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Teaching to Avoid Plagiarism: How To Promote Good Source Use

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Teaching to Avoid Plagiarism: How To Promote Good Source Use, Diane Pecorari. McGraw-Hill Education, New York (2013). xii + 192 pp., US\$ 100, paperback, ISBN: 978-0-3352-4593-2

In an effort to directly address the continuing professional needs of university staff, this volume touches on plagiarism, the complex and multi-faceted phenomenon that is closely related to the core of academic values. Acknowledging the frequent occurrence of plagiarism as the major and most serious violation of academic ethics and integrity in tertiary education, the book offers pedagogically informed practical advice and guidance to academic teachers, university students, student advisors, writing centre consultants and administrators to enable them to respond effectively to plagiarism. In this respect, Pecorari investigates “the complex nature of plagiarism through an array of interesting activities and thought-provoking questions as a necessary precondition to help educators measure the potential of the ideas offered in the book against the reality of their own institutional context” (p. 3). The book is organized into three parts starting with a short introduction that provides a brief outline of the scope and rationale adopted in this volume. Supplementary material is presented in the three appendices at the end of the book that exemplify a possible layout for a staff training seminar, case studies of plagiarism in higher education institutions and a list of sources for the examples offered in the book.

Part 1, ‘Understanding plagiarism’, addresses plagiarism’s general nature and frequency of occurrence, and describes the current policies and regulations that are followed in a variety of academic institutions. More specifically, Chapter 1 functions as an introductory section that attempts to elucidate the complex terminological issues surrounding plagiarism in terms of four concrete criteria. These are: (i) the relationship of similarity between two texts, (ii) the degree of similarity that exists between the later work (Text B) and the earlier one (Text A), (iii) the existence of an inappropriate intertextual relationship when the sources that influence the final product are not fully and appropriately included in the new text and (iv) an explicit intent on the plagiarist’s part to deceive. Due to its contentious nature, the deceptive intention of plagiarism is discussed more thoroughly. Pecorari concludes that higher education policies that exclude intention as a criterion may do so to avoid providing a loophole, rather than out of a conviction that it is irrelevant. Nevertheless, Pecorari advocates that wilful deception constitutes an inherent characteristic of what she calls ‘prototypical plagiarism’, distinctly differentiated from cases of unintentional plagiarism in the form ‘patchwriting’ (cf. Howard, 1995), which simply refers to the strategies of inexperienced writers who lean too heavily on their sources in their effort to produce academic writing. The explanatory power and descriptive value of the definition of plagiarism is finally tested against available empirical data that have been collected from a range of tertiary education institutions worldwide in a number of respective empirical studies (e.g. Pecorari, 2003; Pecorari & Shaw, 2012).

Chapter 2 discusses the main factors that contribute to plagiarism. Pecorari argues that a deep understanding of the causes of plagiarism in university contexts could enable academic teachers to respond constructively when faced with both deceptive (prototypical) and non-deceptive (patchwriting) plagiarism. Initially, a brief overview of relevant literature is provided, describing some of the major reasons that students resort to plagiarism as a form of cheating during their academic studies. In effect, plagiarism has been found to be strongly correlated with: (i) time management issues, especially for those students who combine work at paid jobs with studies, (ii) pressure to gain good grades, (iii) the commercialization of higher education, where some students feel less of a vested interest in complying with academic rules and upholding standards, and (iv) the extent of influence exerted by peers. It was generally found that peer disapproval made it less likely students would cheat. Likewise, they were more likely to cheat if they thought their peers did. In the second half of the chapter, the categories of prototypical plagiarism and patchwriting are conflated and the major factors that motivate plagiarism in academic contexts are further discussed. For example, electronic media and the Internet have been largely viewed as a source for plagiarism through the mechanics of copying and pasting and the wealth of material to be copied. While poor study and academic skills are also seen to encourage plagiarism, Pecorari similarly points to a lack of understanding of the basic principles for good source use in academic writing (see also Bloch, 2012).

Finally, Chapter 3 explores universities’ approaches to plagiarism in the form of the policies and procedures used to address it (regulation), the ways in which it is discouraged (prevention), how it is detected and diagnosed by staff (detection) and how the university acts when potential cases of plagiarism are identified (response). Each of these four stages is examined in turn, by describing the features that commonly characterize them and by discussing the helpful and problematic aspects of each. The methods used by universities to detect plagiarism, and the benefits and risks of using them, are further discussed, along with the actions taken when possible plagiarism is discovered. The challenges for staff and policy makers are described. Pecorari concludes that policies and procedures tend to focus on prototypical plagiarism. However, there is a significant need to distinguish between intentional plagiarism and patchwriting; measures for dealing with patchwriting need to be enhanced.

Part 2, ‘Managing Plagiarism’, discusses how to help students acquire academic skills and strategies to avoid plagiarism, as well as staff and academic institutions’ wider role in promoting this knowledge. In this respect, Chapter 4 primarily focuses on patchwriting in an effort to provide students with opportunities to develop and practice the skills required to use and cite sources appropriately. Two essential principles guiding appropriate source use are discussed, namely, (i) that source use should be transparent to the reader and (ii) that sources should serve as a necessary function in the text. Pecorari acknowledges the need for academic staff to adopt effective instructional methods and strategies in order to promote and develop the knowledge and skills students require to become proficient academic writers.

To this end, Chapter 5 describes ways in which teachers can help students gain the necessary skills to avoid plagiarism. The first section offers an overview of a learning environment with an emphasis on the set of principles necessary for developing a source-use curriculum for teaching students about plagiarism and good source usage. It is suggested that a process-based

skills teaching approach that focuses on explicit learning objectives related to source-use skills should be employed as it provides ample scaffolding opportunities for practice in writing academic texts. The use of text-matching ('plagiarism detection') software is also explored. The chapter concludes with ten sample tasks intended for use by teachers, to teach key aspects of the principle of transparency in source use, i.e. accurately reporting the content of a source, clearly signalling to the reader the identity of the source, choosing when to quote and when and how to paraphrase. The tasks are designed to be useful in a variety of teaching contexts with suggestions for adapting them to others.

Chapter 6 discusses the role academic institutions can play in preventing plagiarism and promoting good source use, and addresses itself primarily to administrators and other staff who are responsible for shaping policy and standards for practice as well as for steering the allocation of resources. In managing cases of plagiarism, it is suggested that the institution ensure that appropriate materials and instruction be made available and be delivered at the most effective points in the curriculum. Teachers should also have the required skills and training to help their students. While penalties for intentional plagiarism are required, it is stressed that cases of patchwriting need to be adequately addressed by instructors if university students are to overcome their weaknesses in academic prose and improve their writing skills.

Chapter 8 presents examples of the differences in source use and explains what constitutes good academic writing practices across academic disciplines. The conclusion reached is that both staff and students would be better served either by a greater consistency over subject borders, or by policies which are sensitive to the differences which exist. Chapter 9 probes the diversity in students' learning characteristics and educational experiences, through a brief discussion of the variety of educational backgrounds students come from (Blum, 2010; Lillis, 2001). It also addresses their strong attachment to the use of technology and, finally their learning preferences in terms of either campus-based or distance learning courses. A final section discusses the implications of the changing composition of the student body and addresses its impact on the implementation of new instructional methods and teaching schemes adopted for the development and improvement of students' academic reading and writing skills. Finally, Chapter 10 treats plagiarism in broader terms than as a phenomenon that impinges upon the process of academic writing. It explores the extent to which universities themselves apply the policies they require their students to follow. An analysis of university plagiarism policies demonstrates clear inconsistencies in the way source use should be understood and practiced by students in a variety of academic contexts and underlines the need to address this issue more effectively through proper teaching practices.

A recurrent theme in this book is that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure (p. 1), and that efforts to handle plagiarism should be proactive, rather than reactive, to the greatest extent possible. Overall, the volume successfully fulfils this aim through a synthesis of received empirical wisdom accompanied by a set of valuable awareness-raising activities that enable both educators and practitioners to promote their knowledge and expertise over issues of plagiarism, academic integrity and ethics in higher education institutions worldwide. In doing so, the book employs a well-delineated, user-friendly format in the organization of its units that allows easy access to the material covered. It can even serve as the basis for the implementation of staff-development seminars on issues of plagiarism and appropriate source use in academic settings. Its highly informative content is also supported by useful bibliographic references on a wide variety of aspects of plagiarism and on academic writing skills, with the explicit intent of illuminating the hidden aspects of the multi-faceted phenomenon of plagiarism and meeting the continuing professional development needs of university staff in their teaching practice of academic writing skills. In this respect, the book makes a valuable contribution to the academic enterprise as it constitutes a pedagogically viable solution to the improvement of academic writing skills and issues related to academic integrity and ethics in writing.

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Eirene Katsarou is a full-time EFL teacher at secondary education in Greece. BA in English Language & Literature (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece), MA in Applied Linguistics (University of York, UK), PhD in Descriptive & Applied Linguistics (University of Essex, UK). Her research interests include: L2 vocabulary acquisition and language learner strategies, individual differences research, research methods in applied linguistics. Email: ekatsai@otenet.gr.

Eirene Katsarou
 Anagenniseos 109, Orestiada-Evros 68200, Greece
 E-mail address: ekatsai@otenet.gr

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