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FOR RELEASE

Writing teachers work to prevent plagiarism

The new school year is about to start at colleges across the country. That means thousands of students writing thousands of papers. With rising concerns about plagiarism, some teachers are taking a novel, pro-active approach to the problem.

Plagiarism “prevention” Websites such as Turnitin.com have become popular recently, but they amount to teachers policing plagiarism. Meanwhile some writing teachers—and the national Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA), a professional group comprising college writing teachers and administrators—are taking a different tack. Instead of resorting to the “gotcha!” Websites to catch and punish student writers, these teachers are concentrating on preventing plagiarism through their teaching.

Dr. Rebecca Moore Howard, associate professor of writing and rhetoric at Syracuse University, says that by concentrating on catching and punishing student plagiarists teachers “risk becoming the enemies rather than the mentors of our students ... [and] replacing the student-teacher relationship with the criminal-police relationship.”

Prof. Howard suggests that writing teachers can reduce the number of cases of plagiarism by taking a close look at their own teaching practices. For instance, teachers who give the same assignments year after year may unwittingly invite students to plagiarize. Students may see such

assignments as “inauthentic,” Howard says, and find the easiest or dishonest way of completing them.

Similarly, she says, “We beg our students to cheat if we assign a major paper and then have no further involvement with the project until the students turn in their work.” Instead, if teachers require such work to be written in separate drafts and take the time to respond to early drafts or confer with students on their progress, students may see that teachers care about students’ learning, not merely their compliance with a final due date.

Professor Stephen Wilhoit of the University of Dayton says, “Requiring multi-drafts of an essay helps dissuade students from buying or borrowing papers ... [making] plagiarism more trouble than it is worth.” Indeed the WPA’s Defining and Avoiding Plagiarism: The WPA Statement on Best Practices, adopted by the group in 2003, urges teachers to “support each step of the research process.” Requiring and reviewing preliminary drafts, for instance, “allows instructors to coach students more effectively while monitoring their progress,” the statement says. (The WPA’s plagiarism statement is available on the World Wide Web at <http://www.ilstu.edu/~ddhesse/wpa/positions/WPAplagiarism.pdf>.)

Most American colleges and universities publicize to students the definitions and consequences of submitting plagiarized work. But that publicity is not enough to educate students and deter plagiarism, Prof. Wilhoit says. “Without adequate repetition and reinforcement, students frequently misunderstand our instructions on plagiarism and source-based writing. ... Some students turn in plagiarized work because they have not yet fully learned how to avoid it. ...”

Prof. Howard finds problems with the “gotcha” websites. Some of them “fail to distinguish between quoting and unattributed copying” from sources, she says. “They blur the

distinctions between omitting quotation marks and downloading an entire paper.” When the different forms and degrees of plagiarism are attended to, and when the range of student motives for plagiarizing is taken into account, Howard says, writing teachers can take a more proactive, mentoring role with respect to their students’ learning.

“A downloaded paper is something that no professor should tolerate,” Howard says. “We assign papers so that our students will learn from the experience of writing them; if they do not write them, they do not learn.” But less blatant form of plagiarism such as unattributed quotations, direct quotations treated as paraphrases, or paraphrases that are too close to the language of a source can be prevented by careful teaching.

Prof. Wilhoit says that “most cases of plagiarism result from honest confusion over the standards of academic discourse and proper citation.” So, he adds, teachers “might more successfully combat the problem by spending more time in class helping students learn how to avoid it.”

Compounding many students’ difficulty in understanding some forms of plagiarism are the differences in citation practices and conventions of different academic disciplines. Professor R. Gerald Nelms of the English Department at Southern Illinois University reminds teachers that “what might be plagiarism in one discipline (for example, copying textual material without citing the source in English) might simply be intertextuality in another discipline (for example, copying textual material without citing the source in Advertising).”

For that reason, Prof. Wilhoit says, it’s important that teachers stress the citation conventions of their own disciplines in the context of actual assignments. Instruction in the discipline-specific ins and outs of acceptable and unacceptable uses of source materials will mean more to students who are working on actual projects in a discipline, he says.

Professor Carmen Werder of Western Washington University says, “I try to teach citation as a writerly move, a way of establishing one's authority by situating a perspective in the context of others' views. So we gain authority as writers *by* citing what others have said. Students seem to appreciate the whole citation deal more when they understand its rhetorical motive, rather than only its moralistic one.”

To help head off plagiarism before it becomes a campus discipline problem, Profs. Wilhoit and Nelms offer a number of practical suggestions for teachers to use in their classrooms:

- Thoroughly define and discuss plagiarism in class; don't have students rely merely on warnings in college policy documents or on course syllabuses.
- Discuss hypothetical cases – in terms of discipline-specific documentation conventions – and have students practice revising plagiarized passages of writing.
- Teach note-taking so students can learn the differences among summarizing, paraphrasing, and directly quoting source material.
- Require multiple drafts of all essays; for researched essays, consider requiring students to submit photocopies of passages they've used from sources.

Another suggestion is, for a writing course: consider making plagiarism the topic of an assignment. Some teachers have done this to try to put plagiarism and authority in the contexts of rhetoric and ethics. For instance, at Southern Connecticut State University, Professor Kelly Ritter has her first-year composition students investigate the Internet paper mills. Prof. Ritter says, “I ask students to visit three of the many available mill sites and analyze the rhetoric-- words as well as images, and other design factors--used on these to promote and sell the term

papers. I then ask the students to think about how this rhetoric relates to their own concepts of ‘academic honesty’ and ethics. This allows them to step back from the sites and see them as students, and potentially consumers (they often mention cost-value issues, without any prompting), but also researchers.”

Many schools across the country offer students online help in avoiding plagiarism. One example is the “OWL” (Online Writing Lab) at Purdue University. Students from anywhere may visit the site, where they are shown a brief discussion of the rhetorical and ethical expectations of academic writing as well as charts of what to avoid, when to credit sources, and “making sure you are safe.” The site also has links to Purdue’s academic honesty policy and to the WPA statement on plagiarism.

A number of major publishers of college writing textbooks also provide Website information and exercises to help students understand and avoid the pitfalls of plagiarism.

In addition to those sources of advice, parents too have a role in helping the children learn ethical practices with their work. Professor Darsie Bowden of DePaul University says, “Parents can help their kids with plagiarism issues by, for example, understanding what plagiarism is--and isn't-- themselves, by encouraging kids to get help from teachers, and by suggesting practical strategies to their kids.”

The WPA plagiarism statement says it is “intended to provide helpful suggestions and clarifications so that instructors, administrators, and students can work together more effectively in support of excellence in teaching and learning.” Many of the suggestions it lists under “best practices” are consistent with what professors like Stephen Wilhoit and Gerald Nelms do. As Wilhoit says, “With time, and an informed strategy, we can decrease the plagiarism in our classes. Most students are well intentioned;

they want to learn how to compose essays properly. Too often, though ... [teachers] do not adequately teach ... students how to identify and avoid plagiarism; we offer threats rather than help. Changing ... [teachers'] attitudes toward plagiarism and the instruction ... [they] offer is an important first step in helping students avoid the problem."

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