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"I Second that Emotion": Minding How Plagiarism Feels

Cover Page Footnote

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"I Second that Emotion": Minding How Plagiarism Feels

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At the end of a semester, a well-respected, full-time faculty member in our department appeared at my office door with a distraught look on her face. "I feel like I want to *strangle* a student, and I need to talk to you right now!" she said. She'd given the student in her first-year college composition course a chance to rewrite a paper he'd plagiarized earlier in the semester, and she strongly suspected he'd plagiarized once again. Although final course grades were due the next morning, and she was facing a large stack of ungraded portfolios, she was determined to catch him. The online originality detection site Turnitin.com had found no significant matches in the paper, and the student had made an attempt to include in-text citations as well as a works cited list. Even so, she felt certain he had copied a large section from a source word-for-word. "I'm so angry," she said. "I don't have time for this!" She was on her way to the library, vowing to give herself one hour to find the matching source text, and she wanted to know if I, as the department's Writing Program Administrator (WPA), thought she was acting irrationally.

Yes, I assured her, "plagiarism is making us crazy," as Rob Jenkins (2011) so aptly phrased it in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Clearly, for many college-level writing teachers, plagiarism is deeply, intensely personal: It touches a nerve that strikes at the heart of our professional identity. In my role as WPA, this is far from the first time an even-tempered, rational instructor has appeared at my door in distress over a plagiarism problem. In fact, listening to writing teachers' experiences and feelings about plagiarism and commiserating with them about how it's making all of us crazy is becoming an important part of my job.

Yet when I look to the research on plagiarism for how it affects college-level writing teachers and to learn how I can best prepare them for and support them during this emotionally-rich experience, I find the subject has been largely ignored. There has been a sustained interest in studying the connection between *student* emotion and learning, writes Di Leo (2006) in "Shame in Academe: On the Politics of Emotion in Academic Culture," but beyond the descriptions and anecdotes of teachers' emotional lives found in memoirs and news articles, there has not been corresponding systematic research on faculty emotion. "This is unfortunate," he argues, "because one suspects that such inquiry would probably

for faculty, just as it should for students, lead to improved success and achievement levels” (222).

Amy Robillard’s 2007 article “We Won’t Get Fooled Again: On the Absence of Angry Responses to Plagiarism in Composition Studies” provided a fascinating look at how one emotion--anger--is expressed by writing teachers when their students plagiarize. Robillard compared the language instructors used in their scholarship about plagiarism to the language they used in their publicly-accessible blog posts. Her analysis revealed a striking difference: Anger in the scholarship was virtually absent, but anger in the blog posts was quite common. She concluded one reason might be that “teachers who represent themselves as angry in the scholarship risk identifying themselves as ‘bad’ teachers, but teachers who represent themselves as angry on their blogs represent themselves as too smart to be fooled by dishonest students” (13). This dichotomy, Robillard suggests, might emerge because of a scholarly conversation that spends considerable time arguing that plagiarism is complicated, hard to define, preventable, and often unintentional (21).

Indeed, a wealth of excellent scholarship and decades of conversation among writing studies professionals have fostered the notion that plagiarism is highly complex, multivariate, and hopelessly indefinable. In the last three decades, scholars have acknowledged the many different forms plagiarism can take, the reasons why it occurs, how it can be better detected, how we can more effectively teach source use, and the struggles students continue to have incorporating sources into their own writing. And, frustratingly, despite the considerable progress we’ve made in understanding plagiarism as a multifaceted concept, there is a continued prevalence of it on college campuses. Our current research strategies are essential; however, they almost exclusively focus on plagiarism as a student writer’s problem to be fixed while avoiding acknowledgement of what plagiarism might be doing to *us* as writing teachers and how this impacts the work that we do in the composition classroom.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Robillard’s comparison of instructors’ anger showed that writing teachers were modifying their reactions to plagiarism based on the rhetorical situation at hand: Anger in response to plagiarism was felt inappropriate for certain audiences and contexts while correct and downright expected in others. My preliminary research confirms her findings; that is, writing teachers sometimes feel angry when their students plagiarize, and they express it differently depending on the context and to whom they’re talking. However, college instructors experience and express a wide range of emotions when plagiarism happens and appear to consciously work at regulating the expression of those feelings.

Robillard's research began an alternative conversation about plagiarism that is ripe for exploration: What emotions exist that complicate college writing teachers' lives during what is arguably the most emotionally-laden episode of their professional lives with students, and might that knowledge be used to support new and experienced writing teachers when plagiarism occurs? A more comprehensive understanding of instructors' emotional responses to plagiarism would provide a much-needed alternative discourse on plagiarism and its impact in the writing classroom—a discourse that could help lessen the stress related to conflicting emotional reactions, inform teacher education and faculty development, and shape more effective policies regarding how plagiarism is discussed and adjudicated institutionally.

In order to support this argument, I draw on the research of emotion, plagiarism, and teaching and discuss results of a pilot study that explored the emotional reactions university writing teachers experienced when their students plagiarized. My objective here is not to offer a solution to the problem of plagiarism or to suggest that instructors should react a certain way when it occurs. Rather, I believe much more can be learned about how plagiarism affects college composition instructors' emotions and impacts their professional identity, pedagogy, and relationships with students—knowledge that can inform and enrich writing teacher education at all levels.

What Are Emotions and Emotional Labor?

In the last several decades, neuroscientists have systematically explored how the brain works and the connection between movement and emotions. Emotions arise from a component of the brain that produces chemical changes in the body, which in turn produce changes to and movements in the body (Damasio, 1999, 51-2). Indeed, a clue to the action implied by the word “emotion” can be found in its etymology, which stems from the Latin *emovere*, meaning to move, remove, or agitate. Quite literally then, when we speak of emotion, we imply action and a changed state of being: We say we are *seething* with anger, *brimming* with happiness, *riddled* with guilt, *jumping* for joy, *moved* to tears, *trembling* with excitement, and sometimes we are even *frozen* in fear (Hargreaves, 1998). Or, as my mother was fond of saying during my teenage years, when we lose control of ourselves, we are effectively letting our emotions run away with us.

Many early scholars of philosophy and psychology believed that emotions essentially flowed over individuals who were in a passive state, and this surge of feeling caused movement (Frijda, 2008, 68). From this perspective, emotions were viewed as intrusive, taking control over our otherwise rational

thoughts and, as such, needed to be suppressed (Frijda 68). Indeed, the need to control emotional impulses, especially as we mature, has become a deeply held concept in Western culture (Boler, 1999; Gilbert, 2001; Hochschild “Emotion Work,” 1977, and *Managed Heart*, 1983). Today, one can still sense a long-standing belief, most prolific in higher education, that emotions impair professional judgment because they are “out of control, destructive, primitive, and childish, rather than thoughtful, civilized, and adult” (Sutton and Wheatley, 2003, 328).

This impulse to control the existence and flow of our emotions has been studied by organizational behaviorists who argue that employees consciously monitor and manage emotions depending on what they think is appropriate for a given situation. Sociologist Arlie Hochschild’s (1979, 1983) groundbreaking research began the scholarly conversation focusing on how and why employees deliberately attempt to regulate their emotions and the consequences of those efforts. Her research, which involved flight attendants, officials, and executives at Delta Airlines, found that workers used “emotional labor” to control their feelings throughout the day, disguising their true emotions and pretending to feel other emotions (*Managed Heart* 7-12). From this perspective, which was a sharp contrast to earlier conceptual models arguing that emotions were merely instinctively triggered responses, we actively interpret and manage our thoughts, feelings, and behavior.

Hochschild noted that employees determine what emotions are appropriate in different workplace settings by referring to specific “feeling rules” (“Emotion Work” 563-4). These rules are a nod to the social conventions—the etiquette, if you will—that exist about emotions, signaling if the employee has permission or a right to feel a certain way in a given situation (Hochschild, “Emotion Work” 563-4). Not surprisingly, monitoring and managing the existence, ebb, and flow of one’s feelings based on a workplace’s feeling rules can be exhausting, taking a toll when one is unable to conjure the emotion expected for the organization’s goals (Morris and Feldman, 1996, “The Dimensions” 990-992). Likewise, the effect of this emotional labor over time can be both negative and cumulative and can eventually lead to job burnout (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Grandey, 2000).

From education research in the last several decades, nearly all of which has focused on K-12, we know that teachers also regulate the emotions they express inside and outside of the classroom and that certain emotions are considered appropriate in particular contexts (Hargreaves, 1998; Hargreaves and Tucker, 1991; Nias, 1996; Lasky, 2000; Morris and Feldman “Managing Emotions,” 1997; Oplatka, 2009; Shapiro, 2010; Winograd, 2003; and Zembylas

“Discursive Practices,” 2005; “Interrogating,” 2003; and “Structures of Feeling,” 2002). Interestingly, Hargreaves and Tucker found that while educational research often describes teachers experiencing emotions of pride and commitment, when asked about their teaching, “teachers *talk* [emphasis added] about emotions such as anxiety, frustration, and guilt” (494). Some have suggested that when a teacher uses emotional labor to adhere to feeling rules she masks her true emotions and effectively trades in a part of herself (Oplatka 66-67), a dynamic that can lead to depression and anxiety (Winograd 1648). This line of thinking suggests that “faking it,” or not being true to one’s feelings, can sharply clash with the integrity, honesty, and connectedness that many believe are at the heart of the teaching profession (Palmer, 2007; Oplatka).

Feeling Rules in the Writing Classroom

Although emotions inevitably complicate all teachers’ lives, what specific feeling rules exist in the college writing classroom that could cause emotional labor for composition teachers, and what are the consequences of obeying those emotional marching orders? In one sense, the model writing teacher myth, which characterizes composition instructors as nurturing midwives or caregivers, creates a significant feeling rule in the classroom (Emig, 1969; Enos, 1996; McLeod, 1987; Richmond, 2002; Yoon, 2005). Feminist scholars and those who study women’s rhetoric have noted the process-centered, collaborative, and supportive climate of the writing classroom, a location that by its very nature resists power and relationship conflicts (McLeod; Micciche, *Doing Emotion*, 2007, “More than a Feeling,” 2002; Richmond; Robillard, Worsham, 1998; Yoon). This characterization suggests that college writing instructors are mentors and coaches who build close relationships with students, guiding their growth as writers and academic citizens. However, this nurturing identity has been sharply criticized by some who note that the mothering role threatens to undercut a teacher’s authority in the writing classroom and further marginalizes the teaching of writing as feminine and, arguably, subservient (Micciche; McLeod; Richmond; Worsham). Nevertheless, this identity endures in the minds of many college writing instructors, and as such, feeds the powerful perception that the writing classroom is a space replete with emancipatory metaphors reflecting a deeply held assumption that teachers guide students’ development to discover their unique voices through writing and experimentation with texts.

In stark contrast to this liberatory ethos is the adversarial climate embodied in the negative rhetoric of plagiarism, language that could clearly suggest to some teachers that the only correct response to an act of plagiarism is anger. Scan the academic literature, and you’ll see plagiarism referred to as a

“sin of neglect” (Posner, 2007, 97), a “cheating disorder” (Murphy, 1990, 898), a “disease” and “infectious silence” (Bowers, 2001, 545), “a worm of reason” (Kolich, 1983, 141), and an irritant, “like a thin wood splinter in the edge of one’s thumb” (Murphy 899). Pathos-driven language like this is echoed in the popular media’s aggressive pursuit and verbal thrashing of politicians, authors, and musicians accused of plagiarism as well as the “hyperbolic headlines that characterize plagiarism as a ‘mortal sin,’ ‘heinous crime,’ ‘terrible transgression,’ and ‘enormous stigma’” (Eodice, 2008, 9). Not surprisingly, academic integrity policies often reflect the powerfully negative connotations inherent in the rhetoric of plagiarism, relying on fear and threats of serious consequences. Although from a purely legal perspective plagiarism is not a crime, most writing teachers are well aware of the severe consequences a “Scarlet P” can have on a student’s academic record (Zwagerman, 2008, 676).

The seriousness with which institutional policies require college teachers’ pursuit and punishment of plagiarism creates a dynamic that firmly places them in an adversarial role, creating a feeling rule that it’s justifiable to feel angry when students plagiarize, and why not? If the plagiarism is intentional, the student might rightly be viewed as having committed an act of betrayal, violating a code of honor between teacher and student. Shouldn’t a caring writing teacher be expected to feel oppositional and therefore angry when his or her students plagiarize? After all, the level of one’s anger can be seen as a direct reflection of how deeply one feels affected by a situation that truly matters. In other words, we typically don’t get angry unless something that we care about is being threatened. Consider the adversarial climate embodied in the language Kolich uses to describe his experiences with student plagiarism:

Over the years I have burned a fair number of plagiarists when I could catch them cheating, and I have ignored only those cases that I could not prove. Like an avenging god I have tracked plagiarists with eagerness and intensity, faced them with dry indignation when I could prove their deception, and failed them with contempt. I wanted the whole business to be as impersonal as possible, and therefore I said that it was not vindictiveness prompting my actions but an uncompromising belief in college as a place of real honor where only the honorable could be tolerated. (142)

In language like this, one can see an emerging plagiarism narrative that writing teachers’ work no longer involves “teaching, but ‘catching’ students” (Adler-Kassner, et. al., 2008, 232-33). From this perspective, institutional policies can

be seen as privileging responses of anger above other emotions and, therefore, fueling a climate of distrust in the classroom. Clearly fanning the flames of this collective plagiarism hysteria are detection services, such as Turnitin.com, which can help composition instructors quickly identify source matches but may also further deteriorate a class climate of trust.

Might the distrustful climate and the power differential it suggests have serious emotional consequences for the composition instructor who works hard at cultivating a professional identity as a nurturing mentor? If so, a writing teacher's identity is complicated by two oppositional yet mutually dependent professional "selves," one supportive the other suspicious, and the conflicting feeling rules each implies. Thus, as plagiarism is squarely situated at the very center of this identity clash, it can serve as a catalyst for substantial emotional labor and stress, revealing the remarkable power plagiarism has in the writing classroom to both expose and upset the power relations existing there.

A Study of Emotions and Feeling Rules in the Composition Classroom

As part of a larger research project, I conducted a pilot study to better understand the kinds of emotional reactions college composition instructors experience when plagiarism occurs, how they deal with those feelings, and what this suggests about the feeling rules at work in the writing classroom. The study involved one-on-one interviews with composition instructors who teach first- and second-year academic writing courses at a mid-sized private university in the Midwest. The courses are intended to teach the conventions of academic writing to beginning college students, and each includes units on avoiding plagiarism and writing with sources (e.g., paraphrasing, summarizing, quoting, source attribution). Participants included two full-time, non-tenure-track lecturers, one tenure-track assistant professor, and one tenured full professor, who had between 7 and 15 years of experience teaching college-level writing.

I asked the instructors to describe instances when students plagiarized in their composition classes and to tell me how the experiences made them feel and how they responded. Each interview lasted about an hour, and I analyzed the conversations by coding instances of how and how often an instructor described experiencing a particular emotion, either by naming the emotion or using a synonym for it. Likewise, I noted when they described faking those emotions either by evoking or suppressing their feelings because of what was felt appropriate or inappropriate for a given context.

Not surprisingly, all of the instructors spoke of feeling angry when first discovering the plagiarism. This emotion was evident when they talked of feeling tense or hostile toward students because of their actions or toward an

academic system that required faculty to follow an academic integrity process. Anger was evident, for example, when a lecturer recalled “feeling so offended, personally insulted that a student would try to put this over on me, you know, that a student would lie and cheat to me and think that I would not be smart enough to detect it.” The full professor, who teaches composition to a mix of international and domestic students, explained that “American students tend more frequently to be borrowing giant chunks of stuff from the internet where clearly they know better and think I won’t notice. And that combination of disappointment in their moral fortitude, you know, I do see it as an ethical and moral issue, and their low opinion of my intellect and savvy—that combination kind of pisses me off.”

Most interesting, however, was how often instructors told me that their initial anger morphed into a kind of fear. For example, instructors said they feared damaging student relationships as well as the consequences a false accusation of plagiarism might have on their own employment. A lecturer on a year-to-year contract mentioned she worried about wrongly accusing students and described how her initial feelings shifted to a concern that the accusation could cause harm: “After the anger, right, I will move to fear that I need to make sure that I have the goods,” she explained. “I guess that’s why I spend so much time on it because this is a real serious thing, and nobody likes to hear about it, and you can’t even whisper about it and take it back. So you have to know when it’s appropriate to spring. I mean, we’ve had suicides on this campus.” Similarly, a male lecturer spoke of how his anger turned into a fear that he was becoming overly suspicious of students, something he worried might threaten his professional identity as a popular writing instructor. He said, “I’d like to look at [a paper] and go, ‘Wow, this person is a great writer,’ and instead my first reaction is ‘This person probably plagiarized this.’ I always feel bad a little bit when I read a paper and then I say, ‘I’m going to investigate this,’ because there’s a part of me that says, ‘Am I unfairly judging this person? Am I investigating something that merits no investigation, they just did a great job?’”

His words characterized a noticeable pattern in all the instructors’ emotional responses: Despite their initial anger and frustration at having to deal with the plagiarism, each described experiencing emotional labor that altered their initial emotion (anger at the student) to negative emotions directed at themselves. In other words, they came to feel that they were somehow complicit in the plagiarism, seeing it as a professional failure either of not effectively teaching source use or of not being a strong enough advocate for academic integrity. This emotional shift was evident in the words of the assistant professor, who described his feelings after a student plagiarized:

“I just start to kind of question what are other things that I could have done in class because...to me I think this student’s problem with documenting sources and with being able to properly incorporate other people’s work into their own is symptomatic of a larger writing problem in my class. So, this student is not in isolation. This is something that is symptomatic of other student writing and, you know, ‘Oh, God, here we are at the end of the semester, and I have not properly addressed this!’ I remember feeling like, ‘When am I going to get it right?’ So, frustration, kind of like I let myself down. Disappointed in my own performance. In a way it felt like failure.”

Similarly, the full professor, who in my study had the most years of teaching experience, described feeling furious after a student plagiarized a second time in her course. But rather than remaining angry about the situation, her feelings morphed to self-criticism. She said,

“I think I felt like, ‘Oh, geez I screwed up!’ I should have lowered the boom the first time, but I was too nice. The thought that came to me was, ‘I should have made her cry the first time. I didn’t push her far enough. I let her off too easy,’ not just in terms of punishment but in terms of thinking about what is going on here, what have you done, what are the implications for you as a student and a writer?”

As they recalled their changing emotions during experiences with plagiarism their words suggested they had been vacillating between the feeling rules associated with two conflicting professional identities: the adversary and the nurturer. Instructors were indeed using emotional labor to mask their true feelings (e.g., anger and frustration) and conjure alternative emotions (e.g., fear of failure and guilt). Both actions, I sensed, were nods to the performative nature of teaching and reflective of a writing instructor’s desire to regulate emotional expression to match what was felt to be appropriate in the profession.

In one sense, this shift from outwardly-focused negative emotions to self-examination indicates the controlled, reflective responses of an educated, reasoned, and mature adult solidly in command of his or her feelings. For, as we are so often taught, what better way to improve one’s teaching than to reflect on how things could be done differently next time to avoid a negative experience and improve the outcome? On the other hand, might the move from blaming the other to blaming the self be harmful, and if so, could this attempt to adhere to

perceived feeling rules be tempered if we better understood and communicated the ways in which the act of plagiarism is not about the teacher at all? Indeed, when our students plagiarize, we often react as if it's something they have done *to* us as teachers, in spite of our efforts to support their growth as writers, rather than something they do to (or for) themselves.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Why should we care about composition instructors' emotional labor when plagiarism occurs? The answer for some may be to tell ourselves we should all just get over it and become less emotional when responding to student plagiarism; that is, treat the offense objectively as one might a violation of an attendance policy. I suspect that for many writing instructors, who readily acknowledge the complex nature of plagiarism today, its cultural and disciplinary peculiarities, and the unique experience this generation of students has with sharing information—approaching plagiarism unemotionally may be an impossible task indeed.

I think we can do more than just acknowledge that plagiarism is collectively making us crazy. By expanding the research on the emotions of plagiarism, much can be learned about writing teachers' lives, illuminating, for example, how they make meaning of the situation when plagiarism occurs, how they react and respond to it, and how this impacts their sense of professional identity and their relationships with students and colleagues. Few would argue that the emotional commitment involved in teaching is significant, and thus, having a better understanding of the emotional interplay during incidents of plagiarism can expand our knowledge of what impacts job satisfaction in the writing classroom.

If we discover, for example, that composition instructors often feel responsible in some way for their students' plagiarism, we could seize upon the opportunity this provides to inform and enhance writing teacher education as well as faculty development and graduate teaching assistant training to more effectively support instructors in their responses to plagiarism in light of the complex relational dynamics involved. For example, to improve instructors' sense of self-efficacy, we could broaden our understanding of the complexity of plagiarism and source use (such as with the remarkable scholarship that's emerging from the Citation Project) and the challenges posed by multimodal, digital sources. We could talk more deeply about the various motivations for student plagiarism, the conflicting standards of attribution, and diverse theories of language acquisition and how each further complicates the plagiarism dynamic. Composition instructors could come together to discuss and reconsider

the benefits and consequences of detection services and their potential impact on class climate. Likewise, we might talk to our students about what plagiarism feels like from the teacher's perspective, a conversation that could open up a meaningful discussion about the nature of sources and ownership of texts. Importantly, writing teacher education should explore the far-too-prevalent belief that plagiarism is one thing rather than a highly multivariate, often political concept that is culturally and economically bound.

Although the range of emotions instructors experience when their students plagiarize may be vast, allowing a space to give voice to those feelings is critical: When we fail to acknowledge writing teachers' emotions, we send the unmistakable message that emotions are devalued and should be suppressed (Robillard 27). And when instructors perceive no one is listening to how they feel, or if they sense a feeling rule that says an emotion felt is somehow inappropriate or unprofessional, they may be unable to find healthy and effective solutions on their own for dealing with it (Ellis and Garvey, 2011; Sheffield, 2011). Thus, although we might not be able to control our initial emotional response to plagiarism, we might be able to lessen the labor involved in modifying those emotions if we better understood the impetus for why that emotional movement occurs.

We are at the beginning stages of understanding the place of emotions in the college writing classroom and, as such, are just scratching the surface about how plagiarism, a catalyst for substantial emotional labor, is making us feel. If teaching involves emotion, then far more attention should be paid to the complex interplay of emotions involved when plagiarism happens that can leave a teacher feeling emotionally conflicted and vulnerable. Unfortunately, the reports on the number of students plagiarizing today remind us that this "plagiarism thing" (Howard, 2000, 473) is not going away despite extensive study and improved detection technology. If we agree that plagiarism is a significant problem in higher education, it is not enough to focus efforts on its causes and prevention or on surveillance, apprehension, and punishment. Far from being a threat to reason, research and education about the feeling rules and emotional labor of the writing classroom can lead to deeper wisdom concerning the true impact of plagiarism; that is, hearing and appreciating the personal, emotional experiences of writing teachers can shape an important alternative discourse about this complex, shared experience.

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