

Teaching about Plagiarism with a Lyrical Approach



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When I think about information literacy instruction, I think of rich and exciting lessons that challenge students to develop the skills, knowledge, and ethical wherewithal to navigate our changing landscape of information and technology.

Plagiarism has never been high on the list of topics I looked forward to teaching. However, while completing the practicum requirement for my specialization in school library media at the University of Michigan, my mentor, a teacher librarian in Brighton, MI, asked me to teach a lesson on plagiarism and paraphrasing to a seventh-grade English class.

The teacher librarian and English teacher emphasized how important this lesson was for the students. The teacher librarian and the teacher had previously spoken to some of the students after they turned in plagiarized work. In particular, the students were struggling to grasp that paraphrasing a source without properly citing it was still plagiarism. My lesson was to provide students with background on what plagiarism is, what its consequences are, and how it can be avoided through proper citation, quoting, and paraphrasing of sources. My mentor also asked me to create a website for the students that would cover the same basic content as my lesson.

RETHINKING THE "TYPICAL" PLAGIARISM LECTURE

As I began to think about what I had been taught about plagiarism in my own classes, it struck me that most plagiarism lectures are very similar. All of the instruction I have received on plagiarism focused on its consequences. In my experience,

at the start of every university class, there inevitably comes the monotone lecture about plagiarism, often dreaded by both students and professors. The basic thrust of these conversations is, "If you plagiarize, something bad will happen to you. So just don't do it." I think many students will relate to my experience. My immediate question then became, "How do I make this not boring?" If plagiarism was not a topic I was thrilled to teach, then how could I expect students to be engaged, especially when they are already less disposed to be passionate about information literacy than someone who has committed her life to librarianship? Rather than just telling the students what will happen to them if they plagiarize, I wanted them to think about how plagiarism negatively impacts their own learning and personal development and how it robs the world of their contribution to a larger body of knowledge. I decided to focus my lesson on the following reasons why students should not plagiarize:

1. It causes people to lose trust in you.
2. It prevents you from contributing your voice to the larger conversation

The success of the activity varied between the four classes, but in each class the students were engaged in the activity, completed at least one paraphrase, and were excited to share with each other and the class what they had written.

and body of scholarship.

3. It robs you of a chance to learn.

Of course, it is important for students to grasp the consequences for plagiarizing the work of others, especially since these consequences may follow them throughout their education and future careers. However, as I have become more engaged in information literacy, I have been aware of many other reasons why plagiarism is an important topic for student awareness. I wanted to challenge the students to think about the ethical reasons why they should not plagiarize: respect for others' ideas, respect for their instructors, and respect for themselves. This is what was left out of the lessons I received, and it is what I feel is the most important for learners to grasp as they build their understanding of how knowledge is constructed and shared in the 21st century.

MAKING PARAPHRASING STICK

As requested, I created a website on plagiarism for the students to use. Many instructional resources on plagiarism are targeted to college and university students. The intent of the website I created, *Responsible Research* (<http://responsibleresearch.weebly.com>), is to fill this gap by providing information on plagiarism that is targeted to a middle school audience. Since mid-

dle school students are at an age where they are just beginning to embark on research projects that require them to synthesize information from a variety of sources, it seems they need a special resource. The website covers the same topics as my lesson, including defining plagiarism, consequences of plagiarism, examples of plagiarism in recent news, how to avoid plagiarism, and why it is important. A link to my slides is also available on the site for those who would like to use them (<http://bit.ly/1nBtvIS>).

Although I was able to plan the content of my lesson and website relying on the three points discussed above, I still needed an activity that would help students practice paraphrasing, since that was a skill that my mentor and the students' English teacher wanted me to emphasize. I was also looking for the hook that would make the lesson interesting and relevant. Since I was teaching a one-off lesson, which was not tied to a current paper or project, this part of the lesson became even more essential.

My breakthrough came when I stumbled upon a recent news story about a judge who dismissed a plagiarism lawsuit against Taylor Swift, so I used lyrics from her songs as my introduction (Gajanan, 2015). I had an epiphany—since my mentor wanted me to emphasize paraphrasing in my

lesson, why not have the students practice paraphrasing Taylor Swift lyrics? Taylor Swift is one of the most well-known pop stars of our time, and I knew it was safe to assume that many students would know her reputation and be familiar with her songs, whether or not they liked her music. Choosing something where I could assume prior knowledge by the students would eliminate the need for any instruction on the materials to be paraphrased. I printed out portions of lyrics from several of her well-known hits, including "Shake It Off," "Teardrops on My Guitar," "Love Story," "We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together," "Blank Space," and "Wildest Dreams" using the website AZLyrics.com. I cut up the slips so I could pass them out and have students work in groups of two to three to paraphrase the lyrics.

I was honestly a little nervous about how this activity would go. Would the students be too distracted by the lyrics to actually work on paraphrasing? However, instead of having eyes glazed over, the students demonstrated excitement when I announced we would be paraphrasing our generation's greatest wordsmith, Taylor Swift (although there were a few groans mixed in). The success of the activity varied between the four classes, but in each class the students were engaged in the activity, completed at least one paraphrase, and were excited to share with each other and the class what they had written. The fact that the students knew Swift and were familiar with her songs meant that many of them took great care with their paraphrases. My third class of the day was so enthusiastic about paraphrasing her lyrics that I had to scramble to keep up with the demand of new lyrics for each group.

Of course, when using pop-culture references in the classroom, there is always a chance that some students will be off-task or whose desire to go for the joke undermined their ability to paraphrase effectively. However, I found these cases to be in the minority. Most students understood that what they were doing was an act of translation, and they created fresh, concise rewordings that honored the original meaning. When I asked the students to reflect on what was difficult about paraphrasing, they were full of insightful observations about balancing how to respect the original ideas while putting something in their own words without overcomplicating it. My favorite observation from a student was how not knowing the context of a lyric could greatly alter the perceived meaning and make it more difficult to paraphrase accurately.

REFLECTION

I did not fully understand the benefits of choosing to use Swift's lyrics until after I taught the lesson and reflected with the teacher librarian and my professor. Because the students knew Swift, they were more careful to respect her words. Getting the meaning of Swift's lyrics right was a greater priority than it might have been if I had chosen a more traditional text, where the author is little more than a name on a page. Second, choosing something with a personal connection to students' lives made even a very dry topic a little more engaging. Regard-

less of their personal opinion of her, Swift's songs are catchy and her lyrics are memorable. Students knew what her songs meant, and they needed little context to understand the lyrics that they were given. Many could sing them by heart (more than one student broke out into song during this activity). In addition, tapping into Swift's status as a pop-culture icon allowed me to establish a common ground with students, an especially important consideration given this was my first time teaching this group of students. Although this strategy helped me connect with the students, the most important element was that it formed a connection to something that they found important and affected their daily lives. Music is a safe bet for many middle school and high school students.

ESCAPE FROM PLAGIARISM JAIL

While teaching my lesson, I was struck by the number of times students stated that if you plagiarize, you might be sent to jail. I think this is emblematic of the larger message students continue to receive about plagiarism: if you do it, something tangibly bad will happen to you. The truth is, while there is a fair chance that a person will be caught and suffer consequences, there are more important reasons why plagiarism is a bad idea. As successful as my paraphrasing activity was, the aspect of my lesson that I believe was most crucial to its success was the emphasis placed on the reasons why plagiarism is not per-

sonally beneficial. When consequences become murkier, plagiarism becomes more enticing. If students only choose not to plagiarize because they are afraid of being caught, what happens when they are confronted with a situation in which those consequences are not evident or are unlikely to be enforced? This is why emphasizing the ethical reasons why plagiarism is wrong and equipping students to properly credit their sources is so crucial for teacher librarians. Hopefully, focusing on those reasons will also allow teacher librarians to create more engaging lessons that are no longer a dreaded teaching topic.

REFERENCES

Gajanan, Mahita. (2015, November 12). Judge borrows Taylor Swift lyrics when shaking off plagiarism suit. *The Guardian*, Retrieved November 17, 2015, from <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/nov/12/taylor-swift-plagiarism-lawsuit-dismissed-shake-it-off>

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