

Writing Matters



The Dreaded “P” Word

Every student and every teacher knows that cheating is out there, though I’m sure many of us would be shocked at the actual numbers if we knew them. Students glance at one another’s papers during an exam; a younger sibling recycles a paper from an older brother; students use cell phones to text answers to one another. Every teacher also knows that plagiarism is, at best, a form of cheating. At its worst, blatant and unrepentant plagiarism is cowardly and wrong. Students don’t seem to understand that they’re not just cheating “the system” when they plagiarize. They aren’t just cheating the professor. They are cheating themselves out of a rich opportunity to learn, to explore, to formulate thoughts that they didn’t know they had. None of us want our students to miss out on the education they are here to pursue. Therefore, it would behoove us to explore the reasons behind plagiarism so that we better understand our students’ perspectives.

Addressing Plagiarism

We all know the feeling: the sinking heart at finding a piece of writing full of plagiarism. It is easy to feel cheated, attacked and wronged. Our first tendencies are to make the students feel sorry, to punish them, to let them know that they can’t take advantage of us. However, simply dealing with plagiarism on the back end of a writing assignment doesn’t truly address all the needs it is revealing. Plagiarism reveals a lack—a lack of skill, a lack of experience, a lack of knowledge, and (sometimes) a lack of honor.

Plagiarism prevention focuses on addressing those

areas of need. Will prevention alone completely eliminate plagiarism? No, but it can move us closer to a pedagogical stance that encourages deep learning rather than widening the already huge chasm between us and our students.

When attempting to define what plagiarism is, it becomes clear that there are two types: intentional and unintentional. We know that technology has made cheating much easier, and those students who are bent on plagiarizing have a wealth of “help” at their fingertips. This type of plagiarism is obviously wrong, and detecting this brand of cheating (and subsequently

punishing it) often helps to deter it.

However, most plagiarism falls under the “unintentional” category. These students plagiarize not out of a hardened heart that is craving to cheat, but they often find themselves victims of either their own poor planning or the real or perceived expectations that burden them. These students plagiarize out of fear or carelessness rather than a sense of ill will.

One type of unintentional plagiarism occurs with students who have poor time management. These students come to us lacking the experience needed to

plan for writing assignments, particularly research papers. They either have never had practice in laying out a writing assignment or they simply have not done so in many years.

Similarly, an increasing number of our students are coming to us with little to no experience using the skills required in research writing. Skills in paraphrasing, using citations and crediting sources are not only lacking but completely foreign.

There are also those students who succumb to the pressures of “college writing.” They feel inept, and because they are not up to the task of writing for college instructors, they find other ways to

The only way to learn to write is to write. —Peggy Teeters

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Plagiarism, cont'd

complete the assignments they are given. Almost every student in this category wants to achieve; they simply do not know how. These are students full of good intentions, but they have very little knowledge of how to go about the tasks they are given. ESL students fall into this category all too easily.

When viewing plagiarism in this dualistic way, it's clear that simply detecting and punishing it doesn't move us or our students towards understanding. In fact, it moves us further from our students, widening the already daunting gap between us. I believe we need to address plagiarism from the

front end, helping to prevent it from happening in the first place.

First, analyze the assignment design and any support given to students. Have you given them a sample schedule to follow for their research paper? Are you helping them learn time management, research, and organizational skills? Is the assignment generic or is it original and specific to your classroom (and therefore much more difficult to find a "paper mill" essay to fit)?

Further, best practices dictate to give our students clear (and concrete) expectations that they

understand. Our instructions and scoring rubrics make sense to us, but we need to make sure our students are on the same page as we are.

Similarly, remember the distance between us and our students. We are not equals with our students. More and more, they come to us with very little experience in areas that we find comfortable—especially when it comes to writing within our fields. Find their perspective, and realize that what they often need is an approach that supports rather than seeks and destroys.

Finally, help students use technology such as turnitin.com to learn where their writing needs support.

After submitting their papers to this software, they can see where their paraphrasing is incomplete, where their writing is too close to the original source. This can be an invaluable resource in teaching students to research well and to incorporate research into their writing.

Plagiarism in any form is wrong. However, rather than feeling attacked or disrespected (which is easy), I believe it is worth the effort to view plagiarism as a valuable opportunity to teach students how to write better within our fields.

REMEMBER! The 2011 WAC Essay Awards will be held in the Spring.

Please let students know that they can enter essays from the 2010-2011 academic year, which includes this current semester.

Students may want to save essays written this semester!

Don't fear making a mistake; fear failing to learn and move forward. —Philip Humbert