A PRACTICAL APPROACH TO PREVENTING PLAGIARISM

Not unlike most colleges, River Parishes Community College's (RPCC) freshmen English composition students are learning about plagiarism and how to avoid plagiarizing. A longtime problem for colleges and universities, plagiarism is increasingly the subject of articles describing college and faculty efforts to deal with all of its issues. Regrettably, most of the solutions described in current literature are either after-the-fact "fix-it's" or casual hit-and-miss efforts with little practical application.

We decided to take a more pragmatic approach to understanding why plagiarism occurs and how to prevent it. One of the pervasive themes in the literature is students' lack of what has been termed "information literacy," essentially referring to a body of knowledge about how to use computers, access information, and use this information. In addition to the wealth of print information and other traditional formats, students have a plethora of electronic information to manage, including proprietary journal databases and information on the web. Thus, an increase in plagiarism, both inadvertent and intentional, can be attributed to a cultural lack of understanding of the Internet as text and students' inability to access, locate, evaluate, and use information effectively.

In summer 2001, we conducted a pilot study of a structured student research project in a section of Freshman English Composition II with 15 students. Students were provided specific resources to use in completing the project and a description of the assignment—the class was now a place of employment where they were staff writers and researchers who had been assigned a project by their supervisor. Students were to focus on one of three topics—gambling, bilingual education, or Mardi Gras—and determine whether the issue or event they chose was either a benefit to or a problem for the state.

The English instructor began the project explaining how to cite various sources in an essay, defining and discussing plagiarism and how to avoid it, and presenting students with exercises in paraphrasing and in-text citation of sources. Next, students began the first step of the project by conducting research that required them to utilize various media. They received hands-on instruction in the computer lab from the librarian about how to search proprietary indexes, use databases, and peruse an E-Book collection that the college receives through membership in a statewide consortium (that offers an extensive library network for its members). The partnering librarian also explained the difference between proprietary resources and those available for free on the web.

Following this session, students were grouped by two's and presented with a handout providing 10 resources they were required to find and submit. This step in the project required students to find articles using the specified databases, an E-Book using the collection of sources available in the library network, an encyclopedia, a dictionary, and specified sites on the Internet.

After procuring their selected sources, students began the second step of the project—a progress report that required them to evaluate three of their sources. Students evaluated their sources, using the criteria of accuracy, purpose, authority, objectivity, currency, and coverage. This assignment required students to reflect on their research and consider details—e.g., their preconceptions about research coming into the project, their expectations about what they would find in their research, the actual steps they completed, the skills they learned while conducting research, and the advice they would give to others about conducting research in the future.

In preparation for completing the final step in the research project, a report to the Louisiana Legislature, the English instructor and the partnering librarian gave a collaborative "MLA Documentation" hands-on session. Students were placed into groups of three or four; each group was given two sources in various formats (e.g., electronic book including title page, publication information, and contents; print book; print journal article; electronic journal article). Using the

MLA Handbook and other sources they were provided, students completed exercises to create bibliographic citations and then presented their group work on the board. Everyone had an opportunity to see proper bibliographic entries for information collected from a variety of sources.

Student response to the pilot project was positive, and the project has continued for eight semesters. Student evaluations of the project are conducted each semester, and slight modifications are made as needed. Large percentages of students report an *increase in personal library research skills and knowledge/ understanding of library and information resources, and an increase in their knowledge and understanding of plagiarism and intellectual property,* as a result of this instruction.

The research project involved several practical solutions to preventing plagiarism through education, including exercises in paraphrasing, in-text citation, and bibliographic entries; clearly-written instructions for the assignment; a limited research topic; structured librarian-faculty interaction; a discussion on intellectual property and plagiarism; and student evaluation of the sources included in their essays. Although time-intensive for faculty initially, the results continue to be well worth the effort.

Teaching students to access, evaluate, and use information has been the result of a unique collaboration. The research assignment and joint faculty-librarian instruction offered students learning experiences that encourage active participation and group effort to develop more competent, independent information-users.

To promote a change in the cultural attitude towards intellectual property and plagiarism, faculty and librarians must make a concerted effort to include practical instruction that teaches students how to locate, as well as critically and ethically use, information. When our students complete this research project, they leave the class as better information managers, equipped with the skills necessary for writing quality papers, and as better citizens with knowledge and respect for the literary and intellectual work of others.

[Syllabi and all handouts used for the project may be viewed at: http://www.lsulaw.com/infolitproject.]

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