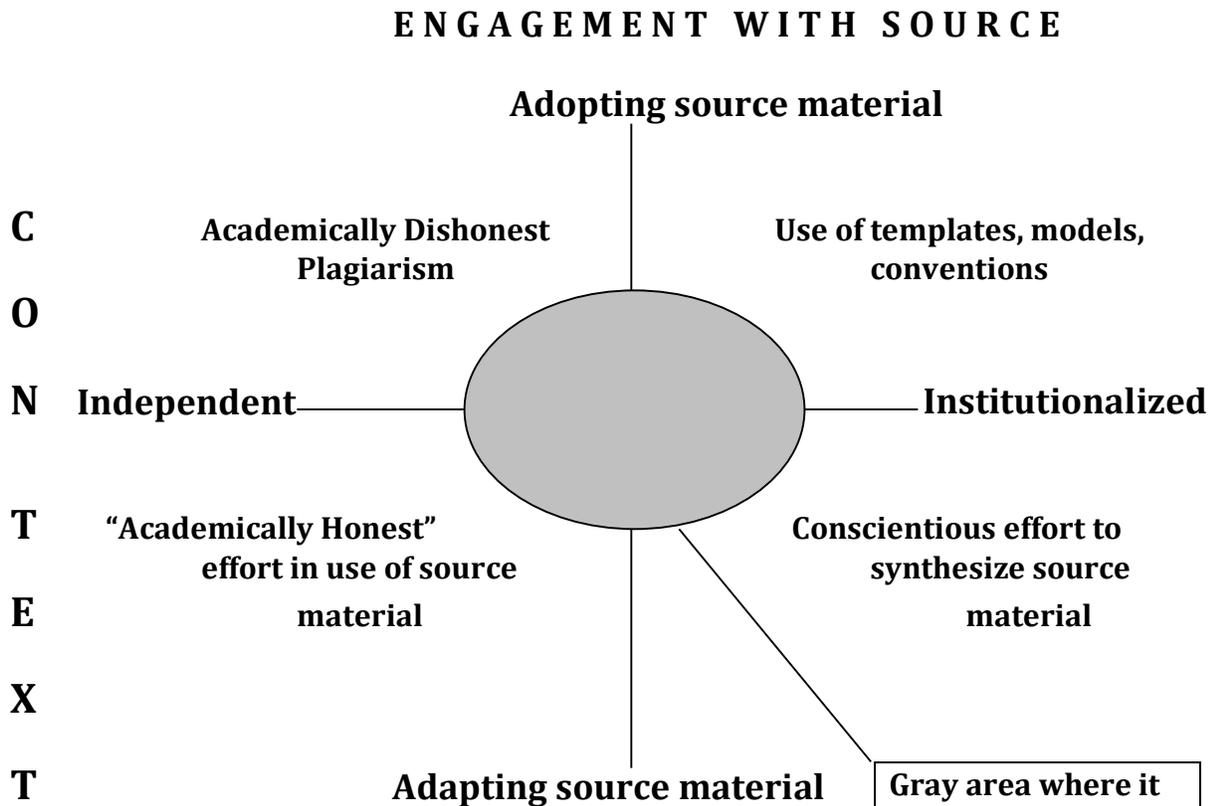


Investigating Student Plagiarism Responsibly

We clearly need to bring a research-based knowledge of plagiarism to every plagiarism case that we investigate. One way of understanding when plagiarism becomes academically dishonest is to view the adopting/adapting distinction and the distinction between independent and institutionalized contexts as intersecting continua:



How the person using the source material engages with it is presented as a vertical continuum between two extreme poles adopting and adapting. The context in which the use of the source material is being used is presented as horizontal continuum between two extreme poles of independent contexts and institutionalized contexts.

This graphic reveals that plagiarism is not really academically dishonest except when a person intentionally adopts a text within an independent (or “competitive”) context—that is, within only one of the four quadrants of source material use created by the intersecting axes.

An example of what might exist in that middle gray area would be a faculty member's statement of her teaching philosophy. Many, if not nearly all, universities and colleges require such a statement from each faculty member going up for tenure and promotion, but, as we all know, some institutions place more importance on this statement than other institutions. I've questioned a good number of college faculty members from different institutions about their statements. Some readily share that they pretty much copied someone else's statement word-for-word. Others somewhat reluctantly admit the same. Some simply refuse to talk about the subject. And there are those who claim they pretty much wrote their statements without copying previously written statements from others. Much depends, of course, on context—that is, on the level of importance each faculty member's institution places on a philosophy of teaching. At some institutions, this statement is considered very important, and thus, the faculty member's statement exists within a context that requires an independence of the text and author from past statements. On the other hand, some institutions consider these statements routine and don't place much importance on them at all, creating what could, at best, be called a *de facto* "institutionalized" context where faculty and administration condone the plagiarizing of these statements. Clearly, then, college and university statements of teaching philosophies, as a genre, occupy a very gray area when it comes to determining context. And so, the examples of such statements will run up and down the adopting/adapting continuum.

A plagiarism investigation, then, must be more than simply an abstract analysis. Every case has its own rhetorical situation. What we know about plagiarism strongly suggests the need for care and a conscientious attention to fairness when dealing with plagiarism accusations. The following questions should be addressed—and probably in the following order:

1. ***Were ideas or language of a source or sources employed by the writer without acknowledgment of the source(s)—that is, is it really plagiarism?***

If not, then further investigation is not warranted. If the writer acknowledged the source but did not appropriately format the citation (e.g., fails to put quotation marks around quoted material), then the case presents an opportunity to educate the writer on proper citation formatting.

2. ***Does the amount or significance of the plagiarism rise to the level of academic dishonesty—that is, to the level where further investigation is warranted?***

If not, then further investigation is not warranted. Unless a pattern of plagiarism is revealed, small glitches in source acknowledgement and/or citation, such as not including quotation marks around copied source material or copying phrases and maybe even sentences in one paragraph of a much longer work, can be viewed like typographical grammar errors, not evidence of a serious absence of knowledge or of an effort to cheat.

3. ***Was the plagiarism committed within a context where the use of others' ideas and/or language is considered acceptable? Or was the plagiarist under the impression that she or he was writing within a context where plagiarism is accepted, what Brian Martin calls "institutionalized plagiarism."***

If so, then further investigation is not warranted. A student writer might misinterpret an assignment, assuming that the assignment allows for institutionalized plagiarism when it does not. The appropriate response to such a case probably is to ask the student to redo the assignment. The best way to determine if the student has made such a misinterpretation is through the one-on-one conference.

4. ***Does it appear that the writer made an effort to adapt the ideas and/or language of the source, rather than merely adopt those ideas and/or language?***

If it appears the writer attempted to adapt the source material, then the writer may have unintentionally or inadvertently plagiarized and further investigation of the effort as plagiarism may not be warranted, although investigation into why the student unintentionally plagiarized is a pedagogical imperative. Sometimes, intent simply is not clear, and the only truly effective way to determine if a student writer has unintentionally plagiarized is by talking to the student in a one-on-one conference. Mechanized detection, such as Turnitin.com, will identify copied material but NOT the intent behind it. And as the research shows beyond a doubt, simply identifying copied material does NOT constitute sufficient evidence of intentional plagiarism.

5. ***Does the plagiarism appear to be the result of carelessness or an inadequate understanding of the conventions of the community the writer is attempting to address?***

If so, then the plagiarism may not have been intended to deceive, and further investigation may not be warranted, although, once more, finding out what caused the plagiarism and helping the student learn what she needs to do in order not to plagiarize that way again should be a pedagogical imperative. Patchwriting should always be viewed as an educational opportunity.

6. ***If the plagiarism is determined to be intentional, are there extenuating circumstances that might warrant consideration?***

Some reasons that students intentionally plagiarize really do seem to warrant our consideration as teachers. For example, did the student have low self-efficacy—that is, a belief that she or he simply was not capable of completing the task successfully? (It is worth considering how we as teachers can address students' low self-efficacy. We have three decades of research showing the impact that self-efficacy has on learning. Are we comfortable with the notion that teachers have no control over and, therefore, no responsibility for student self-efficacy?) Was the student's plagiarism due to inadequate time management? Should bad time management be considered an extenuating circumstance, since colleges and universities (and high schools, too, for that matter) rarely teach students how to manage their time, and yet, research on learning tells us how important it is? Was the student suffering from cognitive overload—usually in conjunction with bad time management? Was the student under undue pressure to succeed from parents or because of financial aid or due to some other significant factor? The pressure to succeed, combined with low self-efficacy, can make students highly susceptible the temptation to plagiarize?

Given what we know about student plagiarism—and especially the importance of judging intent—we can see how crucially important *the teacher-student conference* can be to any investigation of that plagiarism. Too often, when plagiarism is involved, the teacher-student conference is viewed as a criminal interrogation, where the investigator seeks to maneuver the criminal student into a confession. However, as responsible scholarship on plagiarism tells us, many students who plagiarize do so without consciously intending to do so. Instead, the teacher-student conference should seek to reveal the reasons for the plagiarism and the best educational response to resolve the problem. The teacher-student conference should be viewed as a crucially important investigative tool that should not be abused. Students should be given due process and treated with respect. The goal should be to understand the following:

- If plagiarism has really occurred;
- If the amount or significance of it rises to the level where further investigation is warranted;
- If the student understood the context in which the text was produced—that is, not mistaking the context as institutionalized;
- The intent of the student: If the student appears to have been trying to *adapt* the ideas &/or language of the source(s) and not simply *adopting* source material;
- If the plagiarism was due to carelessness or an inadequate understanding of the convention of the community the writer is addressing and not an intent to cheat; and
- If there are extenuating & mitigating circumstances involved.