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What's the Harm in Paraphrasing?

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ABSTRACT

An opinion piece that suggests teaching students to paraphrase can have a negative effect on their ability to use sources in writing.

As a study development advisor, I meet many students who would like to get better marks for their written assignments; I also meet many teaching academics who would like their students to do exactly the same thing. But it doesn't always happen and both sides can feel as if they are hitting their heads against a wall of frustration. The academics have told the students what they expect but the students aren't doing it; the students are trying but not making progress.

Perhaps one culprit is the way in which we tend to separate reading from writing, rather than looking at the interconnected processes whereby our reading informs our thinking and is incorporated into our written message (cf. Levin, 2009). Instead of exploring with students why and how to include sources effectively in their writing, it is still common to present separate sets of skills (Sedgley, 2011) in ways that are often divorced from subject context and disconnected from each other. Particularly problematic for students is the way in which using sources is labelled 'referencing'. It is then treated as separate from other academic processes (Gourlay & Greig, 2007) and linked to the imperative to avoid plagiarism. One of the tools we offer students in this regard is paraphrasing. But does it do more harm than good?

While paraphrasing may be helpful in avoiding unintentional plagiarism, it is counterproductive in terms of learning to write: it distorts the reading and writing process and displaces what students really need, an understanding of how to use the literature to inform and enhance what they themselves want to say. It leads students to perceive using the literature as an obscure set of rules, often poorly understood (Sutherland-Smith, 2008; Magyar, 2012), rather than a means of engaging with their field of study. It puts the focus of using sources on the substitution of one set of vocabulary items and sentence structures for another. "Your own words" become the things that students use to try to re-express what someone else has said rather than the vehicle for communicating their own response and finding their own voice.

As more experienced academic writers, we rarely paraphrase as such: we summarise, we allude, we analyse and comment, we quote judiciously, we simply add a citation, all dependent upon what we want to say and what purpose our sources are serving in our text. Some of our students will – probably like us – pick up this knack by osmosis; many others will not. Yet we do not appropriately and explicitly help them understand how to do it.

The biggest barrier would seem to be that such abilities need to be developed within the context of the students' subjects. Even if other arguments for contextualisation are ignored (e.g. Wingate, 2006), generic approaches to using sources in writing are inadequate because they cannot deal with sufficiently complex texts in sufficiently complex ways. Contextualised work, on the other hand, can engage students meaningfully with material they need to read while making explicit for them the ways in which knowledge is discussed, contested, written about and constructed in their particular area. Although some academics may view this as an encroachment into their already crowded subject content, I would argue that, as such learning is integral to what we expect from students and how we assess them, it should also be integral to what they are taught and that academics are best placed to do it.

So what might this mean in practice? One thing that academics can do is to share their own working practices with their students. Talk about what you read and why you use it in your writing. Take one of your own papers and explain why you included specific parts of your reading in specific ways. Explore other people's papers with your students: for example, compare the way sources have been used with the original texts and consider whether they have been treated fairly and objectively. Look at the words used: explore how they help to create the author's stance and what might be the effects of changing them. Lastly, give students practice and feedback in such things as relating what they read directly to specific questions; synthesising sources; selecting relevant material and experimenting with different ways of including it in their writing. Engaging in such activities with students can give them all the chance to develop their own voice and enhance the way they use their reading to inform their thinking and their writing.

Biography

Chris Doye is a study development advisor and Head of Study Development at the Institute for Academic Development at the University of Edinburgh.

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