PLAGIARISM: CAN IT BE STOPPED?

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PLAGIARISM CAN BE CONTROLLED, not stopped. The more appropriate question to ask is: What can be done to encourage students to “cheat” correctly by doing the assignment the way it was intended? I have lived my professional teaching life with the philosophy that if students are given a chance to cheat, they may accept that opportunity. Cheating by college students continues to reach epidemic proportions on selected campuses, as witnessed by the recent episode at Central Florida University, where more than 200 seniors cheated on a midterm examination. I applaud the professor who, in his strategy management class, harangued the students about their need to come forward and admit their cheating. Plagiarism is only one form of cheating and is usually defined as using someone else’s words or ideas as your own without giving credit to the original.

DESIGN ASSIGNMENTS TO REDUCE PLAGIARISM

When confronted with the issue of cheating in the classroom, it is important to design assignments that avoid even the possibility of cheating. Ideally, assignments should address the following:

1. Original thinking on the part of the students rather than relying on canned textbook problems or cases
2. Writing in own words rather than copying information from textbook cases or assignments with all the facts

CREATE STATEMENTS TO FOSTER ETHICAL THINKING

With increasing frequency, instructors are creating an assignment addendum that explains the importance of not plagiarizing and the consequences of doing so; students sign this statement as a kind of “binding” legal document, as in this example:
I verify this paper contains entirely my own work. I have not consulted with any outside person or materials other than what was specified (e.g., an interviewee) in the assignment or the syllabus requirements. Further, I have not copied or inadvertently copied ideas, sentences, or paragraphs from another student. I realize the penalties for any kind of copying or collaboration on any assignment.

The statement appears on the assignment itself, either after the Attachment notation of a letter or as a memo after the closing paragraphs of a report, and students sign and date it.

Even with this type of statement, plagiarism may still occur. However, at least the student can ponder whether cheating by copying represents a worthwhile effort. As the professor, you have declared that you are aware someone, somewhere, may cross the line. You have declared that honesty is valued in your classroom.

USE SYLLABI EFFECTIVELY

Syllabi for your business communication classes can also reinforce honesty. At many campuses now, because of budget cuts, professors are asked to have their syllabi copied at the bookstore and sold to the students. Usually, in my Policies for Classroom Success, I include statements similar to the following:

The College of Business is becoming increasingly concerned about the need for academic honesty. Therefore, the College (or school) is encouraging business classes to have their students certify on every paper, project, case, and homework report as well as date and sign the following statements [as above]. . . .

It is too bad we have to increase the keyboarded lines on your assignment(s) to bring home the issue of academic honesty. Perhaps, such certification indicates the state of our society. Certain campuses are going even beyond these statements and requiring certifications as part of their overall honor codes.

EVEN GRADUATE STUDENTS PLAGIARIZE

Plagiarism, to a degree, has always been endemic with college students. I remember an instance many years ago when an entire master’s thesis was plagiarized. It was a bright Friday afternoon when a colleague of
mine from another discipline asked me to serve on a master’s commit-
tee for a final reading of the thesis. The topic interested me, and I had
written as well as taught about the subject, data communication, in
previous business communication classes. As I started the daunting
task of reading, I discovered that some words and sentences in two or
three chapters seemed familiar. On an impulse, I pulled down from
my textbook shelf a paperback used as a supplementary text in my
previous classes. To my horror, I noted page after page lifted from a
book published by the (then) AT&T on data communication in busi-
ness. The writer had made no attempt to conceal the wording or provide
any references to that publication. He had plagiarized every single
thesis chapter from that data communication textbook.

Fortunately, the plagiarism was caught before the thesis ended up
on the library shelves of our university as original work. But it took at
least 6 months to kick that student off our campus and out of the master’s
program. The chairman of the committee later told me that when the
student was confronted with the obvious plagiarism, he was supposed
to have said, “I thought I would get caught someday.” The student also
reportedly replied in subsequent interviews that he did not want his
boss or his wife to know, indicating some level of remorse on his part.

GUIDELINES TO PREVENT PLAGIARISM

This article would be remiss if it did not suggest ways we can com-
municate to students our concern about plagiarism. The following
guidelines might help the beginning or seasoned professor contemplat-
ing the problem of student plagiarism:

1. Teach students about the risks of simply “cutting and pasting” from
the Internet.
2. Teach students the difference between paraphrasing ideas and sim-
ply copying information from the Internet. Let them know, through
library and classroom lectures, how important it is to document their
information.
3. Teach students proper reference techniques, especially for Internet
sources.
4. Instill in students the need to rely on trusted sources from recognized
publications and Internet sites. Certain information sources are better
than others (e.g., Wikipedia).
5. Help students to know when to put quotes around ideas and where to place in-text references.
6. Create assignments that encourage students to properly look up data, trust the data, and explain the data.
7. Help students understand that as scholars in college they are expected to prepare papers, reports, and projects that attend to detail in documentation.
8. Assist students in understanding that plagiarism is a form of cheating.

ENLIST OTHERS TO HELP CURB PLAGIARISM

On a personal note, we need to deal with students who have been accused of plagiarism. It is not one of the most pleasant parts of the job. A misstep by either party can result in possible lawsuits and ill will from colleagues, administrators, and the public. I would advise the professor with problem students to document everything thoroughly. The administration may provide forms for that purpose.

Once plagiarism has been verified, notify your department chairman and dean, as well as the Dean of Students or other appropriate office; these administrators can support you when you confront the student and offer the advice you need. Even if you hesitate in dealing with the administration because of tenure and promotion considerations, you are morally obligated to take the necessary action. A strong provost or dean of students can make all the difference.

We are not living in a perfect world; graduate or undergraduate students will continue to cheat the system and risk their own personal welfare. They will be more careful to curb this activity, however, if they know that the professor considers plagiarism to be a serious ethical lapse.

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