

Chapter 3.16

Plagiarism, Instruction, and Blogs

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ABSTRACT

This chapter takes as its point of departure the Colby, Bates, and Bowdoin Plagiarism Project (<http://ats.bates.edu/cbb>), which sought to approach the problem of undergraduate plagiarism as a pedagogical challenge. By revisiting the decision to publish the project's content by means of a weblog, the article considers the ways in which weblogs provide a reflective tool and medium for engaging plagiarism. It considers weblog practice and use and offers examples that attest to the instructional value of weblogs, especially their ability to foster learning communities and to promote the appropriate use of information and intellectual property.

INTRODUCTION

Alarmist news accounts of student dishonesty and cheating abound. More often than not, such stories describe how universities, colleges, and even high schools have resorted to plagiarism detection

services to fight a veritable epidemic of student cheating. The preferred method of combating academic dishonesty, after-the-fact detection, is not the only and is perhaps not the best way to address the problem of student plagiarism. Instead of fighting the lost cause of plagiarism retroactively, technologists and librarians at Colby, Bates, and Bowdoin colleges (CBB) collaborated to develop a program of instruction to educate students about the principles of academic honesty. The resulting plagiarism resource site (<http://ats.bates.edu/cbb>) includes an introduction to plagiarism, an online tutorial that tests one's understanding of plagiarism and that provides guidance in the conventions of citation, and a dedicated weblog that publishes links to newsworthy articles, notices, and projects dedicated to plagiarism.

Conceived as a case study, this chapter discusses and evaluates the project's reliance on a weblog to develop, manage, and publish learning resources dedicated to plagiarism. In the matter of technical choices, the project developers were influenced by their commitment to Open Source Software as well as Creative Commons

licensing. The former influenced the choice of weblog software, Drupal (<http://www.drupal.org>), and the latter informed the decision to make all of the project's learning objects and resources available under an "Attribution-Non-Commercial-Share-Alike" Creative Commons license. These decisions, it turns out, have allowed the project to model the appropriate use of online materials and have retrospectively provided an occasion to reflect on weblogs as an effective medium for engaging plagiarism.

BACKGROUND

Over the past several years, national, regional, local, and campus newspapers across the globe have regularly featured articles on student cheating. While academic dishonesty takes any number of forms (using a PDA, cell phone, or crib notes during an exam; submitting unoriginal work copied from an existing publication, cut and pasted from an online source, or purchased from a paper mill; or simply peering over a classmate's shoulder during a quiz), plagiarism has emerged as the most visible form of student cheating. In many ways, the term threatens to subsume all other categories of academic dishonesty. A passing visit to the statistics page at Turnitin's Web site (plagiarism.org) reinforces this tendency. Turnitin, the world's leading plagiarism detection service, claims that "A study by The Center for Academic Integrity (CAI) found that almost 80 percent of college students admit to cheating at least once." Besides generalizing and rounding up the center's published summary ("On most campuses, over 75 percent of students admit to some cheating"), Turnitin's claim isolates a common tendency to conflate a number of dishonest "behaviors" with plagiarism. Donald McCabe (personal communication, August 4, 2004) explains that the 75 percent figure published by the CAI "represents about a dozen different behaviors and was obtained in a written survey."

Plagiarism is certainly one form of cheating, but not all cheating is plagiarism.

Reports of plagiarism in the media tend to indulge in hyperbole: it is consistently described as nothing less than an epidemic on campuses. McCabe (1996), who conducted extensive surveys between 1996 and 2003, repeatedly found that the facts do not correspond with "the dramatic upsurge in cheating heralded by the media." McCabe (2000) has elsewhere observed: "Even though I've stated on previous occasions that I don't believe these increases have been as great as suggested by the media, I must admit I was surprised by the very low levels of self-reported Internet-related cheating I found." McCabe has subsequently further qualified his view of the problem: "Although plagiarism appears to have remained relatively stable during the past 40 years, . . . it is actually far more prevalent today because many students don't consider cut-and-paste Internet copying as cheating" (Hansen, 2003, p. 777). More recently, McCabe's evaluation of his 2002-2003 Survey of U.S. Colleges and Universities identifies an increase in certain kinds of cheating and a continued misunderstanding of plagiarism among undergraduates: "The past few decades have seen a significant rise in the level of cheating on tests and exams. . . . While the data on various forms of cheating on written assignments do not reflect the same trend, this may be due to a change in how students define cheating" (2004, p. 127).

To complicate matters further, statistical estimates of academic dishonesty seem to vary due to contexts (including education level and geography). For example in a recent survey of graduate students enrolled in 32 business programs in the United States and Canada, McCabe, Butterfield, and Treviño (2006) have reported that business students tend to cheat more than other graduate students: "Fifty-six percent of graduate business students, compared to 47 percent of their nonbusiness peers, admitted to engaging in some form of cheating . . . during the past year" (p. 299). The level of self-reported cut-and-paste plagiarism in

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