

Podcast: BiblioTech
Episode: 13
Title: Plagiarism
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Intro

Welcome to Episode 13 of BiblioTech - the podcast about emerging technologies for academics.

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This podcast is brought to you by *University Affairs* magazine. My name is Rochelle Mazar, and I am an emerging technologies librarian at the University of Toronto Mississauga. Every month you can listen in as I talk about what's new in technology and what we as academics should be paying attention to. It's hard to keep up on all of the new software, tools and gadgets. That's where I come in.....

We live in a world where it's easier than ever to cheat, and harder than ever to catch cheating. Right?

In this episode I discuss the contentious topic of plagiarism and offer some advice on how to design assignments that make it much, much harder to plagiarize, while also engaging and challenging your students.

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It's a truism that the internet has made it easier than ever for students to cheat on assignments. It's a copy and paste world, and there are so many sources readily available online that it's practically impossible for an instructor to know for certain that a piece of work produced by a student is entirely original. Instructors have to use plagiarism detection tools. That's just how it is.

If only we could convince students not to copy and paste their assignments and just to do them properly in the first place! And we try: we have seminars on plagiarism and its consequences. We spend valuable time during the first class explaining our policies around it. We have whole units dedicated to academic integrity. That's what we're talking about here, after all: integrity.

So now we have tools like Turnitin and SafeAssign to catch students trying to sneak their way into less work for a better grade; they run each student's paper against the open internet, scholarly materials, and a massive database of student papers from other classes, years, and schools to make sure that students aren't selling their papers to each other or otherwise finding ways to avoid just buckling down and doing the work. It's a sad state of affairs, but there you have it. That's where we live now: the world where it's easier than ever to cheat, and harder than ever to catch cheating. Right?

This is a long-standing meme in academia; the cheating student, the lazy student, the plagiarizer we need to hunt down and catch. But what this meme is obscuring is actually a series of much older and more systemic problems with our processes. It's also hiding the fact that every term we ask students to hand over their work (over which, let's not forget, they have copyright) to a for-profit vendor, who will then amass that work into a product they rent to us. At bare minimum, 80 to 90 percent of that work is, in fact, original. We ask students to hand over their intellectual labour to these vendors for free. And then we pay for it. It's a great business model for the vendor, but possibly not that great for us.

We're living in a grade-based economy. Our systems tend to reward the right answer handed in on time, not learning per se. It's hard to blame students for caring less about what they learn and more about what grade they get when it's almost always the only thing that anyone else seems to care about. If a student misunderstands a concept from the start, but then has a revelation three quarters of the way through the course and does very well on one last minor assignment, they're going to get a much poorer grade than a student who already knew everything on the syllabus before the first day of class. It's revelations we want students to have, but they're very hard to track and reward. It's difficult to evaluate learning, and few faculty have any experience or training in how to do it.

Handing in something that gets a good grade is the way this game is won, especially in large classes where the instructor never gets to know any of her students and the students rarely if ever speak in class. This is the culture we've built over centuries, based on the limitations of eras and of ancient knowledge dissemination techniques, not the values lazy students are bringing to the institution. I wonder what it would look like if we graded students based on how creatively they manage to game this system to get themselves a decent grade. Some of their solutions are kind of ingenious.

You can tell the expectations that come along with our grade-based economy is part of the problem as soon as you give students something other than grades to care about. The moment it matters what words go on the page, or if they see an application of what they're learning in a context outside the classroom, students will work harder than you would ever have imagined. Students will spend hours working on Wikipedia projects or perfecting a Google Earth fly through. I've been watching two French students create materials for first year students using video tools and voiceovers; the quality of their work is astounding. Ask students to make a protest quilt out of burlap and craft supplies like one of our women's studies faculty here at the University of Toronto Mississauga, and you'll find that students will create works of fine art.

While the internet appears to make it easier for students to cheat, recent studies have suggested that in fact, tools like Turnitin and SafeAssign are only uncovering a rate of plagiarism that's likely been stable for decades. Students in higher education today are far more likely to be caught and punished for plagiarism than any students before them, but they may be no more likely to try to cheat than any other generation of students.

So let's turn the tables here. What if we think of this another way? The argument is always framed as being about student morality and integrity, but what if it's actually about the nature of the assignment?

What if we tackled the issue of plagiarism by making our assignments much, much harder to plagiarize? We need to create assignments that have students produce something meaningful to them, but opaque to everyone else.

There are lots of ways to do this. The most obvious ones involve comparisons between unlikely elements: compare two events and eras that are rarely linked, for instance. But you can be more creative than that. I've seen a religion instructor have his class choose a currently-airing television show that they agree to watch every week. He uses each episode to demonstrate something in his religion lectures. He could apply the same technique and have students use elements of the episodes in their papers, too. That means the papers are only ever useful the term they're produced, only in this particular context. Of course you can attach any kind of popular culture item to this kind of assignment; or anything, really. A TV show from the 50s, or a classic novel. If you can do *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, surely you can also do *Pride and Prejudice and Sociology*. The options for constructing assignments this way are really unlimited, and require students to make unusual and unexpected connections. That's undeniably one of the best skills a student can gain from their time in higher ed.

Another alternative is to have students blog about your lectures and the course readings throughout the term, summarizing them in their own words with liberal quotations. Then, rather than grading the blog, you can have students write a paper citing only the blog they created. The more they blog, the easier it will be for them to write their paper in the end, and the easier it is for you to see what's original and what's not.

If you want to take a social media approach, incorporate Twitter or FriendFeed, or even Facebook if your students are open to it, and have students build on interactions with you, the course materials, and each other, to write papers.

Or get involved in one of the many Wikimedia projects desperate for content. Have your class build resources for a textbook for high school or first year students. Rather than one final paper, consider a patchwork approach, where students do a variety of short writing pieces throughout the term and submit an edited and amended portfolio at the end of term.

Or, try something beyond a written assignment altogether: have students build something. Dioramas, models, virtual spaces, websites – all of that kind of work requires a tremendous amount of research and thought. It just doesn't include a classic written element. You can use video and audio, or just get back to basics and use clay and paint. Natalie Zemon Davis, reflecting on the challenge of being a consulting historian on a film set in early modern France, noted that filmmakers asked her questions she had never asked herself. What is the floor made of? Is it mud? Are there animals in the house with the family? She didn't know. Trying to create something in a different format forces you to think of your subject from a radically different angle.

One of the classic assignments in first year English is a great model: take a scene from one of the books and write it from the perspective of another character. Write a new ending. Insert a character from another book. Create something unique, show me what you understand to be true.

The number of ways we can twist the idea of the traditional essay is truly staggering, fascinating, and exciting, both for instructors trying new things, and for students shocked out of their rut. They will protest: we're still in a grade-based economy, and innovation, where the parameters of success are less obvious, carries the risk of uncertainty. Whatever you do, provide students with a really solid rubric so they know whether or not they're meeting your expectations. But challenge them: they are more interested, more creative, and more inspired than you might think.

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That's it for this episode. Do you have any suggestions for plagiarism-proof assignments? Share them by posting a comment at the bottom of this podcast's page at [University Affairs dot CA](http://UniversityAffairs dot CA). Until next time, I'm Rochelle Mazar.