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Assignment 4

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Recommendations for an Interactive Approach to Plagiarism Prevention

Like drug use and rising tuition costs, plagiarism is an issue that has plagued students and universities through the turn of the century. Its pervasiveness in recent years has brought it to the forefront of academic discussion. Academic dishonesty studies reveal that 76% of students polled cheated in either high school or college. (Landau, Druen and Arcuri 112). Similar studies, focused more closely on plagiarism, revealed that 48% of students were not aware of the proper methods or requirements for citation (Landau et al. 113). In light of these statistics, the prevalence of plagiarism warrants the attention it has been receiving in academic discourse.

In the last two decades, advances in computer technology have been blamed for increased instances of plagiarism through homework-helping websites, copy and paste technology, and the multitude of pre-fabricated papers available for sale (Gallant 67). Despite these changes, Gallant notes in her 2008 plagiarism study that “organizational responses to student academic misconduct in the twenty-first century have not changed substantially from those taken in previous decades” (77). Traditional methods of addressing plagiarism include anti-plagiarism policy (including punishment as deterrent), honour code systems, and instructor detection. These methods are being found to be ineffective in battling today’s plagiarism issues, and new strategies are being sought out.

These new strategies are student-centric and aim to address the issue of plagiarism before it has the opportunity to affect student academic development, namely at the first-year level. Helping first-year university students to combat plagiarism requires an interactive and preventative approach by faculty.

It is useful to consider plagiarism in two categories based on student intent. The first of these is intentional plagiarism, where the student fully understands that he is cheating or stealing the work of others and intends to do so. The second is unintentional plagiarism, where the student commits the act but is either unaware of the requirement to credit the original author's work or does not possess the skills to do so correctly (Park 303-304). Unintentional plagiarism requires a preventative approach.

Traditionally, the practical application of battling plagiarism in universities takes the form of robust anti-plagiarism policy, which often includes advertisement of penalty or punishment (Ellery 507). Researchers note that simply informing students of the school rules and ramifications of plagiarism, no matter how clear, does not seem to affect student propensities to plagiarise (Ellery 508). Says one 2002 study, "an admonishment to avoid plagiarism was the least effective method for helping students detect and reduce plagiarism" (Landau et. al 114).

Similarly, honour code systems originally based on small, demographically homogenous groups are no longer effective (Gallant 76). Honour codes and deterrence through robust policy are simply two side of the same coin: the former taking a positive approach while the latter takes one that reinforces and threatens with the negative.

Detection of plagiarism by faculty is a long and difficult road. Park notes: “...relying solely on marker vigilance places a great onus of both practical and moral responsibility on the individual marker, who is held accountable as custodian of the academic integrity and reputation of the institution” (300). The same changes in technology that have increased student levels of plagiarism have also made detection a more visible part of the university defence as well. The advent of software such as Turnitin[®] or Copycatch[®] offer a fuss-free way for staff to find plagiarized papers, but also bring into question student copyright and intellectual property issues, since original works are uploaded and left in mass public databases (Park 300). Detection, it seems, is not the most effective method.

Distinct from these two methods is a more progressive approach to addressing plagiarism: prevention. Many plagiarism researchers of the 21st century are examining student motivations toward plagiarism, as well as student intent and conceptual understanding of the issue. Researchers such as Compton and Pfau have observed that preventative methods, especially when conducted in the early phases of postsecondary education, are more effective in reducing student plagiarism than other methods (114). Similarly, Landau and his colleagues have recognized the merits of a proactive approach:

Adopting a proactive approach to eliminate plagiarism is important because students who are unclear about plagiarism may assume that they are sufficiently knowledgeable and, consequently, may not seek greater understanding. Likewise, instructors who assume that students know how to avoid plagiarism may miss an important opportunity to give

students the skills to avoid the consequences of academic dishonesty.

(114)

Prevention, versus both deterrence and detection, is recognized as the opportunity to reach students while they are still early in their academic development. While preventative methods may take more time or effort than their counterparts, their approach to dealing with the issue of plagiarism yields the best results (Compton and Pfau 114).

In the context of prevention, a practical and skills-based approach has been proven to be largely effective. In recent studies, such as those by Ellery and Schuetze, teacher-led practical exercises were found to yield very good results in preventing plagiarism, often with a surprisingly minimal time commitment (Schuetze 259). These exercises included not only practicing key skills such as paraphrasing and citation, but also examining examples of work that had been plagiarized to varying degrees to improve student understanding of plagiarism concepts (Landau et al. 113). In their 2002 study of practical preventative exercises at York College, Pennsylvania, Landau and his colleagues determined that first-year students who received feedback after examining a group of plagiarized passages showed improvement in their own paraphrasing skills as well as in their ability to recognize instances of plagiarism (113). It has been specifically noted that conceptual understanding of what constitutes plagiarism and student sensitivity to the subject was greatly improved by such exercises (Landau et. al 113), and also that the likelihood of unintentional plagiarism for future coursework was reduced

based on newly acquired student awareness of requirements for citation (Schuetze 258).

Student-teacher interaction, in the form of either discussion or formal feedback, is deemed to be an important part of any practical approach. Ellery's 2008 study of preventative methods is an excellent example of this point. After student instances of plagiarism (regardless of intention) were detected, first-year students were invited to discuss plagiarism issues with the professor before attempting a re-write. This process, which was carried out in conjunction with an array of preventative tutorials, resulted in improved student understanding of citation and paraphrasing requirements (509). Similarly, Compton and Pfau recommend that something as simple as the school plagiarism policy from a course syllabus can be used as a springboard for healthy student-teacher discussion about the topic of plagiarism (115). Interactive student-teacher discussions and activities round out a successful practical preventative approach.

While any interactive preventative measures are better than none, the consistent application of these measures throughout a student's university studies would be ideal. In their plagiarism research with mass communication students, Conway and Groshek revealed that student ethics are "malleable" and can be influenced at each stage in their education: "students... over their time in school showed significantly increased concern for those ethical violations and expected harsher penalties for those who plagiarized or fabricated material" (139). Proactive and interactive anti-plagiarism measures can be reinforced by repetition during each stage of a student's development.

Similarly, it has been noted that clarity and consistency from faculty at each level is important for the prevention of plagiarism (Power 652). Devlin goes so far as to recommend in her 2006 plagiarism study that university professors should address the issue of plagiarism for each and every assignment to ensure acceptable practices are clearly indicated and understood on a “task-by-task basis” (52).

In her research into student motivation and understanding of plagiarism, Power noted a lack of consistency among and across disciplines as a major cause of student feelings of powerlessness regarding the issue of plagiarism.

This sense of getting mixed messages represents a lack of agency because students often do not feel on solid ground when they are writing, and waste some of their creative and rhetorical energy on fear and anxiety about being caught in a perceived arbitrary system of rules and consequences. (653)

Consistent and clear direction and discussion from each instructor would serve to reinforce plagiarism lessons learned early on in a student’s university career as well as to open a discussion at each level of study. The malleability of student ethics over time and their natural maturation, both academically and as young adults, are reasons for these lessons to be re-opened and discussed at each level.

Students and universities will continue to battle plagiarism in the years to come. Advances in computer technology will only make plagiarism a more accessible option. Similarly, faculty will likely have no more time to pore over student assignments in search of plagiarized material. Threats of punishment and honour code systems will

come no closer to the root of plagiarism issues, such as the need for conceptual understanding and practical skills. Only a preventative and interactive approach by university faculty will attack these roots and nurture the growth of academic honesty and integrity in first-year students.

In this light, faculty methods to prevent plagiarism among university students are best applied as early as possible. Coupled with a practical, skills-based approach for first-year students, interactive prevention not only improves student abilities for citation and paraphrasing, but also increases student conceptual awareness of and sensitivity to the subject. Student-teacher discussions have also proven fruitful in a preventative sense.

Finally, to be most successful, this practical and interactive approach should be repeated at each stage of a student's university career, reinforcing lessons learned at each stage of development and providing consistency in faculty approaches and expectations. Ellery states that "...acquiring attitudes, values, norms, beliefs and practices is an ongoing and long-term process" (514). Thus it is through a practical and interactive approach by committed faculty that university students will learn and understand the complexities of plagiarism with the aim to avoid it.

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