

Pick Your Battles

Katie Walser Klahn

After working happily in suburban Chicago for seventeen years, my husband and I decided to sell our house, move to suburban St. Louis, and resume our professional and personal lives there. We were convinced that new perspectives would invigorate our forty-something selves.

For me, this meant teaching English and French at a well-respected suburban high school. I began the school year becoming acquainted with new colleagues, policies, procedures, and students. The students proved to be my favorite part about this school: lacking the cosmopolitan, blasé air of many of my suburban Chicago students, these were more sincere, enthusiastic, and *happy* than any with whom I'd worked before. Often students would just *giggle* with delight at something we were discussing in class. Like John Donne. Or Kafka. I enjoyed them very, very much.

This story concerns the three sections of A.P. Literature that I taught to juniors. This was unusual, because the course is ordinarily taught to seniors. But for the most part, these juniors embraced the rigors of the course. Their essays and class discussions became more analytical with each week we spent together. I was very proud of them.

About a month before the A.P. test in the spring, I made an assignment designed to ask students to review all that they had read in my class as well as their two previous years of high school English. They had a template to complete, filling in information such as plot, character names, character analyses, themes, important quotes, symbols, and so on. This was to prepare them for the Open Question on the essay part of the exam in which students respond to a question using any text they feel is appropriate. The specific instructions for this assignment were to return to their class notes and the texts in order to complete it. It was a large assignment, and I gave it as a long-term one. I even allowed them some class time to discuss this with others for the purpose of stimulating their memories.

As I was reading over the completed products, it became clear to me quite quickly that over half of them had been plagiarized from the Internet. About 63 percent of them, in fact. Instead of relying on class notes, many students had simply gone to Spark Notes, Cliff's Notes online, or similar sites, and they copied what they found there into the appropriate place on the template.

I was horrified. At my school in suburban Chicago, students are required to review the Academic Honesty policy every year, and they study and discuss scenarios and even take a quiz to test their understanding. If a student ever does commit plagiarism, the district policy is enforced swiftly and thoroughly. Parents are involved, and the students learn from their mistakes. In addition, the school subscribes to Turnitin.com, which deters most would-be cheaters. (When I asked my new school about turnitin.com, I was told by the district Language Arts coordinator that it was too expensive. By the end of the year, however, the district was installing it and training teachers to use it.)

With this philosophy in mind, I marched down the hall to my colleague who taught the other two A.P. Literature courses. He also happened to be the department chairman. He is a very nice man. We had the following conversation.

"Hey, I've really got a problem. Over half of my students plagiarized 100 percent on that assignment that we gave them. Did any of your students do that?"

"Well, they probably did. I really should be looking for that sort of thing."

“What should I do about this?”

“Katie, you’ve got to pick your battles.”

I stared at him for two long heartbeats. “I’m picking this one. What is my next step?”

Based on his response, I next visited the Assistant Principal who oversaw the issues of junior class. I walked in with a sample paper and the district’s policy handbook. We sat down. The resulting conversation is faithfully recorded here:

“I’ve got a big problem. Sixty-three percent of my students committed Level Three plagiarism on an assignment.”

“What’s Level Three?”

I quickly furnished him with my copy of the district’s policy. The page was marked; he reviewed it.

“Well, Katie, there’s the district policy...and then there’s the building policy. These are *honors* students. We generally don’t pursue these things with them.”

“Generally?”

“Right.”

“Thank you for your time.”

There never was any response or followup from this individual. I emailed the Assistant Principal whose assignment was to oversee matters concerning the English department, as well, and he did not respond either. But, then, he never responded to any of my emails.

Wow. I had one big Level Three problem. Students had committed the most grievous of academic crimes. Were they going to get away with it because I was lacking the support of my administration? I would hardly expect to be applauded by the parents for enforcing the policy (which was to give a zero on the assignment).

I did check with a few English-department colleagues about plagiarism in their classrooms. They said that they rarely checked for it because it was so time-consuming. Some said that they never assigned a paper to be written outside of class, either. Time to be creative.

On the day I returned the assignments, I sat in front of the class and put on my best face that showed how pained and disappointed I was. I spoke in a low, forceful tone. They were riveted. I spoke of Academic Integrity. I spoke of Academic Dishonesty. I spoke of Right and Wrong. I spoke of Policies, and how one place where they were sure to be enforced was College. I said a lot of things, and I drew out the punch line for as long as I could:

“I know that this was to be a 100-point assignment. I’m changing that. Those of you who completed this assignment with integrity will receive twenty-five extra credit points.” There was a general gasp; I had repeated like a mantra that I don’t believe in extra credit. “Those of you who turned to the Internet will simply receive nothing.”

I stopped, gathered my books, and walked back to my desk in the corner. There was silence for about five seconds, then the whispering started. I already knew that twenty-five points of extra credit would give some of my best students an average above 120 percent. I flipped through a book for about thirty seconds, and then I asked them to take out their class materials. We spoke no more about it in class.

What I thought was so interesting was the students—about twelve of them—who came in after and before school for the next few days. Some thanked me because no one

else had ever pointed this out to them before. Some said they were sorry. One girl tried to say that she hadn't plagiarized; I pulled up one of the Spark Notes pages she had used in about fifteen seconds. She'll be okay: she earned a 5 on the AP exam.

As for me, I am glad I picked this battle. The problem was that there were so *many* of them at this particular school. I turned down my contract at the end of the year, took a year off, and my husband and I are now happily back in suburban Chicago pursuing invigorating professional and personal lives with informed, new perspectives.