

12-6-2012

Teaching Matters: The Necessity and Challenge of Teaching Information Ethics

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Recommended Citation

Ragains, P. P. (2012). Teaching Matters: The Necessity and Challenge of Teaching Information Ethics. *Communications in Information Literacy*, 6 (1), 1-4. <https://doi.org/10.15760/comminfolit.2012.6.1.113>

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THE NECESSITY AND CHALLENGE OF TEACHING INFORMATION ETHICS

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This column focuses on the conceptual and practical aspects of teaching information literacy. Column co-editors Patrick Ragains and Janelle Zauha write about trends and issues that have come to our attention, but also solicit contributions to this space. Readers with ideas for Teaching Matters may contact Patrick Ragains at ragains@unr.edu, or the editors of Communications in Information Literacy at editors@comminfolit.org.

Librarians who work in elementary, secondary, and higher education are familiar with issues related to academic integrity: plagiarism, citation practice, and misrepresentation. It is practically a universal expectation that schools have policies that address cheating and impose sanctions on students who do cheat. Yet, despite academe's expectation that a good education should convey knowledge of and respect for ethical information practices, plagiarism and research fraud seem common in our schools and in society. What to do? What can be done to promote responsible scholarship throughout the education cycle? Are there effective institution-wide approaches to promoting academic integrity and information ethics? While this column is neither a research study nor a thorough overview of literature on academic integrity, it aims to place the issue into a useful perspective for college and university instructors and librarians.

There is no shortage of publications on the problems of academic integrity and teaching methods designed to mitigate them. Readers can start to explore this literature on Worldcat™ at <http://tinyurl.com/76wut4u> and <http://tinyurl.com/7ymla85>. Because plagiarism is of major concern of educators, it is a good starting point for this discussion. Miguel Roig's 1997 study of plagiarism among college students is particularly well designed and worthy of attention. His *Plagiarism Knowledge Survey (PKS)*, n.d.) consists of an original text passage and several paraphrases, each of which the student is to mark as plagiarized, not plagiarized, or cannot determine (Moniz, Fine, & Bliss, 2008). After administering the survey to 517 undergraduates at two private colleges in the New York metropolitan area, Roig concluded that most of the students surveyed assumed that they only needed to cite their sources in order to

avoid plagiarizing. In other words, they made no distinction between quoting and paraphrasing, nor did they show any awareness of the need for proper paraphrasing. Based on survey responses, Roig concluded that most of the students had probably plagiarized unintentionally (1997), echoing the belief of many teachers that students commit plagiarism predominantly by failing to paraphrase properly and cite sources.

To assist students in recognizing information attribution problems that result in plagiarism, instructors can implement creative and sound teaching methods simply. Jean Caspers' undergraduate information ethics course at Linfield College (Oregon) includes an assignment requiring students to choose a news article, link to it on their own blog, and then post their own paraphrase of a passage in the article. Caspers reads each paraphrase and provides feedback to students individually, who revise their work until it meets the standards identified in the course (J. Caspers, personal communication, March 15, 2012). In a similar effort, students in Angela Walker's undergraduate course on psychological research methods received instruction on paraphrasing and engaged in guided practice throughout the course. Walker found some benefit to the instruction, particularly when students paraphrased more complex passages using psychological terminology (Walker, 2008).

Other forms of academic dishonesty include cheating on exams, misrepresentation, and falsifying data. Instructors can often address these problems in the context of an assignment, e.g., journalism students can be required to supply proof that they interviewed someone. It can be useful to discuss examples of authorial misconduct in the real world such as popular historian

Stephen Ambrose's plagiarism, which he attributed to inadequate note taking (Marsh, 2007; Arnold, 2002) or Greg Mortenson's heroic exaggerations in his books *Three Cups of Tea* (2007) and *Stones into Schools* (2010), which remain unexplained. I used Mortenson's case as an example in an information literacy course for honors students. After viewing televised news reports, an analysis of the issue, and reading documents from Mortenson's organization addressing the charges, students answered these questions on the *Blackboard* site for the course:

1. What are some consequences of misrepresentation in a public arena, as in Mortenson's case?
2. Imagine you're teaching a course with a research component such as freshman composition or a methods course in your major field. Based on information you viewed in the news reports and read in the documents about Mortenson's case, what would you want students to know about misrepresentation and ethics of authorship, specifically regarding citing, paraphrasing, copyright?

The students' answers solidly supported principles of academic integrity. So far, so good, I thought, hoping this perspective would carry over into their research and writing. After all, they've all completed freshman composition, and they are honors students. As I said, I was hoping, but not necessarily expecting, that students would internalize principles of academic integrity and display them in their work. I won't know if they have unless I read their senior theses or other work in subsequent courses.

Roig administered his *Plagiarism Knowledge Survey* to students with standing as high as college juniors, in other words, students at least halfway through their undergraduate studies. While instructors may wish students be taught to write properly in freshman composition, most know that students must continue to learn to write through practice, feedback, and revision, including becoming familiar with the writing conventions of their chosen discipline.

All faculty and librarians should familiarize themselves with their school's policies and practices on academic integrity and be prepared to discuss them with students whenever appropriate. Beyond the scope of institutional policy and enforcement, they should all understand that students must learn the conventions of scholarship. This means instructors and librarians should introduce them to proper quoting, paraphrasing, and citing practices. Many campuses have licenses to *Refworks*, *EndNote Web*, or other reference management systems (or use free tools like *Mendeley* and *Zotero*). Instructors should be encouraged to integrate these topics and tools into their own courses. Librarians can discuss these systems with faculty for whom they provide information literacy instruction.

One can identify several themes related to the need to promote academic integrity and ethical, legal use of information. First, college and university instructors cannot assume that students who have passed a freshman composition course are citing, paraphrasing, and otherwise using sources properly. Students need further practice, particularly in their major courses although additional work in core and elective courses

is beneficial too. Effective school-wide policies and practices that support academic integrity, including investigative procedures and sanctions, are necessary components (Park, 2004). There are indications that smaller colleges may have more success than larger institutions in establishing and maintaining high academic standards, but this has not been confirmed. Although there is no single fix for raising students' awareness of and adherence to academic integrity, course instructors, writing tutors, instructional librarians, student judicial boards, and policymakers can all help build and maintain an environment in which intellectual productivity is respected and for which students can be duly proud of their achievements.

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