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Student Plagiarism: How to Maintain Academic Integrity

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Detection or Deterrence?

Plagiarism cases can be hard to judge; teachers' decisions may not receive institutional support, and detected instances of cheating may turn out to be the result of the misuse or inherent limitations of plagiarism-detecting software. In spite of these difficulties, the race for detection has gone into high gear. This year witnessed the 2nd International Plagiarism Conference on managing institutional policies. We have also seen abundant proliferation of publications and web sites with anti-plagiarism tips as well as the growing use of Plagiarism Detection Technology (PDT) in thousands of institutions.

Nevertheless, many institutions are questioning the use of PDTs. The University of California at Berkeley refused to use a PDT because of concerns about student privacy and violation of copyright; Mount Saint Vincent University in Canada turned off Turnitin.com (a popular PDT) because of similar concerns; and a student at McGill University refused to submit his paper to Turnitin.com and won his case.

Whatever the institutional policy, teachers need to be prepared to make critical choices: whether to use PDT or not, which one to use, how to use it, whether to report plagiarism, how to report it, and

whether to recommend or pursue disciplinary action. Most importantly, teachers need to decide whether to give a higher priority to catching cheaters or to deterring cheating by educating students about proper citation and research methodology. We cannot reach high standards of academic integrity without guiding students in their pursuit to distinguish their own ideas and words from those of others.

Reappraising Choices

Making informed choices depends on knowing how a PDT works and the logical consequences of its use. Relegating this workload to technology may end up colliding with our academic goals.

Text-matching procedures are invalid ways to measure plagiarism. A PDT service may offer plagiarism detection when its operations really provide only text matching. Text matching only detects sentences or phrases in a student's work that appear verbatim in other works archived in a digital database. As a result, text matching tools flag properly cited text as readily as uncited text. Yet the technology cannot check the validity and relevance of citations, data, or content. Furthermore, these tools fail to detect well-paraphrased theft of another's ideas (Barrett & Malcolm, 2006; Braumoeller & Gaines, 2001; Crisp, 2004).

If catching illegally copied digital text matters, then the database content against which a PDT compares content, also matters. Databases vary and PDTs are entirely dependent upon them. For example, Turnitin does not check databases other than those owned by ProQuest. Students who use any source not included in a particular PDT's database to find articles and papers can easily plagiarize without detection. In addition, if catching plagiarism is important, then non-digital content matters, too. Yet no digital text checker covers non-digital sources such as individuals who write papers for a fee, friends or peers who help, old books, deep files in a

sorority or fraternity, or encyclopedias. Incorrigible plagiarists can find a way to succeed.

PDT systems have limited teaching capacity. Some instructors allow stu-dents to submit a paper and review each subsequent text-matching report before formally submitting it to the teacher. This allows students to learn how to plagiarize without being caught. It works like this. Students see that quoted material triggers bad reports. Students also see those sections that the PDT failed to flag, such as paraphrased, uncited text. They learn that rewording text and dropping quotations generates better originality reports. To some students, this is old news. They learn how PDT's work and figure out how to make minor adjustments in plagiarized text in order to foil detection. A teacher can guide students in identifying a source by walking them carefully through the process of integrating outside sources into "original" research. Without this context, technology may lead both students and learning objectives astray.

Ethical and legal problems may arise with the content of a PDT database. Turnitin has never hidden the practice of using student papers to build its database—with or without student consent—and then using the database containing these student papers for its own commercial gain. Students get no returns from this business. Teachers may feel more secure if all previous student papers are submitted to the database, even without student consent, so that another student's paper is less likely to be plagiarized. However, the teacher is then allowing a student's intellectual property to be used for someone else's profit. How can students place a high value on academic integrity when teachers and institutions make this kind of choice? Although the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) requires students' written consent for submitting their papers, is this true consent when faculty require such submissions in their course?

Defining Plagiarism

Pinpointing ethical, professional, and legal dilemmas has scant meaning in the absence of a common understanding about what constitutes plagiarism. Does the presence of one uncited section on one page of a ten page manuscript demonstrate plagiarism? How do students know where teachers draw the line? Statistics on cheating add to the fog because questions on surveys about cheating ask about anything from accidental omissions of citations to copying of papers; few students admit to major infractions. We do not know the true percentage of students who cheat. By some reports it could be as low as 5 or 10 per cent, significantly less than the higher percentages often cited. How one defines plagiarism determines the percentage of those who cheat.

Many people think that "cutting and pasting" snippets from disparate online resources produces acceptable student work, saves time, and does not constitute serious cheating. Many disagree. The courts are wrestling over its legal implications. Subsequently, teachers should make explicitly clear their expectations and requirements including the appropriate ways of using the Internet and other digital media in a particular course.

Teaching with Technology

Tech-savvy teachers are less likely to be fooled by plagiarism. For these individuals, the careful deployment of technology can be helpful in confirming or eliminating suspicions. Yet technology is no substitute for good teaching. Abundant evidence suggests that problems of academic integrity have much more to do with the efficacy of teaching assignments and students' capabilities than with dispositions to plagiarize. Students who don't plagiarize tend to be high achievers with better ethical reasoning skills, self-confidence, and grades.

All of the following reported motivations for plagiarism can be

changed by what students learn from a teacher's guidance, support, modeling, and explicit instructional communication: lack of confidence in tackling a topic; lack of prerequisite skills or preparation for an assignment; reluctance or fear of questioning course content; poor critical thinking habits; poor citation and reference skills; low vocabulary and language skills; low motivation to do an assignment; poor time management; confusion about goals; confusion about when collaboration ends; confusion about what constitutes plagiarism in general; lack of skills in properly using content from the Internet.

Assignments discourage plagiarism when they require analysis move progressively from simple to complex concepts. Such assignments must be challenging, but not beyond students' skills. Instructions and assessment criteria must explicitly delineate behaviors and artifacts for performance and be actively discussed during class time before studying begins, including examples and consequences for noncompliance (Auer & Krupar, 2001).

Many scholars and practitioners, already deep into this journey, provide effective tips and strategies that produce a low probability for plagiarism. Turnitin.com is one of the PDT businesses that provide such resources, usually a set of study and research tips. Ironically, if the resources work, then PDT's like Turnitin.com could be out of business.

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For more student and teacher resources on plagiarism, visit: "Student Guidelines & Tutorials" and "Assignments & Teaching" (http://academics.georgiasouthern.edu/cet/ludy/integrity_links.htm)

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