

Special issue: Innovative Teaching Personal Essays

Innovating Integrity in Online Learning Contexts

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I began my teaching career in 1994, as a languages instructor in the humanities. After completing my doctoral work in education, I changed fields and now teach in education, with the majority of my courses being in educational research. I taught my first online course in 2012. Since then I have taught more than ninety courses online, in both higher education credit and continuing education contexts. Now the majority of classes I teach are online.

Plagiarism in online classes worries me. I have a different relationship with my online students, and in my experience, it is possible for students to be less socially present in online and blended courses (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Annand, 2011). At times, I don't always know what it is my online students need, unless they have the agency to advocate for themselves and ask for help. I have observed distinct differences as my colleagues and I grapple with issues of academic integrity, and plagiarism in particular. I also researched the topic of plagiarism, and I confess that I was surprised to learn that there is little to no empirical evidence to support the notion that the Internet is responsible for the increases in plagiarism (Panning Davies & Moore Howard, 2016) or that students who study online plagiarize more than those who take face-to-face classes (Eshet, Peled, & Grinautski, 2012; Watson & Sottile, 2010). According to the research, these notions are myths, but I also found little in the way of helpful guidance for those

of us who teach online about how we address plagiarism in our courses. Thus the reason for this essay, which I offer to my fellow instructors, particularly those who find themselves, as I do, teaching in online contexts and dealing with plagiarism.

With almost a quarter of a century of teaching experience, I have observed that how I address plagiarism differs for me, in an instructional sense. Plagiarism can be accidental or intentional, and other contextual factors play a role, too (Brimble, 2016; Blum, 2009; McCabe & Treviño, 1993, 1997). With online students, the opportunity for real-time communication can be limited. I might have to reach out via e-mail, meaning that I cannot rely on body language and visual cues to help me understand the nuances of the situation, so I try to focus more on prevention. I began to focus intently on prevention after discovering two cases of plagiarism in the same online Master's-level class. In discussing the case with the Associate Dean, I recognized that these two students had done the minimum about of work in terms of contributing to the required discussion board, had not attended any of my virtual office hours, and had never reached out for help. I had failed to flag their need for additional support and instead had assumed that if they needed help, they would reach out and ask for it. This experience proved to be pivotal for me. I learned a valuable lesson: I must take an active role in helping my students understand what I expect of them and how I can support them in their learning. Before I came to this conclusion, my approach to plagiarism had been to follow institutional policies and guidelines, which focus on identifying, proving and sanctioning plagiarism after it has occurred, rather than trying to prevent it in the first place. As I reflect on this particular experience, I realized that as an educator, I have agency and influence when it comes to helping to prevent plagiarism in my classes. I may not be able to prevent it 100% of the time, but I can have an impact in a positive way.

Explicit instruction helps students understand how to avoid plagiarism in their work (Moniz, Fine, & Bliss, 2008), but if I am being completely honest, I have so much course content to cover in my classes, that finding time to teach explicit strategies to help students avoid plagiarism can be problematic. Besides, I don't often teach writing courses specifically, so I would have to find a way to add in this direct instruction on top of the content we have to cover. In a perfect world, I would do this, but reality differs from the perfect world.

Instead, I want to share an approach that does not involve adding more content to my courses. I will concede that providing formative feedback adds more work for me as an instructor. I am willing to do this work for two reasons. The first is that I have decided that one of my values as an educator is to focus on learning as an *ongoing process*, rather than as an *end product*. Identifying this value proved to be so important I later added it to my teaching philosophy statement that is part of my teaching dossier. The second reason that I am willing to provide formative feedback is that often (though not always), it makes summative assessment easier. I am already familiar with the work, and I can see how students have worked hard to improve. I end up spending less time at the end of the semester undertaking summative assessments when I have provided in-depth formative feedback throughout the term.

I use a multi-pronged innovation that combines direct instruction, emphasizing learning as a process, and committing to providing formative feedback that has worked well. I engage in explicit dialogue with my students at the beginning of the term about expectations. Our courses include asynchronous (on demand) components such as discussion boards, and synchronous elements such as Adobe Connect live meetings (real time webinars). Of course, I must include the standard institutional boiler-plate language in my course outlines referring students to the academic misconduct and plagiarism sections of the academic calendar, but frankly, I don't think

students look at that part of the course outline anyway. So in addition to that, I post a message on my discussion board that looks something like this:

“Integrity statement: I understand that as students, you have many pressures on you. You may be tempted to take short cuts by cutting and pasting material you find online into your assignments. Please don’t do that. It doesn’t help you learn, and it’s a waste of my time to grade. Instead, I invite you to review drafts of your work with me. I will give you formative feedback that will help you improve. You’re here to learn, and I’m here to help you to do that. It may take both of us a bit more time, but I believe it is worth it, because I believe in *you*.”

Similarly, in our first webinar of the semester, I often review the course outline with the students. I re-iterate the same message verbally in real time. This is a simple strategy, but the results have been effective, at least anecdotally. Students have reported that they really like knowing they can share drafts of their work with me. Sometimes they are surprised that their teacher is willing to give them formative feedback.

Starting the conversation lets students know that I am alert to the possibility of plagiarism. Because the structure of our courses focuses on summative assessment, it can be a bit tricky to require students to submit their drafts. So instead, I emphasize, by inviting drafts and offering formative feedback, that I affirm the value I place on learning as a process, not term papers as an end product. In terms of sustainability, I include the Integrity Statement in my course content during the planning stages of the course. I send students reminders about sharing drafts of their work with me for formative feedback throughout the course (particularly if we are about a week to ten days away from a due date). Finally, and this may be my deepest learning as an instructor, is I have learned to budget time to provide formative feedback. I block off chunks of time in my calendar so I am not doing this off the side of my desk, but rather as an integrated

element of my instructional practice. I also find that that the final submission is of a better quality because students have had the opportunity to improve their work before submitting it for a grade.

There is no silver bullet to prevent plagiarism. As I reflect on my experience integrating direct communication (being brutally honest, if you will) with a commitment to provide formative feedback and focus on the learning process, I cannot claim any cause-and-effect relationship between taking this approach and decreases in plagiarism incidences. What I can say, is that it has helped me to focus on the relational aspects of teaching and learning. My students know I care about them, and I care about plagiarism, regardless of whether the learning happens in a classroom or online. I am convinced it is worth the time and effort to provide formative feedback, because the end product is stronger and perhaps more importantly, students know that I am committed their development as learners, which in turn, has resulted in deeper levels of trust and better relationships with my students.

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