

Essays on Teaching Excellence

Toward the Best in the Academy

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Student Plagiarism: Are Teachers Part of the Solution or Part of the Problem?

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With the rise of the Internet, students now have almost limitless access to information, texts, and other people's words and ideas. For most teachers, this technology is both a blessing and a curse. In the pursuit of learning, students have lightning-fast access to vast storehouses of information, increasingly rich in its presentation and complex in its links and interconnections. Yet what students can find with computers also comes to them virtually unscreened and unevaluated, making the Internet like a huge shopping bazaar where good finds are hidden among large quantities of worthless junk. Worse, increasingly sophisticated search engines can find text -- or entire papers -- that respond to many common writing assignments: Kimbel Library at Coastal Carolina University has amassed over 250 Web sites where students can find thousands of papers representing hundreds of different courses in dozens of different fields (Internet 2003). So enabled, students can earn decent grades not for their skills at reading, researching, interpreting, writing, and revising, but for a few unscrupulous moments at a computer screen

With the allure of such readily accessed papers, suspicion of student plagiarism has reached an all-time high. At its most basic, our response is often defensive; we wonder how we can protect the walls of academe from being scaled by the plunderers and thieves of text,

and we enjoin our administrations to impose ever-more severe punishments on offenders (zero-tolerance laws, two-strike automatic expulsions, scarlet-letter grades on transcripts, and the like) This reaction partly explains the popularity of commercial plagiarism detection services, such as Turnitin.com and EVE2.com (Essay Verification Engine). Across academia, teachers pursue their suspicions of plagiarism with the energy and persistence of Les Miserables' Javert on the trail of Jean Valjean, sometimes spending hours or even days of their valuable time in the hunt.

The fervor over the detection of plagiarism and its accompanying legalistic and punitive apparatus seems antithetical to many educational principles. It subtly begins to wear away at our collective personae as coaches, guides, and mentors, yielding a hardened attitude, detective-like and oppositional. Rows of naïve students begin to look like miscreants ready to dash off and do bad things, deceptive things, things that show blatant disregard for the concepts of copyright, ownership, and individual authorship. Lacking the moral fiber of previous generations, students are to blame. We, the bastions of higher learning, demand honesty and integrity, and our students flaunt them. Our duty then requires us to search and seize, discipline and punish.

Teacher's Responsibilities

In a recent discussion with a group of college juniors and seniors, I learned that many students have strong opinions about the nature of writing assignments. They explained that they can easily detect (and strongly dislike) stock or "cloned" assignments that ask them to "go through the motions" in order to prove that they know something. They also shared stories about being asked to do the same generic assignment in more than one course, such as "write a paper about a theme in Lord of the Flies."

Unwittingly, my students had pointed to an important principle in the way we use writing in our classes: the quality of an assignment matters far more than we think. Dull, ill-formed, poorly conceptualized, unrealistic, confusing, and badly written assignments lead to writing disappointing in equal measure. Such assignments open themselves up to plagiarism- sometimes even invite it -- in their insensitivity to students' writing and learning experiences. (A Google

search for "Lord of the Flies paper" yields over 83,000 URLs, many of them links to downloadable high school and college essays.)

This principle is also an important part of a statement on plagiarism recently issued by the Council of Writing Program Administrators. In 2002, the Council assembled a task force whose dozen members represented writing programs at a range of institutions such as Duke, Illinois State, Syracuse, Stanford, Purdue, Temple, and Eastern Michigan Universities. The task force spent over a year drafting a position statement on plagiarism which is now available under a Creative Commons license for free duplication and dissemination (Council, 2002). Among its most important features, the statement excludes from its definition of plagiarism those cases in which students try earnestly but imperfectly to cite sources, falling prey to inexperience and lack of instruction. But the heart of the document is its many helpful suggestions for teachers, who, it claims, share responsibility for avoiding plagiarism by providing needed guidance and instruction and by creating well-crafted, carefully sequenced, and interesting assignments.

It's in the Assignment

If the fear of plagiarism has any positive influence, it is in its potential to help us design plagiarism-proof assignments. Many of the strategies that subvert plagiarism are also those that support the principled use of writing in coursework. For example, unique assignments, assignments that show imagination and creativity, have no precedents (and therefore no Internet paper will "fit" the assignment). Sometimes it takes only a small adjustment in audience or form to turn a generic assignment into a unique one. Letters to authors, imaginary conversations between two authors or characters, mini-cases or applications of an idea to a specific context, explanations of concepts to specific audiences (such as a group of 4th-graders) -- these kinds of assignments can be shaped to realize certain learning goals or intellectual processes. Especially in general-education courses, where it is somewhat less important for students to learn the conventions of writing in a certain discipline, assignments can take more classroom-based forms, in which, for example, students must incorporate ideas from a class discussion into their papers or must write about the progress of their work as it proceeds.

Many teachers are also rejecting the "assign and collect" method, in which students respond to assignments at home and turn them in during class for grading. Instead, they are finding ways to weave their assignments into their class work, such as giving students time in small groups to discuss material related to a paper or respond to rough drafts, or having students give brief oral "micropresentations" on their papers before submitting them. In larger projects, it's essential to provide opportunities for students to practice certain writing activities, such as incorporating outside sources effectively in their work. Breaking larger assignments down into small tasks also allows teachers to collect in-process material and monitor students' progress on a paper. Long the mainstay of composition instruction, this attention to process is slowly gaining momentum in courses across the curriculum. As it does, faculty are discovering that supporting and overseeing students' work on an assignment takes much less time than they had feared, and when artfully integrated into a course, supports rather than impedes their coverage of course material.

Toward Shared Responsibility

Students who deliberately and knowingly represent the work of others as their own are guilty of plagiarism in an academic setting, a kind of misconduct that brings upon them the misfortune of institutional sanctions. Nothing in the Council of Writing Program Administrators' statement suggests that students do not have a responsibility to behave ethically, nor that contemporary student culture flaunts that responsibility. (The almost universal involvement of students on college and university conduct committees, as well as the many other student-led groups and organizations devoted to such issues as plagiarism, bear witness to their concerns.) Just as importantly, however, faculty and administrators must consider what role they play not only in creating and enforcing rules, but in supporting students' development as writers. Designing good writing assignments and supporting their development in our classes is really about good pedagogy, a pedagogy that sees writing as a way to help students to learn, not simply to test the outcomes of learning. Good writing pedagogy has the added value of subverting plagiarism, but that's not its primary goal. If we start with pedagogy-if we take time with our assignments, and if we have students work on their writing in class, especially in small, focused groups-students will be unable

to plagiarize. More to the point, they won't want to. Personal interest and engagement in a writing project is a far better deterrent to plagiarism than detection devices or hours at the computer searching for suspicious passages.

References

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