

Learn to Hate Dishonesty Without Becoming Emotionally Involved

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DR. ELIZABETH KUBLER-ROSS (1969) introduced us to the five stages of grief that terminally ill patients go through—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance. Dr. Carolyn Foster Segal (2006) presented the seven stages of “plagiarism grief” that students confronted by their misconduct go through—disbelief, denial, astonishment, confusion (parts 1 and 2), plea (parts 1 through 6!), defense, and accusation. There is no doubt that faculty, too, display a wide gamut of emotions when they encounter instances of academic dishonesty. Anger, annoyance, anxiety, depression, frustration, incredulity, regret, resentfulness, resignation, more anger, and more depression—these and other emotions are part of the baggage that goes along with an instructor’s experience of “plagiarism grief.”

Embracing the emotion of hate (hating the *sin*, mind you, and not the sinner) enables one to avoid the one unacceptable emotional response to encountering plagiarism—acceptance. The energy underlying the emotion is caused by a perceived violation of the social contract the instructor has with the student, a reaction to an apparent rejection of his or her academic duty. It is important not to let misdirected energy interfere with a process that, in the long run, is best for both instructors and students. In order to avoid their own and their students’ intense emotions, many faculty members choose to handle the situation on their own, running away from their emotional responses rather than using the energy in a positive way. However, this way of “handling it” reflects the same kind of disbelief, denial, and confusion as is displayed by the accused students. Such avoidance trivializes the misconduct, deprives the student of due process, exposes the instructor to litigation, and is, ultimately, unsatisfying.

Our professional obligation is to be prepared to confront the misconduct rather than merely reacting to—or avoiding—the misconduct. If we are unprepared, our emotional energies are undirected and serve only to agitate us. We should be prepared instead to respond in a manner consistent with campus procedures, and our preparedness should make it much less likely that our responses will catch us off guard or consume us. Knowing the campus policy on academic misconduct allows us to focus our emotional energy in applying policy to the specifics of a particular incident.

To put this in context, consider two plausible scenarios:

Scenario 1. You are a new faculty member (or a new teaching assistant) grading three- to five-page papers for a freshman level introductory course. You are sitting in your office one evening, halfway through both a small pot of coffee and the stack of papers when you come up short from what you have read. You are not sure what it is at first, but then you realize that, by the end of page two of the paper, the writing style has shifted. It does not seem to have the same voice as earlier in the paper. There is also something elegant about a particular phrase. You “Google” the phrase and find thousands of links. The first one is to a page that contains the same paragraph as the paper in your hands, nearly verbatim.

Scenario 2. You are proctoring your first large classroom examination. You have a room more than twice as large as your regular classroom, so students occupy every other seat. You have also created multiple versions of the exam, each on different colored paper, and arranged for another teaching assistant to help you proctor the exam. You are pretty confident that you have things under control. After about forty minutes, as you are walking around the first row, you notice something odd. One of the classroom lights is reflecting off the label of a student’s water bottle and it just looks wrong. The student is seated right in the middle of the front row, and as you take a longer look, you notice that there seems to be a great deal of small writing on the *inside* of the label, a place you never expected to look for crib notes.

What is your reaction? In both situations it is likely to be first confusion, then anger mixed with apprehension. Your stomach starts to dance a little bit—you really do not want a confrontation—and you wish that the situation would just go away. In the first scenario, you might think “I have another dozen or more papers to grade, so maybe I should just grade the paper on the basis of the earlier writing, what is likely the more authentic voice, and give the writer a C–.” In the second scenario, students are starting to come forward to turn in their exams, and several have questions over the next assignment. You cannot just let them accumulate at the front of the room, disturbing the remaining students, while you figure out what to do with the student with the water bottle. Maybe you just note the exam when it is turned in, and see whether or not that exam has a grade significantly different than other work by that student.

Part of your turmoil is because you are upset by the idea that these students were cheating, and part is because you are not prepared to deal with these situations! You put the paper aside to deal with it later. You make a note of the exam when it is turned in, but the student has packed up the water bottle and left. Ah well, you will deal with it later.

So what happens when “later” comes? The emotional turmoil comes back, perhaps not quite as strong. Now, though, it is time to try to use the energy the emotions have generated to address the problems that are in front of you. You have a professional obligation, not only to deal with the situation rather than ignoring it, but to deal with it in a manner consistent with your campus policy. What is your first step? Make sure you know what that policy is.

Each campus will be different, but it is likely the case that they all have a core commitment to due process. For public colleges and universities due process is mandated by law, by the “due process” clause of the federal constitution. “Since the early 1960s, the concept of procedural due process has been one of the primary legal forces shaping the administration of post-secondary education” (Kaplan & Lee, 1995, 484-5). While private colleges and universities are not bound by the federal due process clause, they may be governed by state sanctions. As Kaplan and Lee illustrate by examining court decisions dating back as far as 1928, the courts have found that to discipline a student, a private college or university must also follow a procedure that

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is fair and reasonable (497-500). In either event, higher education’s philosophy of fair and equitable treatment for all students imposes a philosophic obligation of following a due process procedure to ensure that decisions are not made in an arbitrary or capricious manner. (See, for example, the American Association of University Professors’ *Statement on Professional Ethics*, available at <http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/pubsres/policydocs/statementonprofessionalethics.htm>.)

We have a pedagogical responsibility to structure our courses and their requirements in a manner that minimizes the opportunities for students to cheat. While some faculty find this to be an onerous chore, not having to address issues of cheating after the fact more than compensates for the up-front effort in course design. But unforeseen incidents may still take place during the course, so what is an instructor who planned ahead to do when problems arise anyway?

Begin by considering what due process asks of us in these circumstances. First and foremost, a student should have the opportunity to explain his or her actions *before* any decision is made regarding the interpretation of those actions. In the plagiarism example used earlier, it is clearly the case that significant material was copied from a website and may have been used without attribution. But why? Was the website listed in the references? Does the student really understand how to cite properly? Correct academic citation is not a skill that

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most students master in a single basic composition course. Did the student fall victim to a cut-and-paste error that did not get addressed because the paper was completed at four a.m.? A student who otherwise has done solid work without passing the work of others off as his or her own might simply

have dropped the ball due to juggling a heavy academic load. Or did the student just not care, and so took whatever steps he or she deemed necessary to submit a minimal paper? In a meeting with a student, an instructor has the opportunity to come to a clear understanding of how the student wrote his or her paper. Only then can a decision be made as to whether or not dishonesty was involved, and, if so, what an appropriate response might be.

While the examples used earlier may seem clear-cut, other instances may be more ambiguous. It is incumbent upon faculty to come to a complete understanding of an incident before acting. Certainly, context will influence the decisions made regarding academic or disciplinary penalties. Talk to your chair, mentor, and other faculty in the department. What is the general sense in your department of the seriousness of the particular academic "sin"? What penalties have others applied for similar incidents in the past? That, too, is context that will inform the decision that you make in a specific case.

Finally, you should always notify the student in writing of any decisions that have been made regarding his or her case. Putting the decision in writing allows you to outline for the student the context of his or her behavior and the college's expectations of integrity. The letter should reinforce the college policy. Writing such a letter allows you to use your emotional energy to do what you do best: teach. If the student has made a mechanical or procedural mistake, this is your opportunity to instruct him or her on both proper work processes and the potential penalties for continued mishaps. If the student has deliberately

cheated, this is an opportunity to convey to the student just how his or her actions have harmed his or her education, his or her peers' education, and the reputation of the institution's degree. You may feel anger at being victimized, but as Judge Posner (2007) points out, the "principal victims are the plagiarist's student competitors" (106).

What do you do about the student with the water bottle? You have the exam and the student's score was quite high. So was, you discover, his or her first exam score. Your inclination is to fail the student for cheating. But you have no evidence of that assessment, as the student left the room in possession of the water bottle. You did not ask the student if you could look at the water bottle, which would have been a reasonable request. You do not actually know what was on the inside of the label. Though you may be frustrated, there is nothing to be done now but to enter the exam into your gradebook. There is something that you can do *later*, however. Use the energy of the frustration you are experiencing to prepare better an examination environment that further minimizes the opportunity for students to cheat—and to prepare yourself to intervene if you suspect further incidents, even if "intervention" just means asking all of your students to keep their water bottles on the floor.

Hate is a powerful emotion. You hate that a student has cheated—you take it as a personal insult. Maybe you also hate that you might be partially to blame for the situation—perhaps you reused a paper assignment or an exam. Either way, you must accept that that emotional energy is there. We teach because we are passionate about education. We cannot, and should not try to, dismiss the many emotions that we experience as part of that passionate commitment. Instead, we should harness the energy of those emotions to accomplish something positive, making such an experience an educational one for both our students and ourselves.

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