality; I didn't think for a second that I would have an incident of plagiarism in my first semester of teaching. How naïve I was!

It struck me as I was grading papers in my office after a challenging class: two of the students' papers were indistinguishable. Even the typos were the same. The only difference was the names at the top of the paper. Now I was presented with a difficult decision: report the incident, or handle it myself. I had two days until I saw the students again, so I needed to make a decision soon. The freshmen offenders had very different classroom presences. Student A was respectful and attended and participated in class regularly. Student B was disrespectful, lazy, and had poor attendance. Student A turned the assignment in during class, while Student B came to my office 30 minutes after class and handed the assignment in late. This brought to light an interesting dilemma. Did I report the incident and set into motion events that would follow these students' academic careers, even for Student A, who otherwise seemed like a "good" student and might just have made a dumb decision? How seriously would I be taken by the students if I handled it on my own and with minimal consequences (compared to the ramifications of officially documenting the suspected offense)?

Weighing my options and taking into account the seriousness of academic integrity, I decided to give them both a failing grade for the assignment. I was

teaching a course that focused primarily on introducing freshmen to college customs and expectations, along with promoting skills for lifelong learning. I felt as though this could be a learning experience for the students, and told them to consider this as their one and only “break.” In addition, I took the opportunity to emphasize the issues of academic integrity in a university setting during the next class meeting. I discussed the definition of academic integrity, our university’s administrative policies, and the grave consequences of reported incidents.

Reflecting back now on how I handled the situation, I did not make the right decision in the beginning. The same students committed a similar offense during a quiz close to the end of the semester. Due to lack of classroom space, students had to sit right next to each other. (In my ideal situation the students would sit at least one seat apart.) As I was proctoring the quiz, I noticed Student B lowering his cap and turning his head toward Student A’s paper. After this quick glance, he swiftly wrote down an answer on his paper. I nonchalantly continued my walk around the room and when I reached the suspected offender’s desk (Student B), I glanced down at his paper and at Student A’s paper; the answers were the same! I waited until I was in my office reviewing the quizzes later that day to assess the issue. All the answers on the two quiz papers were the same. By this time I had had it! It is *suggested* by the faculty handbook to discuss the incident with the student before formal action is taken. Since I was on campus only one day a week, had extended a previous warning to the two students, and had already spent considerable time addressing the first incident, I did not feel it necessary to call the students in before I sent documentation to the administration; I also had the support of the associate dean in this matter.

Observing the students’ disrespectful behavior and lack of motivation made me want to go back in time to change my decision not to “nail their butts to the wall” in the first place. If I had documented the first incident according to the suggestions of the faculty handbook, I might not have had to have spend additional time dealing with this offense a second time around. As a young instructor, I understood that adjustment to college could be quite challenging, but I might have been too lenient because of my sympathy. I have decided that, in that particular situation, the best decision would have been to document the occurrence and hand it over to the administration. I believe that everyone has a “wake-up” call during the early days of his or her academic career, and maybe this could have been one for these two students. Unfortunately, they got theirs too late. By the end of the semester, both students had failed miserably in all of their classes, and they eventually had to be dismissed by the end of the academic year.