Plagiarism Scenarios

Scenario 1
Blogger Jean Hsu, born of Chinese parents who moved to the U.S., wrote a blog post responding to Amy Chua’s *Wall Street Journal* essay, “Why Chinese Mothers Are Superior.” Hsu disputed virtually everything that Chua said. Her blog post included the following sentence: “Chinese who demand the highest grades from their children at any cost are doing them a great disservice” (para. 6).

In the first draft of her essay on the debate over Chua’s claims about what has come to be called “tiger parenting,” Alissa wrote the following:

> Not everyone agrees with Amy Chua that the verbal abuse traditional Chinese parents pour on their children when they don’t make all A’s benefits the child. In her response, blogger Jean Hsu writes, Chinese parents who demand the highest grades from their children at any cost are doing them a great disservice.

**Has Alissa plagiarized?**

In her revision of that first draft in response to her instructor’s feedback, Alissa changed that paragraph to read as follows:

> Not everyone agrees with Amy Chua that the verbal abuse Chinese parents pour on their children when they don’t make all A’s benefits the child. “Chinese parents who demand the highest grades from their children at any cost are doing them a great disservice” (Hsu, para. 6).

**Does Alissa’s revision of this passage improve it?**

In her post-submission reflection on writing this essay, Alissa expressed dissatisfaction with having to revise that paragraph. She liked the original version better than her revision. She wrote, “My dad is a newspaper columnist, and I wrote my first draft like it would be a newspaper column, the way my dad taught me. Having to identify my source in parentheses at the end of the quotation doesn’t sound right to me.

**How might Alissa’s instructor have better responded to her first draft? What might her instructor say to her now that might Alissa improve this draft for her final portfolio?**
Scenario 2

In her book *Standing in the Shadow of Giants: Plagiarisms, Authors, Collaborators* (Ablex, 1999, pp. 6-7), Rebecca Moore Howard pointed out that, in a 1994 essay, Gerhard Joseph copied words directly from a passage in Thomas McFarland’s *Originality and Imagination* (Johns Hopkins UP, 1985, p. 22). Howard notes, “This quotation appears in the middle of an extended summary of and commentary on McFarland’s book” (p. 6). The problem is that Joseph’s passage uses some of McFarland’s exact words without using quotation marks to indicate they were copied. The words in bold print indicate words shared by the two passages.

Here is McFarland’s original passage:

> Plagiarism is a **cultural** occurrence about which there has been **remarkably little theoretical discussion**. The reason is not far to seek: the practice occupies a gray area, encroaching in many instances on clearly defined standards of propriety and ethics. Although plagiarism must surely be—one can hardly doubt the fact—a variant form of the phenomenon of imitation and influence, it brings the **conception of individuality into conflict with itself** and thereby **tends to be rather uneasily dismissed from cultural consciousness**.

Here is Joseph’s summary:

> Because it brings the bourgeois **conception of individual identity into conflict with itself**, plagiarism **tends to be easily dismissed from our cultural consciousness** and has occasioned **relatively little theoretical discussion**.¹

**Consider:**

- Should we ignore this seeming plagiarism? Does this plagiarism rise to the level of academic dishonesty? What action, if any, should we take?
- How important are quotation marks in this case?
- What if Gerhard Joseph had been a graduate student and his essay a paper turned in for a college course—would that, or should that, change our response to the plagiarism?

---

Scenario 3

Imagine that your student Morgan turns in a paper to you that includes unattributed passages copied from several websites. It’s clearly a case of plagiarism and the amount is enough to warrant further investigation. When you talk to Morgan, she explains that finding source material on the Internet is how she was taught to write. “That’s how it’s done these days.” And she points out that there are plenty of examples of this remixing of material all over the Web. When you point out the University’s plagiarism policy, which is repeated in the course syllabus, Morgan replies, “But that’s not the way writing is really done. My husband writes reports all the time for the company he works for, and he just goes back and copies past reports. I mean, maybe he changes some of the figures and maybe a few words, but only if it’s needed. Nobody really writes something completely new, unless they really want to.”

Consider:

• What should your response be? Do you formally accuse Morgan of plagiarism? Or do you offer her a chance to revise her paper? What would the benefits and/or detriments of each response?
• Given that anthropologist Susan Blum has concluded that the Internet “has changed how [students] think of texts” and that their understanding of textual production is often vastly different from that of their college instructors, how might a writing teacher address this issue to insure that students don’t write their papers in the same way that Morgan did?

Scenario 4

Imagine that you are on the promotion and tenure committee member at a mid-sized Midwestern “teaching” university with aspirations to become a research university. The committee has discovered that an assistant professor, going up for promotion and tenure, copied nearly word-for-word another person’s teaching philosophy statement that he found online, changing only the name of the department and program to fit his own. Several members of the committee immediately call for the committee to deny the assistant professor promotion and tenure, but other members convince them to allow the assistant professor to be questioned about the plagiarism. During this interview, the assistant professor states that he believes he did nothing wrong. The P&T guidelines only state that he should provide an at least one-page document that articulates his own philosophy of teaching, and that, he says, is what he did. He claims that the teaching philosophy statement he provided accurately describes his teaching philosophy.

Consider:

• What is your response to this situation? Should this assistant professor be denied promotion and tenure? Should he be fired? Should he be asked to submit a new, original teaching philosophy statement? Should the plagiarism simply be ignored?
Scenario 5

Imagine that you are a member of a faculty committee hearing the case of a junior faculty member accused of plagiarism on his dissertation. While all his sources are listed in his “References” and there are some quoted passages in his literature review that are cited perfectly, there are other copied passages that have no citation at all, and there are some copied passages that are introduced with a conventional “tag” (“According to X,” “As X states,” “X has concluded,” and so on) and which are block quoted but which have no other citation markers. Your colleague’s explanation is that all of the plagiarized passages had been part of longer quoted passages that during writing, he had broken up when including new material from other sources and that he was in such a hurry to make his dissertation deadline that he must have forgotten to go back and include citations for all of the parts of the passages that had been divided.

Consider:

• What response should the committee reviewing this case make?
• What if the accused was a senior professor colleague of yours? Would you recommend a similar response?

Scenario 6

Imagine that you are a member of your institution’s Committee on Misconduct. Makiko, a native Japanese first-year college student with an otherwise stellar school record, has been brought before the Committee on plagiarism charges. Makiko moved to the U.S. when she was a sophomore in high school. She tested into a low-level ESL college writing course, but her first-semester composition instructor was impressed with her writing ability, and Makiko made an A in that course. This first-semester ESL writing course did cover the topic of plagiarism. The handbook used for that course had a short section describing and warning against plagiarism, and the instructor spent a class period going over what plagiarism is and how to cite and document sources. Yet three semesters later, Makiko’s history professor has charged her with plagiarism. In her paper for him, Makiko had copied word-for-word sections of a source without adequate acknowledgement, and she had paraphrased several other sources, including phrases and sentences from those sources also without adequate acknowledgement. In her defense, Makiko argued that she quoted these sources as signs of respect, something she had been taught to do as a student in Japan. When confronted with the paraphrasing plagiarism, Makiko said that she simply did not understand that what she’d done was wrong. Yes, she remembered discussing plagiarism, but she knew that she would never intentionally cheat and so, she assumed that she didn’t need to worry about plagiarism.

Consider:

• What should be the response of the Committee to this case?
Scenario 7

Imagine that you are the Chair of the Department of English for your institution, and one of your faculty members comes to you with a complaint about a colleague, whom he claims is promoting plagiarism in her advanced writing class. He says that a student in the class came to him with the first writing assignment for the course, and he says that it clearly is assigning students to plagiarize. You schedule a meeting with the other instructor, and she readily admits that the assignment does encourage a kind of plagiarism, but she argues that it encourages what’s called “patchwriting,” which is a form of “developmental plagiarism” that is common in the texts of novice writers. She also points out that this assignment is intended to move the class into a discussion of patchwriting and plagiarism generally and what novice writers need to learn in order to avoid unintentionally plagiarizing: learning how to summarize and to synthesize source material and learning how to cite and document sources.

Consider:

• What should your response to the faculty member’s assignment be?

Scenario 8

Imagine that you are the Writing Across the Curriculum and Writing Center Director for your institution and that an engineering student has come to you for help. Apparently, her engineering lab instructor discovered that a group of students in one of the lab groups co-wrote the discussion of their results of an experiment. The instructor clearly intended that each student be individually responsible for writing a lab report, but clearly, this intention either was not sufficiently communicated, or the students intentionally ignored it. Each student in this group submitted individual lab reports that were almost exactly the same. The students clearly believed that they did nothing wrong. They readily admitted collaborating and showed their professor the GoogleDoc where they composed the discussion section together. Checking the history of the document, it does appear that each student contributed more or less equally to the text they submitted. But the instructor has decided to officially accuse each student with plagiarism. The student has come to you for help.

Consider:

• What should be your response? Should you offer a defense for the students? Should you try to mediate between the students and the instructor?
• When is collaboration academically dishonest?