Chapter XIII
Minimizing Plagiarism by Redesigning the Learning Environment and Assessment

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter we have raised a number of questions and made attempts to respond. These questions are: Can plagiarism be stopped? Should we stop students from using the information available on the Internet? Is it enough if the students just acknowledge the sources in their work? What action is required to minimize the harmful, and maximize the useful, aspects of Internet use in the educational setting? We want our students to learn and demonstrate their learning with honesty and integrity. In the institutions of higher education, student learning is judged through assessment tasks in the form of assignments, tests, and examinations. We have to ensure that high stakes assessments do not act as an inspiration to cheating in the form of plagiarism. We have provided arguments in support of the integration of process approach with deliverables at the end of the course for assessment of students learning.

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, it is difficult to think about life without the Internet. In the past there has never been such free and easy access to information. This may be considered both a blessing and a curse. On one hand, information and communication technologies have provided us with the advantages associated with this open information market. On the other hand, it has raised issues and
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concerns about the usage of materials gained from this source (Sterngold, 2004, as quoted in Warn, 2006). Not least of these is plagiarism. Although plagiarism is not a new phenomenon, it has become a much more discussed and seemingly problematic issue based on the accessibility of information and the ease with which it can be “lifted” from Internet sources (Baggaley & Spencer, 2005). In addition to the potential for copying material from unacknowledged sources, students often do not distinguish between academic and non-academic sites and seem to have become uncritical consumers of all knowledge. While such naïve use is of concern for all educators, the issue of plagiarism has become the most worrying aspect of academic student outputs to teachers and educators all over the world. This concern is reflected in the thousands of sites on the Internet on this issue and availability of a number of electronic tools for detection of plagiarism. In this chapter, the authors discuss various possible reasons for plagiarism and try to identify the underpinning causes which foster this. The ethical and moral issues associated with plagiarism and its detection are also discussed briefly. The authors argue that teachers will need to change their approach to assessment in view of the ever changing challenges of the Internet/information age. We will have to assess both process and the product in order to ensure the authenticity of students work. The authors propose a model for design and development of assessment tasks and learning environment for prevention of plagiarism.

BACKGROUND AND ASSOCIATED ISSUES

To plagiarise is to use the writings or ideas of another in an unacknowledged way (Schwarz, 1992). This is a difficult term to “pin down” in terms of teaching and assessed outputs and often confuses rather than enlightens as to just what it is, its causes, and how to alleviate it (Chandrasoma, Thompson & Pennycook, 2004). The art of teaching and learning is rooted in the principle of mimicry, or mimesis (imitation or representation in art, the rhetorical use of a person’s supposed or imaginable words [Schwarz, 1992]). The level of cognitive development of the learner and/or the type of subject being studied determines the level of mimicry required and tolerated. Where the student is at the first three stages of Bloom's Taxonomy of cognitive development (Knowledge, Comprehension and Application), “memory” or “recall” will constitute the majority of assessed output. Thus, teachers using “role play” utilize this mimicking to enable the student to scaffold and practise the concept taught. Cognitive apprenticeships and mastery learning are traditionally used by the “Masters” in traditional apprentice-relationshipships, to encourage the students to emulate “good practice” before becoming Masters themselves. In these cases, mimicking is encouraged to enable the student to “practise” the skills desired. The term “plagiarism” would be unsuitable to cover the outputs at this level as “recall” constitutes a plagiarizing of others’ work. For example: a request to recite the poem by Wordsworth “I wandered lonely as a cloud/that floats on o’er Vales and Hills” (Wordsworth, 1807), will usually not be considered a plagiarism, especially when the poet’s name is referenced. If the task, however, is to show understanding of the sentiment and the technique used in the poem, by writing a poem to show this, the student will copy the verse rhythm, the syntax and the vocabulary to emulate the writer’s style as closely as possible. A teacher of students at this level will accept this and no accusations of plagiarizing will arise. Once a student reaches tertiary level, however, such tolerance is no longer to be expected. Even paraphrasing will be considered a form of plagiarism if executed without appropriate citations. Teachers concerned with the scholarship of their students initially may allow heavy reliance on
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