Teaching Against Plagiarism: A Pedagogical Approach

Over the last 25 years or so, responsible scholarship on student plagiarism has increasingly emphasized addressing the problem proactively—that is, implementing ways to help students NOT plagiarize. Be a teacher before being a judge. Teach to prevention, which can save you from having to respond to plagiarism. The following are tips focus on taking a proactive approach:

Helping Students Avoid Plagiarism Generally

1. View plagiarism, even much intentional plagiarism as an educational opportunity:
   - An opportunity to help students improve their abilities to integrate source material into their own writing and thinking;
   - An opportunity to help students understand better how academic writing amounts to broad, ongoing “conversations” that require the accurate citation of source material;
   - An opportunity to help students understand the conventions of the particular disciplinary discourse they are seeking to use; and
   - An opportunity to help students become more ethical writers and persons.
2. Familiarize yourself with the research-based scholarship on plagiarism and let it guide your responses to plagiarism cases.
3. Know the discourse conventions and citation/documentation standards of your discipline and communicate them to your students. Research suggests that not only undergraduates AND graduate students but also university and college professors can be unclear on exactly what plagiarism is and is not.
4. Clearly describe your course plagiarism policy. Be specific about your expectations of students, especially with regard to citation and documentation, collaboration, and self-plagiarism—that is, turning in the same paper for assignments in different courses. Collaboration is especially important. Some teachers want students to talk to other students about their writing and to get feedback and share ideas. Other teachers prefer that students not discuss their work with other students.
5. Offer guidelines for collaborative writing, if you assign or allow collaboratively written papers, and require individually written and confidential progress reports and final evaluations from each group member of each group member, including self-evaluations.
6. Discuss hypothetical cases. Ask your students how they would handle these cases, and let them know how you would handle them.
7. Consider making plagiarism the subject of a writing assignment. This strategy is especially powerful in a writing course. Have students read sources on plagiarism. Maybe have them practice summarizing individual sources and synthesizing sources on particular topics. Maybe have them share their summaries and syntheses in small groups. Maybe have students write up a proposal for a plagiarism policy.
8. Make your assignments clear and provide them to students in writing.
9. Have students write reflections on the processes they used when writing their papers or other written documents, describing how they chose their topic, the processes they used to
complete the assignment, and the obstacles they encountered and how they overcame them. This reflective assignment forces students to talk in-depth about their work.

- Reflecting on their writing processes can reveal dangers for unintentional and developmental plagiarisms.
- Reflecting on their writing processes also can reveal intentional plagiarism. Writers who intentionally plagiarize sometimes do not take the time to become familiar with their subject matter and, of course, often do not have a process they care to describe.

10. Hold one-on-one conferences with your students to talk about their writing processes.

11. Have students submit their texts to Turnitin.com and receive their own “originality reports.” Discuss how to read these reports—that is, how to see what is meaningful and what is not. Begin by submitting your own texts and then, using the reports on them as models for teaching students how to read their own reports. For example: reports highlighting quotations that might be properly cited but may be too many.

Helping Students Avoid Unintentional Plagiarism

12. Teach your students how to synthesize source materials—that is, to summarize what multiple sources have to say on a topic, both where they agree and where they disagree. A major reason for unintentional plagiarism is a lack of familiarity with how to bring together information from multiple sources, how to see relationships and overlapping ideas among sources and how to summarize multiple sources together.

13. Teach students how to formally cite sources.
- Have students practice where to include citations. See Richard Fulkerson’s exercise in citation in his article “Oh, What a Cite! A Teaching Tip to Help Students Document Researched Papers Adequately” (The Writing Instructor 7 [Spring/Summer 1988]: 167-172).
- In addition to teaching parenthetical citation and/or footnoting, teach students how introduce source material (quotations and summaries), using conventional “tags,” such as “According to Nelms,” “As Nelms has stated,” “Nelms argues that,” etc. In They Say, I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing (2nd Ed., NY: Norton, 2009), Graff and Birkenstein provide an extensive list of the conventional frameworks for integrating others’ ideas with your own ideas and the contexts and rationale for the use of these frameworks.

14. Teach your students how to formally document sources in lists of “References,” “Works Cited,” etc. Documentation is a dry topic for discussion and best learned through practice. Lecturing on citation and documentation is NOT an effective pedagogy. Instead, you might provide exercises in revising plagiarized passages, thus requiring students to practice citing and documenting source material. And in fact, perhaps the best way to teach citation and documentation is by showing students a good online source for citing and documenting sources in your discipline and just relying on them to eventually absorb these conventions through practice both in your class and beyond it.

15. Don’t assume that just spending a class period on teaching citation and documentation will mean students “know” how not to plagiarize.

16. Have a classroom discussion (or even two) about what students believe constitutes plagiarism. Encourage students who have been educated in non-Western cultures to
describe how they have been taught writing. Do not be judgmental.

17. Teach note taking. It’s not just summarizing, paraphrasing, and quoting. Teach your students how to read source material, determine relevant information, and digest that information, AND how to include subjective responses, which can connect source information with personal experience, with prior knowledge, and with information provided by other sources. Teach students the importance of (1) distinguishing b/w source material and the writer’s own material; (2) making sure to clearly indicate the source of material on every page, every note card, etc., of notes.

18. Teach students how to effectively summarize individual sources. Practicing summarizing forces students to actually engage with the source, and not simply skim the source.

19. Have students share their texts and provide peer response that includes guidance to question the originality of writing that is highly sophisticated.

20. Teach time management to work against carelessness due to being in a rush.

21. Discuss with students the differences between institutional contexts where plagiarism is accepted and independent or competitive contexts, where it is not. Make sure that students understand that they will be expected to adhere to Western academic ideas of authorship and plagiarism. Most academic assignments present independent contexts, not institutionalized ones. A good rule of thumb for students is to assume that all academic assignments present independent contexts, unless they are specifically told otherwise.

22. Define and discuss plagiarism thoroughly with students, allowing students themselves to express their thoughts and feelings about plagiarism. Perhaps even allow students in your class to help you shape a policy on plagiarism that would be allowable at your institution. Research suggests that many students have strong feelings about plagiarism and also have misconceptions about it.

23. Allow students opportunities to receive feedback from you and then to revise their written work. This process allows you to catch unintentional plagiarism early and educate students in proper integration, citation, and documentation methods.

Helping Students Avoid Developmental Plagiarism

In addition to the previous tips for helping students avoid unintentional plagiarism, consider the following:

24. Discuss with students how moving from a novice writer to an experienced, “expert” writer takes time and practice.

25. Emphasize how trial and error—and revision based on error—is one of the most powerful methods of learning.

26. Provide a safe and supportive environment for trial and error and revision.

27. Embrace developmental plagiarism, often in the form of patchwriting, as an inevitability.

28. In fact, consider making an early writing assignment an exercise in patchwriting, which then leads into a class discussion of why patchwriting is unacceptable in academic writing and how to avoid it by learning how to adequately summarize and synthesize source material and cite sources.

Helping Students Avoid Intentional Plagiarism

29. Clearly describe your course plagiarism policy. Make sure to describe the possible consequences of being caught intentionally plagiarizing.
30. Be specific about your expectations of students, especially with regard to citation and documentation, collaboration, and self-plagiarism—that is, turning in the same paper for assignments in different courses. Collaboration is especially important. Some teachers want students to talk to other students about their writing and to get feedback and share ideas. Other teachers prefer that students not discuss their work with other students.

31. Discuss hypothetical cases. Ask your students how they would handle these cases, and let them know how you would handle them.

32. Consider making plagiarism the subject of a writing assignment. This strategy is especially powerful in a writing course. Have students read sources on plagiarism. Maybe have them practice summarizing individual sources and synthesizing sources on particular topics. Maybe have them share their summaries and syntheses in small groups. Maybe have students write up a proposal for a plagiarism policy.

33. Have students write reflections on the processes they used when writing their papers or other written documents, describing how they chose their topic, the processes they used to complete the assignment, and the obstacles they encountered and how they overcame them. This reflective assignment forces students to talk in-depth about their work.
   - Reflecting on their writing processes can reveal intentional plagiarism. Writers who intentionally plagiarize sometimes do not take the time to become familiar with their subject matter and, of course, often do not have a process they care to describe.

34. Hold one-on-one conferences with your students to talk about their writing processes.

35. Work at increasing each student’s self-efficacy.
   - Try to provide a writing success early on that will be perceived by students as an indication that they can succeed in the course.
   - Break longer assignments into component parts and set deadlines for completion of each part. Then, evaluate each part as it is submitted. This allows for early successes and early opportunities for revisions that will increase student chances of success.
   - Always speak to students with respect and projecting the expectation that each student has the ability to succeed.
   - In feedback, find positives to note.

36. Frankly discuss the pressures to succeed that students often face. Take on the role of coach and indicate that you will help them succeed as much as possible. But don’t mislead students; make sure they understand that you also have an obligation to uphold standards.

37. As a class, discuss workload and family pressures and stress. Have students share their strategies for dealing with these pressures and stress.

38. Teach time management.

39. Work on motivating students.
   - Make sure that students understand the relevance of what they are learning in your course
   - Provide contexts for writing assignments. Include a purpose and an audience for the text to be produced. Let the students role-play as experts on the subject matter.

40. Discuss the value of citation.

41. Discuss institutionalized writing contexts and the Internet and how and why school writing is different.