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Unbalancing Acts: Plagiarism as Catalyst for Instructor Emotion in the Composition Classroom

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Ann E. Biswas

Abstract: In this essay, the author reflects on her experiences while researching composition instructors' emotional responses to plagiarism. The research found that instructors faced a variety of complex and competing feelings when students plagiarized, and those responses threatened to upset relationships, power structures, and professional identities in the classroom. The author considers how and why her own emotional labor was altered in light of these findings and what this might suggest about the need for increased professional conversation in our discipline regarding the impact of emotions in the writing classroom.

“Who doesn’t get upset about plagiarism?” remarked the highest-ranking member of my dissertation committee (a full professor in the School of Education), as he off-handedly dismissed my research proposal. “What makes you think you guys in English are so special?” His immediate resistance to the fundamental assumption of my painstakingly developed research plan came as a shock: Of course plagiarism more deeply affects those of us in composition. It strikes at the very heart of what we do. As a composition instructor for more than a decade, I’d been profoundly affected by student plagiarism, and, as a WPA, I’d repeatedly witnessed the emotional consequences of plagiarism on my department colleagues. I’d chosen a dissertation topic I thought linked my two disciplines of English and Educational Leadership well: I wanted to unpack how plagiarism threatens to emotionally unbalance us in the classroom and how this impacts our relationships and professional identity as writing teachers. Unquestionably, academic integrity is a shared value in all areas of higher education, and plagiarism can be troubling for instructors in all disciplines, especially those teaching in WAC/WID programs. However, I did not expect I’d need to defend the notion that plagiarism is exceptionally hazardous terrain for composition instructors. Yet over the years that followed, I was asked this same question by colleagues across campus. Everyone it seemed, regardless of discipline, was “emotional” about plagiarism. Why did composition instructors warrant so special a focus? Although my proposal was eventually approved, the question nagged at me. I needed to understand the ways in which plagiarism is a particular catalyst for emotion in the composition classroom, one that exposes and upsets the relationships and identities that are cultivated there and significantly alters how writing teachers feel about their work.

My qualitative study involved pre-interview written reflections and one-on-one interviews with twelve composition instructors at a Midwest public institution. Participants, who had between four and thirty-six years of experience, were asked to recall a time when a student plagiarized in their course and to tell me how they felt and how they responded.

I expected to hear that plagiarism evoked anger, an emotion sometimes mentioned in plagiarism literature (e.g., Howard; Robillard; Zwagerman). Indeed, instructors I spoke with talked a lot about feeling angry at students, at administrators, at themselves, and at the academic integrity system. However, they spoke of experiencing more than a dozen emotions, including failure that their lessons about source use had been woefully unsuccessful, sadness that students felt cheating was their only option, and betrayal that students had violated their trust. Some described feeling cynical about what seems to be a growing culture of dishonesty in which students don’t feel bad about cheating—only about “getting caught.” For a few instructors, negative emotions, such as stress and anxiety, were so intense they would become physically sick.

I was surprised, though, by how often and how deeply participants spoke of feeling empathy for their students when they plagiarized. This was the most frequently discussed emotion in the study, experienced by ten out of twelve participants (the next closest was anger, described by eight of the twelve participants). Empathy emerged when instructors recalled their own undergrad experiences and related to the stresses facing college students, or when they spoke of how complicated writing with sources can be. Instructors who worked with international students spoke with extraordinary compassion for their students' struggles to adapt to a culturally bound system of ownership whose conventions were completely foreign to their own.

Listening to their stories, I realized that instructors' emotional responses had very much to do with what they viewed as their role in the classroom. For example, those who saw themselves as nurturers of student growth often viewed plagiarism as a failure on their part rather than the student's. For some nurturing instructors, plagiarism was devastating, and it dramatically upset the supportive, collaborative classroom dynamic. In contrast, many viewed their positionality in opposition to their students. For these "adversaries," plagiarism confirmed suspicions that, at the end of the day, most students were dishonest and needed to be policed.

A few participants didn't fall as neatly into the "nurturer" or "adversary" categories. These individuals, whom I labeled "diplomats," saw themselves not as rule-makers but as representatives of the academic discourse system. Although plagiarism was unpleasant, it was just something that sometimes happened and needed to be dealt with by following established protocol. When a student plagiarized, diplomats responded in a balanced, even-handed manner with little to no emotional waffling or difficult decision-making ("Should I let her rewrite or should I give her a zero?" "Should I report it or keep this just between us?").

For most, however, an act of plagiarism was emotionally destabilizing: Instructors experienced what one referred to as "the usual Rolodex of emotions you go through" when a student plagiarized. Likewise, instructors consciously worked to manage those emotions to keep them in line with what was considered appropriate for their workplace. This "impression management," to right the imbalance between what they felt and were expected to feel, was stressful and emotionally taxing for most (Ashforth and Humphrey 90).

As participants poured out their feelings to me, I kept wondering why we don't talk about this more. Why has how we feel during this most challenging of episodes in the composition classroom not been given a louder voice? Are we still fighting against the age-old notion that emotions are somehow inappropriate in serious academic discourse? Do we continue to sense a concern, as some have noted, that talking about how we feel threatens to feminize or diminish the profession of teaching writing (e.g., Enos; McLeod; Micciche; Yoon)? Ironically my dissertation committee member was challenging me to prove that composition instructors were more emotionally impacted by plagiarism than others, yet there seemed to be a reluctance, at least in the literature, to really explore this conversation beyond noting how angry plagiarism sometimes makes us feel.

When I reflect on what happened to me during the three years I worked on this study, I sense that talking about the variety of emotional responses that occur when a student plagiarizes, how these emotions impact a writing instructor's identity, and the consequences (real and imagined) of different emotional responses is what's really missing in the discourse. Over the years, many of my students have committed some form of plagiarism, but before beginning this research, I had never followed through on any official incident reporting. Perhaps as a non-tenure-track, contingent faculty member, I was worried that a disgruntled student might turn in a harshly negative evaluation, or I didn't want to make a name for myself as a teacher whose students plagiarize. And, as someone who avoids confrontation, I deeply wanted to downplay the stress involved in "the dreaded meeting" with the student. So, after much emotional mayhem, I spoke to the student about what went wrong and then allowed him or her to revise and resubmit. In some way I'm sure I rationalized my action as "what was best for the student."

As I worked on the dissertation, however, I was teaching two writing courses and had a student intentionally plagiarize in each. Perhaps because I was so deeply entrenched in my participants' emotional responses, I was hyper-focused on my own, and I responded entirely differently this time: I briefly met with the two students, told them what I suspected and why it was inappropriate, described the academic integrity rules I was required to follow, gave each an F, and filed the appropriate paperwork. Through it all I was emotionally unruffled, and although I still hated having to confront the students, I spent far less time being anxious prior to and during those

meetings. Did I experience fewer negative emotions because I was able to divert the students' attention, making the academic integrity system the police rather than me? Perhaps. Would I have reacted differently had the plagiarism been unintentional? The nurturer in me would have likely struggled with this. But in retrospect, I have no doubt that having such extended conversations with my composition peers about how plagiarism makes us feel helped me respond in a healthier manner this time around—that is, with far less emotional labor.

At my final dissertation defense, my committee member remained unconvinced, asking me again (amazingly!) what made plagiarism such a big deal in composition. Clearly, I was not to win the battle over whose discipline has it harder. Yet composition instructors arguably face a number of paradoxes regarding plagiarism that can lead to higher levels of emotional stress. In particular, they are tasked with supporting student writers while at the same time they are encouraged (often required) to pursue and punish plagiarism, a highly political, cultural, and context-bound term fraught with misunderstanding. In the past fifteen years, considerable Writing Studies scholarship has focused on how complicated plagiarism is and how difficult it can be for anyone to incorporate sources into his or her own work. Writing instructors with knowledge of this scholarship are more keenly aware than others of these challenges and the many, many reasons why students might plagiarize. They must grapple with issues regarding intent: Are students simply struggling to find their academic voices, as Howard and others have suggested, or are they cheaters? Are they overwhelmed by pressures to succeed, or are they just lazy? Some instructors might be concerned, as I was, about the professional consequences of accusing a student of plagiarism. And because we're typically relied upon to teach students academic writing, we're often the first to be blamed when they plagiarize in other courses. For all of these reasons, and many others, plagiarism is a substantial emotional flashpoint in composition.

When students plagiarize in our classes, we often face complex and competing feelings that threaten to upset relationships, power structures, and professional identities. I believe we better maintain emotional balance by talking to each other and listening more often and more closely to how this powerful experience makes us feel. Academic leaders ought to make time for these discussions. For example, through workshops and other faculty development efforts, WPAs and chairs can encourage faculty conversations about plagiarism and its impact on instructors. These discussions can include the reasons why students plagiarize as well as the many different ways instructors respond to that act (emotionally and in writing assessment). When an instructor experiences plagiarism, he or she should feel safe talking about it, whether with the WPA or with department colleagues who have had similar experiences. Likewise, attention should be paid to how student plagiarism can be experienced differently depending on an instructor's academic rank. No instructor, and especially not an instructor whose labor is contingent upon periodic renewal, should fear that plagiarism is a reflection of poor teaching or even that it is far out of the ordinary in a writing class. Finally, writing instructors can work together to begin challenging academic integrity policies that assume plagiarism is a single thing rather than a complex issue with multiple causes and effects.

Overall, embracing the conversation, as my participants and I did, can be an important step to begin reducing the emotional labor that plagiarism too often evokes. Attention to this discourse will help define for ourselves and for others the significance of instructor emotion when plagiarism happens in the writing classroom.

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