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FOR RELEASE

Writing teachers work to prevent plagiarism

The beginning of the new school year at colleges across the country means thousands of students writing thousands of papers. With rising concerns about plagiarism, the First Year Writing Program at Eastern Michigan University is 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, at EMU, 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.

“We have almost no problem with plagiarism in first-year writing courses,” says Associate Professor and Director of First-Year Writing Dr. Linda Adler-Kassner. “The First-Year Writing Program teaches students how to blend their own ideas with those of others, and how to attribute those ideas or words to their sources. Instructors design unique assignments, work closely with students as they write, and discuss and practice rules of citation with students in English 120 (Composition I) and English 121 (Composition II).”

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, as instructors in the First-Year Writing Program at EMU have done. 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, as teachers at EMU do, students will 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.” EMU’s Adler-Kassner agrees. “Many of our instructors state from the onset that it will be more work for students to plagiarize than to do the work in the course – and besides, they’ll learn much less.” Indeed, the WPA’s Statement on Best Practices for Defining and Avoiding Plagiarism, adopted by the Council of Writing Program Administrators 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. A co-author of the WPA Statement, Adler-Kassner says that the group wanted to both define plagiarism, and emphasize how to make it a moot point. “Plagiarism is a complex issue,” she notes. “Often, instructors seem to group a number of practices under the term as a catch-all. We wanted to present a clear definition, but we really wanted to provide some models for avoiding plagiarism through thoughtful teaching.” (The WPA’s plagiarism statement is available on the World Wide Web at

<http://www.ilstu.edu/~ddhesse/wpa/positions/WPAplagiarism.pdf>.)

“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.

At EMU, Adler-Kassner reports that many instructors even go beyond citation practices, inviting students to practice writing in different styles and for different audiences as part of their Composition II courses. As a result, she says, “students understand that different audiences have different expectations for writing, and learn how to understand and employ writing strategies that will meet those expectations.” Often, she says, what professors perceive as plagiarism is really an occasion when a student hasn’t understood how to incorporate or attribute sources in writing for that particular discipline. When students understand how to meet an audience’s expectations, she reports, such occasions don’t arise.

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, the Council of Writing Program Administrators suggests that students, teachers, and administrators share responsibility for defining and avoiding plagiarism. They offer a number of practical suggestions for teachers to use in their classrooms:

- Define plagiarism clearly and discuss its implication 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.

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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