

Tutors as Collaborative Allies, Not Judges of Integrity

By Emily Rothrock

As writing tutors, we often encounter student papers that blur the line between original work and that which is plagiarized. Plagiarism, accidental or intentional, may be the most common type of academic dishonesty that tutors encounter in the writing center. Most times, it is fairly easy to discern incorrectly cited information in a student's paper, and a problem can easily be resolved by showing him the proper ways to give credit where it is due. However, we may at times come across a few stickier situations—those times that we are not sure of the correct protocol, or suspect that the student is intentionally plagiarizing large portions of her work. What do we do? Is it our job as tutors to be protectors of citation methods and the school's honor code?

According to the University of Southern California's Center for Excellence in Teaching, academic dishonesty is defined as including four types of behavior: "cheating, dishonest conduct, plagiarism, and collusion." A broad definition, but it was one of the few I could find when I Google-searched "academic dishonesty." In reality, most universities have some sort of academic integrity policy but few are clearly defined. In Faculty Senate Policy 49-20, Penn State defines academic integrity as "a commitment by all members of the University community not to engage in or tolerate acts of falsification, misrepresentation or deception." This definition is all-encompassing, but it may be too broad to be useful in specific situations.

Recently, I encountered a tutee who explained to me that she brought her brother's college essay to the writing center to be "edited." When I looked at the paper, the brother's name and "Common Application Essay" were clearly printed at the top of the sheet. After explaining to her the policy we have in our writing center, that we cannot tutor the work of someone who is not present during a tutoring session, she explained that she had actually written the essay for her brother. Although I knew I was not telling the tutee what she wanted to hear, I explained to her that I could not tutor someone else's essay, and reminded her that it was deceitful to allow her brother to turn in an essay that he had not actually written.

When the tutee left, I looked her up in our center's contact report system. I had her name, and wondered if there was any higher authority to which I should be taking the issue. In truth, there really wasn't. As tutors, we only guide students and make suggestions as to how they can make their writing better. We never take out a red pen and slash paragraphs or make rewrites. As writing tutors, we should not see ourselves as an extension of the classroom jurisdiction. Instead, I urge all tutors to simply do the right thing within the tutoring session and not try to police students outside of the Writing Center. We should not get bogged down by the explicit statements of a school's policies, or lack thereof.

Unspecific academic dishonesty policies can result in many different scenarios that create difficult situations for us as tutors. We no longer have a clear, black-or-white answer, but are

faced with a gray area. If a student comes in and says she is reusing a paper from a previous semester and wants help changing it to fit a current assignment, should the tutor report the situation to the professor? I say no. It is not our job to get involved in university politics, and while we can suggest to the student that they should attempt to write an original paper that relates to the assignment, at the end of the day the student has authority over her own academic career. Instead, if we simply do our job—make sure that the writing relates to the prompt, that the thesis is clear and argumentative—we can be more effective tutors.

Truthfully, it is up to each tutor and individual writing center to define specific procedures for questions of academic dishonesty. However, I personally believe that we should focus on helping each student leave the writing center with the best quality work possible. That is not to say that we should not correct students who take entire paragraphs from sources without including a citation, but we should not be too focused on trying to uncover dishonesty or “catch” students. By approaching each tutoring situation with the intent of collaborating with the writer to make her writing technique and her paper the best they can be, these gray-area questions may be eliminated.