

Instructors as Partners in Learning

By Joanne Lau

In college, you are more responsible for your own work than you may have been in high school. Therefore, it is important that you understand what you are expected to do in your assignments. In entering the academic world, your instructors are helping you prepare for your future. In many cases, you may learn a lot more at college than just the facts from your books or results from a lab experiment.

Instructors as partners

Your instructors are **partners** for your learning, not your adversaries. They want you to be a successful learner. They are available to give you extra help if you do not understand something in class. All instructors hold office hours for their classes. Office hours are a free service! This is a great opportunity to follow up on questions that were not answered in class. Unfortunately, office hours are an underused resource by many college students. Yet they offer a chance for instructors to see how you are doing, and a chance for you to foster a good relationship with your instructors.

Instructors and work

What you are expected to do on assignments will vary from professor to professor. It will also vary between subjects, depending on what your assignment entails. However, what will **not** change is the fact that there is a reason that you are assigned the work. An assignment may invite you to think critically about ideas that you have learned about, or to practice your experimental skills, or to work on part of a bigger project.

A learning **partnership** involves legitimate expectations on both sides, based on the implicit promises underlying the relationship between students and instructors. For example, you expect to be graded fairly, and the instructor expects you to do your own work. Of course, in order to fairly evaluate you, the instructor must **trust** that the work is your own and that your work has been done according to his or her expectations. Therefore, it is extremely important that you understand what you are supposed to gain from your assignment and how you are to demonstrate what you've learned. The goal of an assignment will usually relate back to the course objectives. If you do not understand something at this stage, ask your instructor. The amount you learn is contingent on the amount of effort you put into your work and how well you met the assignment's objectives. Many instructors will give you an extra day or two to complete your work if you have a good reason for it. However, this is part of the **trust** relationship that you have with your instructors, so do not take advantage of it!

Academic dishonesty

There are cases in which it is acceptable for students to *not* do all the work themselves, but, as a rule, it is not. Instructors also generally assume that you are not getting credit for your work in other classes. If you violate these expectations, you may be guilty of **academic dishonesty**. Your instructors will expect you to be familiar with this concept. Some common forms of **academic dishonesty** include:

- **Plagiarism**, in which a student presents the work of another as his or her own (that is, without the proper acknowledgement of the source). In many cases, your instructors will expect you to do research, so it is important that you carefully cite the authors you've relied on when writing up your findings or conclusions. Instructors often will ask you to use a particular citation style for acknowledging sources. Make sure you know their expectations in this area.
- **Multiple Submission**, in which a student turns in the same work for credit in more than one class. What counts as multiple submission will vary depending on how much you are planning to reproduce and what your assignments are about. Ask your instructors (from both your classes!) beforehand to make sure that what you are doing is acceptable.
- **Unauthorized Collaboration**, in which a student works with another student on an assignment without prior authorization. Of course, collaboration is sometimes allowed and even encouraged (such as having a lab partner or working in teams on a presentation). Some instructors also encourage students to share limited resources (such as library books). However, collaboration is *not* acceptable when you are expected to do the work yourself. For example, you may be allowed to share books with another student, but each of you should write your own assignments separately.

As you can see, it's important to know what your instructors expect from you in each of your classes! If you need help, you are better off asking your instructors than violating their expectations to complete an assignment. Not only will you undermine your own learning, but once the **trust** you have with your instructors is broken, it is very hard to regain. There are also serious disciplinary consequences for violating expectations of academic honesty.

Discussion questions

1. Can you think of other implicit promises underlying the student-instructor relationship? Why is it important to keep promises?
2. How does academic dishonesty undermine learning? How does it undermine your relationship with your instructors? Can you think of ways in which academic dishonesty harms other students? Does it harm the university?
3. How can you know what your instructor expects of you? If the instructor-student relationship is so important, what should be done to avoid violating the relationship of trust that you build with your instructors?
4. Of course you should ask for help sometimes. But not all help is OK. What makes some forms of assistance acceptable and others not?

Examples

1. Sara has studied hard for an important quiz and she is pretty sure that she is going to ace it. One day before the quiz, she is eating lunch with Rob, another student from her class, who reveals that he has gotten his hands on the quiz sheet and offers to let her see it. Sara agrees and is relieved to find that she is just as well prepared as she thought. The next day she aces the quiz and moves onto the next segment of the course confidently.

2. “Oh no!” groans Jason. “It took much longer than I expected to study for my biology exam, and I haven’t even started the paper I owe Dr. Bright in World Lit. But wait a minute! The essay I wrote for my history prof last semester is almost exactly what Bright said she was looking for. Why don’t I just change the title page and print off another copy? It’s not like the faculty are going to talk to one another about students’ paper topics.”

What is wrong in these scenarios? How is the trust involved in the instructor-student relationship being violated in the cases? How do they undermine the students’ learning? What could the students have done differently?

The examples come from Creighton University’s handbook, Learning in the Academy: An Introduction to the Culture of Scholarship, available at: www2.creighton.edu/fileadmin/user/CCAS/docs/LearningInAcademy.pdf.