Plagiarism as Gaslighting in the Time of Artificial Intelligence

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In one of my teaching documents I claim that good professors motivate, prepare, and support their students to produce good work in their courses. I remain deeply committed to this view. But something has been happening over the past several years that has shaken my faith not only in my ability to teach well but in my perception of reality. I've started receiving assignments that feel *off*. I start reading, ready to comment on student work, and run into words, phrases, and ideas that don't fit. Sometimes it is a peculiar use of language. Other times a paper references information that was not explored in a course and is not common knowledge.

Worse, I've received uncannily similar assignments from multiple students. Not only is some of the outside information they use wrong in a similar way, the stock phrasing of basic material is identical. I find myself wondering if it's more likely that multiple students decided to use a word like "tapestry" in their analysis due to some affinity for the term or if something else is afoot.

I have begrudgingly accepted that my students are using artificial intelligence (AI) to write their assignments. A Google search for "what percentage of students are using AI?" suggests that at least half of them use it. It is unlikely that my students are an exception.

I've had several uncomfortable meetings with students about suspected plagiarism using AI. On occasion they admit their work is AI-generated. Other times they acknowledge outside source usage but deny AI. Often they flatly deny anything, even as they struggle to explain the words they claim to have written.

What does a good professor do in this situation? Do they give their students the benefit of the doubt? Do they follow the procedures for suspected plagiarism even as these are based on legal principles which often perpetuate social and racial inequality? Is it their fault they were unable to motivate students to do the work themselves? Was their course poorly planned given that it wasn't AI-proof?

Answering these requires addressing two additional questions: (1) Is plagiarizing using generative AI different from the plagiarism of old, where a student might clandestinely copy from an encyclopedia on a typewriter? and (2) Why is this *so* bad if AI, as administrators and technocrats often remind us, is here to stay?

My class, often the only humanities class a student is taking, nurtures skills of reading, writing, and critical thinking that cannot be duplicated by a computer. One can produce passable work with AI. I've accepted that. But one cannot *create* and recognize good work without developing proper skills.

I don't want the sins of some previous students to dictate the way I treat my current and future students. In fact, I don't want the ways I've been mistreated by friends, family, partners, or anyone else to dictate how I interact with new people. But it would be naïve to assume that others won't ever act similarly. Still, I don't want to approach student writing suspiciously because students have used AI in the past. I worry that I over-emphasize that AI is unacceptable. Sadly, this has not prevented me from occasionally experiencing the uncanny feeling that something is *off* in an assignment.

Grading has begun to feel like gaslighting. Kate Abramson in *On Gaslighting* (Princeton University Press, 2024) characterizes gaslighting as a trusted person aiming to make another incapable of reasoning, perceiving, or reacting in ways that would allow them to form appropriate beliefs, perceptions, and emotions. My experience of grading has fundamentally shaken my confidence in my ability to make good judgments about reality – what my students learned, how they write, and if they would have the *audacity* to submit work that they didn't write themselves despite my repeated warnings that it was unacceptable.

I've gone from hoping that my students put effort into their assignments to merely hoping that they wrote it themselves. I now savor the occasional typo, misspelling, sentence fragment, or odd formatting, things that occur in student writing as they develop their skills.

Something can be done. All is not lost. I've shifted multiple preplanned assignments from short at-home writing exercises to in-class assignments. For text papers, I require students to submit an annotated primary source reading.

We are all teaching in a new reality, one that causes discomfort for many. Good teaching may look different going forward even if it falls short of our ideal. Nonetheless, the principles of good teaching remain the same even as the experience of teaching changes.

https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2025/09/plagiarism-as-gaslighting-in-the-time-of-artificial-intelligence/