

PLAGIARISM: WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL?

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PLAGIARISM IS RECOGNIZED by the National Council of Teachers of English and the Council of Writing Program Administrators as a serious issue at U.S. colleges and universities. The Council of Writing Program Administrators (2003) responds to the growing educational concerns about plagiarism in four ways:

by defining plagiarism; by suggesting some of the causes of plagiarism; by proposing a set of responsibilities (for students, teachers, and administrators) to address the problem of plagiarism; and by recommending a set of practices for teaching and learning that can significantly reduce the likelihood of plagiarism. (para. 2)

In our academic culture, plagiarism is considered to be a form of cheating and therefore unethical. Understandably, instructors try to eliminate this kind of unethical behavior from their courses. But what if they designed their assignments and exams in such a way that students would find no reason to cheat? Is that possible? We think so, at least in the case of technical communication courses, and many of these same teaching strategies detailed below can apply to other fields of study.

One of us is a technical communicator instructor, one of us is a teaching assistant who teaches composition, and one of us is a technical writer. Recently, one of our trio came across a video project called “Everything Is a Remix” (<http://www.everythingisaremix.info/>), a projected four-part series of “webisodes.” This project appears to define remix as combining or editing existing materials to produce something new. This got us thinking about the meaning of plagiarism in the digital age. It seems to us that remixing and plagiarism are related, and so we wondered how

the remixing concept that our students are familiar with is related to plagiarism in academic writing, and if it is, how we might control it.

We propose that in writing courses, such as technical communication, instructors can make an end run around the cheating problem; we ask, “Plagiarism, what is the problem?” We propose designing components of a PFP (plagiarism-free pedagogy) in technical communication courses at the university level.

We agree with Carnegie Mellon University’s (“Design and Teach,” 2010) *Enhancing Education* program:

The more unusual an assignment (e.g., taking a different perspective on a problem, question, or reading), the less likely students will be able to find something (from the Internet or their peers) to submit as their own work. In addition, an assignment that has multiple parts may reduce the likelihood of plagiarism. (para. 5)

WHAT HAVE OTHER RESEARCHERS FOUND?

While most university-level instructors focus on the detection and avoidance of plagiarism, Reymann (2008) argues that the classroom definitions of plagiarism may directly conflict with the types of writing that technical communication students will learn to use, such as using boilerplate templates, single sourcing, and collaboratively writing texts. Reymann further suggests that instructors of technical communication should “rethink the teaching of plagiarism, as it occurs both in the classroom and in textbooks, by (a) incorporating discussion of legal definitions of authorship and (b) using analyses of workplace scenarios as a pedagogical tool” (p. 64). She examines approaches to teaching about plagiarism and the need for rethinking plagiarism in light of contemporary workplace practice.

Generally speaking, policies and other responses to the issue have focused on punitive, rather than on educative, measures. Devlin (2006) argues that recently a subtle shift is discernible. As well as ensuring appropriate consequences for plagiarists, several universities are beginning to formalize the inclusion of learning and teaching strategies in antiplagiarism-related policy and practice, as well as paying closer attention to communicating unambiguous definitions of plagiarism. Devlin argues the necessity of evidence-based evaluation of approaches to reducing plagiarism in higher education.

SOLVING THE PROBLEM FROM ITS FOUNDATION RATHER THAN TREATING A SYMPTOM

The strength of our argument comes from the fact that we eliminate the reason to plagiarize. Some instructors may say that this will not work in their courses. There may be some literature or composition instructors who assign papers on topics that can easily be plagiarized. Those instructors may use turnitin.com and other tools to determine whether or not their students are stealing text.

In our case, we have developed the following two types of assignments and found that they are very difficult to plagiarize:

- *Unique or unusual assignments:* One example of a creative or unique assignment is to assign a task that is inherently unique, such as writing and designing a newsletter for a local organization. Not only will the students will be able to help a local business and get valuable feedback, but the assignment will also have to be an original creation. Other possibilities are assignments can be based on current news events, such as writing practice emails, letters, or reports. For example, ask students to imagine that they work for BP or for WikiLeaks and were asked to write a document regarding the issues the company/organization is facing. This would also give the opportunity to discuss ethics in the technical communication workplace as well.
- *Portfolio-based assignments:* These assignments give the students the chance to create useful and original documents. Many assignments can be structured so they build on each other, showcasing the students' skills. It will also be easier for the instructor to measure the students' growth in the class by analyzing the improvement of each subsequent assignment. With multiple mentoring sessions of the students' work, the instructors can help ensure its originality.

Another way to avoid plagiarism is to have plenty of in-class work time, allowing the instructor to circulate and read through the various drafts and revisions as students are working on them. Requiring several drafts will help the instructor measure progress, as well as ensure that the students are doing the work themselves. In addition, the instructor can require students to write weekly project update memos.

Finally, it is also important to teach students how to work collaboratively. Collaborative in-class assignments can mimic professional situations that they will face in the workplace. Students will learn the

difference between plagiarism and collaboration. Typically, if students are given a group assignment, they will nearly always create original work.

Our experience suggests that plagiarism in the assignments we have described is difficult. Instructors who create these types of assignment may not have to punish plagiarism and instead will be encouraging innovative and original student work.

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