Creating Plagiarism-Proof Assignments

The following is adapted from author Doug Johnson’s blog article: “Plagiarism-Proofing Assignments”

Too much effort is expended in education trying to “catch” plagiarism in student work. Isn’t our time as educators perhaps better spent creating assignments that reduce the likelihood of plagiarism in the first place?

Rather than creating boring research assignments that call for nothing unique, and then implementing “gotcha” methods for detecting plagiarism, why not do a little work upfront to design projects that require original, thoughtful research?

Distinctive assignments can also increase motivation and inspire creativity, while helping students develop their technology and project management skills.

Qualities of LPP (Low Probability of Plagiarism) projects:

1. **Have clarity of purpose and expectations.** The project purpose and its specific goals are clearly communicated to students.

2. **Give students choices.** Dig down and look at the core skills and concepts your research assignments are trying to teach, and let the students pick a specific subject that interests them.

3. **Are relevant to the student’s life.** When we ask our students to research important topics – environmental issues, historical issues, health issues – help them make the vital connection of why the findings are important to them or the people they care about.

4. **Ask students to write in a narrative rather than an expository style.** Allow students to write about not just what they discovered, but the story of how they went about gathering their findings, and to reflect on the research process.

5. **Stress higher level thinking skills and creativity.** The results of experiences or projects are far more interesting than a paper that simply asks an “about” question. “Write a research paper about ice.” Boring! Instead, ask students to brainstorm an original theory, test it, and find creative ways to effectively communicate findings. More fun and impossible to copy.

6. **Answer real questions.** Ask students to research questions or problems that are not yet fully understood or don’t yet have “real” answers.

7. **Involve a variety of information finding activities.** The answers to many personal, local and timely questions often cannot be found in standard primary sources. Ask students to talk directly to experts, conduct surveys, design experiments, or look at other types of primary sources to get more precise and meaningful information.

8. **Are hands-on, allowing students to learn by doing, not just listening.** Corollary skills are also practiced in hands-on research projects: writing skills, interviewing skills, photography skills, layout/design, and speaking skills.

9. **Use technology to spur creativity.** Whether for planning, for research or for communication, many students find the use of technology motivating.
10. **Use formats that call upon multiple senses.** Our ability to digitize and present information is no longer restricted to the written word. Include drawings, photos, sounds, music, animations and movies to help interpret important and unique information.

11. **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. **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, but real-world work environments increasingly stress teamwork.

13. **Share results with others to review and respond.** Sharing can be a “hook” because others can look at the work and comment on it. Assessments and reviews by peers are common in industry, and knowing others will be looking and may detect plagiarism may reduce its likelihood.

14. **Are authentically assessed.** Quality indicators like rubrics and checklists are provided with the assignment to help guide learning and keep guesswork to a minimum. As students become more sophisticated in the research process, they can design their own criteria for evaluating quality, which can develop intrinsic motivation.

15. **Allow learners to reflect, revisit, revise and improve their final projects.** Good projects, like gardens, or relationships, are probably always works in progress. If students make mistakes using source information, they should be given the chance to correct them.

16. **Given enough time, resources and motivation, all students are capable of original work.** It’s not just the high achievers who can solve difficult problems, be creative, and perform complex tasks. Most students will rise to high levels of accomplishment when it is clearly expected of them. Great ideas can come from any student, given the right opportunity.