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# Tampa Bay Times

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## EDUCATION

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# Teachers take tests too. And when they cheat, Hillsborough has a knack for catching them

Claudette Wilson

Module 2 Lab 3  
ESOL Cross-Cultural Communication and Understanding (69511-LT)  
Nonverbal Modes of Communications  
Six Grader: [Redacted]

Nonverbal Modes of Communications	# of times observed
Attentive or Distracted	12/20 distracted
Development	10/20 Acting like he is still a 5 grader.
Eye Contact	Always looking away unless forced to look at me.
Time Usage	30 minutes of useful time on task.
Facial Expressions	15/20
Voice: Volume and Speech Rate	6/20 Only when forced to contribute.
Dress and Grooming	20/20

Half the time I do not know what he is thinking. I tried to understand his nonverbal expression and some of them are beyond me. He rarely makes eye contact and if I ask him a question he will shrug. At time I am not certain what the shrug signifies - is he being disrespectful or e doesn't know the answer to the question. It doesn't improve his ability to communicate because whenever he uses nonverbal communication the other students get distracted and start giggling thus leading to further distraction. Sometime I used similar nonverbal communication to mimic him which usually resulted in a positive response in the form of a verbal response

Annella Fender  
Dowdell Middle Magnet School  
Grade 6  
Cross-Cultural Communication and Understanding (69511-LT) ←  
Module 2 Lab 3 Assignment - Nonverbal Modes of Communications

She is enrolled in 69507-LS

Seven grader: [Redacted]

Nonverbal Modes of Communications	# of times observed
Attentive or Distracted	12/20 distracted
Development	10/20 still acting as if he is a 5 grader.
Eye Contact	Always look away unless forced to look at me.
Time Usage	30 minutes of useful time on task.
Facial Expressions	15/20
Voice: Volume and Speech Rate	6/20 Only when forced to contribute
Dress and Grooming	7/20 always holding up pants with one hand.

Half the time I don't know what Fernando is thinking. I tried to understand his nonverbal expression and some of them are beyond me. He rarely makes eye contact and if I ask him a question he will shrug. At time I am not certain what the shrug signifies - is he being disrespectful or he doesn't know the answer to the question. It doesn't improve his ability to communicate because whenever he uses nonverbal action the other students usually get distracted and start giggling thus leading to further distraction. Sometimes I use similar nonverbal communication by mimicking him, which usually result in a positive response in the form of verbal responses.

Two Hillsborough County teachers, Claudette Wilson and Annella Fender, separately submitted the course work, seen side-by-side above, as part of their English for Speakers of Other Languages training. Hillsborough officials, who use a sophisticated system for spotting plagiarism on ESOL tests, noticed the submissions were strikingly similar and accused the two of cheating. Fender takes issue with that finding. If the passage she submitted (on the right) reads a lot like Wilson's, she said, it's because they taught the same students at the same school and were reflecting on experiences they had discussed with each other - using similar writing patterns, because they grew up together. The two are sisters. Both are now pursuing careers outside of teaching. [Hillsborough County Schools]





Marlene Sokol

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📄 × TAMPA — Claudette Wilson and Annella Fender are sisters from Jamaica who did everything together.

  
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They both taught at Dowdell Middle School — one English, the other reading. They played tennis on Saturdays. After their match, they would work on their English for Speakers of Other Languages course, which many Florida teachers are required to take.


  
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But instead of earning an important credential after countless hours of weekend study, the two were accused of copying each other's work.

  
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Plagiarism, the district and state called it, although Fender disagrees.

"I have a masters degree. I know what plagiarism is," she said. "I was shocked."

  
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More than 60 teachers in Hillsborough's public and charter schools have been caught up in similar cases in the last several years, all involving the ESOL course and an algorithm the district uses to detect duplication.

**THE GRADEBOOK:** *All education, all the time*

Of 11 Hillsborough cases that came before the state's Education Practices Commission this month, 10 involved plagiarism. By contrast, the commission heard a total of 13 cases from Hernando, Pasco and Pinellas counties. None involved plagiarism.

Nobody thinks more Hillsborough teachers are cheating. But Hillsborough has an unusually sophisticated system of finding the ones who do. Their assignments are run through a system similar to the turnitin.com service used by universities.

The outcomes tend to be similar and serious, whether the teachers dispute the allegations or agree to settlements with the state.

First, they resign to avoid a public suspension and termination. First- or second-year employees are sometimes told their contracts will not be renewed.

Next comes the state action before the education commission. The result is typically a one-year suspension, a \$750 fine and a requirement that the teacher earn at least a B in a college course on educational ethics.

Technically, the teacher can be rehired after that.

But experts say that is difficult at best. And, during the year's suspension, they cannot work in a school, not even the cafeteria.

"A year's suspension, where they can't teach, that is turning into a career-ending suspension," said Tony Duran, an attorney with the Tison Law Group, which has helped defend teachers in about a dozen Hillsborough cases.

The ESOL requirement stems from a legal settlement reached in 1990 between the state education department and civil rights groups led by the League of United Latin American Citizens. LULAC and the other plaintiffs had alleged in federal court that Florida schools were not doing enough to meet the needs of students with limited English skills.

The settlement, modified in 2003, was intended to make sure they did.

LiveCareer

While education majors learn in college how to create lessons for their ESOL students, teachers hired from other professions often must earn between 60 and 300 credit hours, depending on what they teach.

The assignments are substantial. They must design lessons, summarize academic readings, show how they reach out to families from diverse cultures, and reflect on their practices and experiences.

Christie Gold, a Hillsborough teaching mentor and chairwoman of the state's education commission, said she advises new teachers to wait until their second semester on the job so they will not be overwhelmed by the work load as they adjust to their new career.

"We have put so many demands on them that a lot of them feel backed into a corner," Gold said. "They have to write things, they have to submit lesson plans, they have to collect data from their schools."

It's not clear why some copy each other's work, and most of the teachers contacted by the *Tampa Bay Times* would not comment.

Records show that before they begin the online course, they must agree to an academic integrity statement. They get emails reminding them to do their own work.

District files show some were deeply ashamed when investigators confronted them, one especially so because his mother was a teacher.

Investigators traced one set of homework answers that was passed from a Tomlin Middle School teacher in 2013 to another Tomlin teacher in 2014, along with a Turkey Creek Middle School teacher and, in 2016, yet another Tomlin teacher.

The files show Kaycie Ooley, who taught kindergarten at Lamb Elementary, turned in a list of examples of the "Five Elements of Culture" in 2016. Another teacher, previously, had listed all the same examples — Bar Mitzvah for young Jewish boys, piñata at a birthday party — but in a different sequence.

John Campbell, who was an assistant principal at several schools, described the work he did for ESOL students as an administrator in almost the same terms as another administrator. The answers included this repeated sentence: "Also I look to see if students are grasping the concepts and the ability to apply them orally and in writing and not merely through rote repetition."

Both Campbell and Ooley declined to be interviewed.

Advocates for the educators whose careers are now in tatters speculated that a teacher might slip up, despite the warnings, because in other kinds of training, they are allowed and even encouraged to collaborate.

"It sends a mixed message," said Hillsborough teachers union leader Stephanie Baxter-Jenkins, although she made it clear that she does not condone cheating.

Some suggested the ESOL situation is handled more strictly than others because it is the subject of the LULAC settlement, and no one wants to wind up back in court.

Gretchen Brantley, the education commission's executive director, said the strict enforcement in Hillsborough should be a point of pride.

"When you think of this and how seriously they are taking it, I know it is a pain for them to lose these educators," Brantley said.

Zero tolerance sets a good example for students who are held accountable when they cheat, Brantley said. And it is the district's way of saying "that every student in every class deserves an education regardless of what their native language is."

But Duran and his law partner William "Ty" Tison said they are troubled by the similarity of the penalties. There is no differentiation, they said, and not enough allowance for mitigating circumstances — hardship in the teacher's life, or whether the teacher submitted one duplicated

paragraph or 10. Nor can the suspensions be served retroactively, even though the teachers sometimes wait a year or longer for their cases to move through the state system.

Tison asked, "Do you want somebody who is an effective teacher who made one mistake? Or do you want to be stuck with an ineffective teacher who made no mistakes?"

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Gold said the one-year suspension, which is the most onerous part of the penalty, is necessary because of state guidelines.

She has heard stories of teachers who did not really cheat. But, she said, "every one of these cases that I have read has been substantial."

Nor does she think the matter should be treated lightly.

"People have said to us, 'It wasn't anything that was hurting children,'" she said. "But academic integrity is such an important issue." As a mentor, she said, "what I typically think about is, what about all these other teachers who did do the right thing?"

Rebecca Kaskeski, Hillsborough's general manager of professional standards, said the number of plagiarism cases has dropped off sharply in the past year or so, as the district has redoubled its efforts to remind teachers to do their own work.

To Fender, that's little comfort.

"We would sit there for hours on Saturday, then on Sunday," she said. "That's what pains me. Every little bit of time I would get, I would have to spend on this thing."

If the passage she submitted read a lot like her sister's, she said, it's because they taught the same students at the same school and were reflecting on experiences they had discussed with each other — using similar writing patterns, because they grew up together.

District investigators also noted their work came from each other's "Internet Protocol" addresses, the unique numbers that traces online activity back to a computer. Of course it did, Fender said. They often worked from the same house.

Fender said she thought at first that only her sister was in trouble. Ultimately, both lost their jobs and were reported to the state.

Today they are pursuing other careers, one in occupational therapy and the other in physical therapy. "I don't think it was fair to either one of us," Fender said.

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