



Planning for Plagiarism-Proof Assignments Tip Sheet for Teachers

The following is adapted, with permissions from the author, Doug Johnson, from the article "Plagiarism-Proofing Assignments" published in Phi Delta Kappan, March 2004

Much effort is expended in education trying to "catch" plagiarism in student work. Teachers and library media specialists are using various web services and techniques using search engines to determine if or how much of student writing is lifted from online sources.

Our time as educators is perhaps better spent creating research assignments that minimize the likelihood of plagiarism in the first place. Rather than making assignments that can be easily plagiarized and then contriving methods for detecting or reducing copying, why not do a little work upfront to design projects that require original, thoughtful research?

Qualities of LPP (Low Probability of Plagiarism) projects:

1. **LPP projects have clarity of purpose and expectations.** This information is clearly communicated to students and available to parents.
2. **LPP research projects give students choices.** Dig down and look at the core concepts your research assignments are trying to teach, and let the students pick a specific subject that interests them.
3. **LPP projects are relevant to the student's life.** So many times we ask our students to research important topics – environmental issues, historical issues, health issues - but fail to help them make the vital connection of why the findings are important to themselves or the people in town in which they live. The "I-Search" approach suggests that "the topic should choose you." See <http://www.literacymatters.org/content/isearch/intro.htm>
4. **LPP projects ask students to write in a narrative rather than an expository style.** The "I-Search" techniques also suggest that students write about not just what they discovered, but the story of how they went about gathering their findings.
5. **LPP projects stress higher level thinking skills and creativity.** Think how different the results of a science project are than a paper that simply asks an "about" question. "Write a research paper about ice." Boring! Instead brainstorm an original theory, design a means of testing it, and find ways to effectively communicate your findings. Suddenly we've moved up on Bloom's taxonomy from the knowledge and inference levels right to application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. More fun and impossible to copy.
6. **LPP projects answer real questions.** Unfortunately, teachers rarely ask questions to which they do not believe they know the answer. Diminishing to the student; boring for the teacher.
7. **LPP projects involve a variety of information finding activities.** As library media specialists, teachers and parents, we are comfortable with our familiar primary sources of reference books, magazine indexes, and trade books. Yet the answers to many personal, local, and timely questions cannot be found in them. They can provide excellent background information, but often we need to talk to experts, conduct surveys, design experiments, or look at other kinds of primary sources to get precise information that is meaningful to individuals.

8. **LPP projects tend to be hands-on, allowing students to learn by doing, not just listening.** Corollary skills are also practiced in this type of “research” project: writing skills, interviewing skills, photography skills, layout/design skills, and speaking skills.
9. **LPP projects use technology to spur creativity.** Whether for planning, for research, or for communication, many students find the use of technology motivating.
10. **LPP projects use formats that use multiple senses.** Our ability to digitize and present information is no longer restricted to the written word but now can include drawings, photos, sounds, music, animations and movies. All are formats that carry important and often unique information.
11. **LPP projects can be complex, but are broken into manageable steps.** This helps students to master corollary planning and time management skills in the process. Large projects can be overwhelming even for adults, but planning smaller steps, building timelines, creating frequent deadlines, and scheduling multiple conferences turn complexity into manageability.
12. **LPP projects are often collaborative and produce results that are better than individual work.** Joint problem solving, assigning and accepting responsibility, and discovering and honoring individual talents help create a synergy that can result in better, more satisfying results than students working alone might produce. Not every project needs to be a joint effort, however real-world work environments increasingly stress teamwork.
13. **LPP projects have results that are shared with people who care and respond.** Kids get hooked because adults take the time to really look at the work they have done and comment on it. Assessments and reviews by peers, experts, and neighbors (any audience beyond the teacher) are common in scouting, athletics, dramatics, 4-H, and music organizations. Knowing others will be looking and may detect plagiarism helps reduce its likelihood.
14. **LPP projects are authentically assessed.** Quality indicators like rubrics and checklists that are given to students when an assignment is made can help guide learning and keep guesswork to a minimum. As students become more sophisticated in the research process, they can choose or design their own “rules of quality,” one of the indicators of a genuinely intrinsically motivated person.
15. **LPP projects allow the learner to reflect, revisit, revise, and improve their final projects.** Good projects, like gardens, musical repertoires, and relationships, are probably always works in progress. If students misuse information gathered from another source, they should be given the chance to correct the mistake.
16. **LPP projects are encouraged by adults who believe that given enough time, resources, and motivation, all students are capable of original work.** It’s not just the talented and gifted student who can make choices, solve problems creatively, and complete complex tasks. These parents, teachers and library media specialists know that most students rise to the level of performance expected of them, and that great ideas can come from anyone in the class.

For more information about Doug Johnson’s work, go to:

<http://www.doug-johnson.com/welcome/>