Distinguishing between plagiarism and a teaching opportunity

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I may look meek and mild, but I am really not the coddling type, so don't get the impression from the title that I am going to write an article that entirely sides with students on this issue or that I take plagiarism lightly. I am a firm believer that plagiarism is like taxes: You can be penalized whether or not you intend to commit plagiarism (or fraud in the case of taxes). And this same rule holds true for our students; however, since we are a teaching institution, we have a unique opportunity where we can use some instances of plagiarism as teaching moments. I don't have any hard and fast rules or tips on how to distinguish a reportable case of plagiarism from a teaching opportunity, but I do have a few things instructors might want to consider before they decide to report a student.

In my time at Kaplan University, I have had several instances where I had to report students for plagiarism, and it's always a painful process – not the administrative process, but the emotional strain it puts on us as instructors to actually turn someone in for such a serious offense, and it is indeed serious. There really is no way of getting around turning in a student whose final project shows up as 95 or 100 percent plagiarized in Turnitin.com, whether the information was lifted from an Internet source or whether a student used another student's project; those cases are clearly reportable.

But what about the Unit 5 project that has a references page, but no in-text citations? Or it has in-text citations and no references page? Or quotations in the project, but no in-text citations or references page? And my personal favorite: a completely different style of writing than you've seen from this student before, and a quick Google search or turnitin.com shows where this student "got" his or her information. Are these reportable instances of plagiarism or teaching moments? I would venture to say these instances can certainly be teaching moments because they allow us to actually teach a student vs. penalize him or her, especially since the project is not the final project.

I know what it's like to get into grading mode. When you're grading, that's all you do – grade. We know we have an inbox full of projects to be graded and it takes a certain mindset to get them graded and returned within the specified timelines Kaplan sets. You have to set aside uninterrupted time (ideally), and then you have to sit down in your easy chair (ideally), laptop nestled squarely in front of you, a good beverage by your side (not alcoholic – that comes afterwards!), and the phone turned off. You are now set and ready to "grade." And so we get into our zone where we mark errors, make comments, and assign grades. It's easy to get lost in this zone as we open up one project right after the other, frustrated by common errors that you know you covered in seminar, as well as blatant disregard for the project description.

But if we stop, blink or look up from our screens, and even get up out of our chairs to stretch our arms and legs, we might also stretch our minds into seeing the opportunities that lie before us when we grade papers that look like students are simply taking the easy way out. And while that may very well be the case sometimes, that doesn't mean we still can't take a moment to let students know we noticed instances of plagiarism and that if they'd like to take the time to correct their mistakes, we can help them with that.

Typically, the way I handle such instances as described above is that I assign a grade (failing) and a promise to report the student as having plagiarized if he or she does not meet with me to discuss the paper. If the student does meet with me, I give him or her an opportunity to rewrite the assignment based on our one-on-one consult. When approached this way, we are giving a student the option to learn or take a failing grade and be reported for plagiarism. Most times, seriously, students just don't know the rules for citing correctly or they are confused. Confusion, although disregarded by the U.S. Government when it comes to taxes, does not have to equate to failing. Confusion should be cleared up by intervention from an instructor. Furthermore, if this same student is caught plagiarizing on subsequent projects, then you have solid grounds for reporting the student and the emotional strain on you will not be as great because you have given the student previous learning opportunities.

While we can take the same stand about plagiarism that the U.S. Government takes about taxes – it is your responsibility to be informed – we are better than that, and we are here to teach.