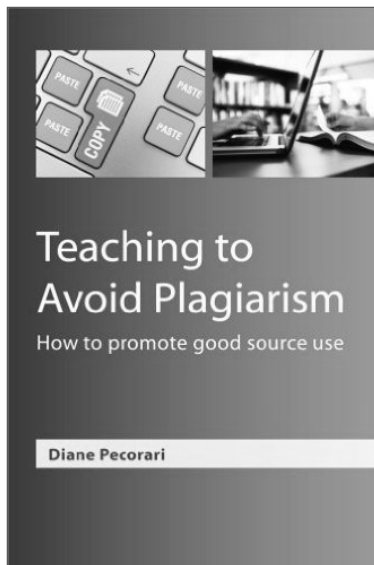

Book review

Teaching to avoid plagiarism: how to promote good source use

Diane Pecorari, McGraw Hill, 2013, ISBN 978-0-33-524593-2



Reviewing this book for *European Science Editing* feels rather unfair since it makes no claims to be aimed at journal editors. However, since editors should be concerned about plagiarism, and because I (and perhaps other EASE members) offer training for authors on this topic, I was interested to read it. The introduction states that this book is aimed at university staff to help them understand plagiarism and develop their skills in handling it. One strength of the book is that the author, Diane Pecorari, mentions her own research into plagiarism and also her own experiences of working with students. Her main argument is that students should be taught about citation and the use of sources and she attributes much student plagiarism to poor understanding of academic norms. Given this premise (ie that much student plagiarism may be inadvertent), teachers need to decide when plagiarism is, instead, deliberate, aimed to deceive, and therefore misconduct.

The use of text-matching software (such as Turnitin, which uses the same software as CrossCheck used by many journals) is discussed in detail. Pecorari urges caution and emphasises the limitations of such systems, while rather grudgingly accepting that they may be useful.

One aspect editors might empathize with, and which I thought was well covered, was the isolation and lack of support that teachers (and, I dare say, editors) may feel when faced with student (or author) plagiarism. Pecorari describes the effects of confronting plagiarism and the

reasons why teachers may be tempted to overlook cases. She suggests that institutions could provide confidential advisors to help teachers handle specific cases – this reminded me of the origins of COPE (the Committee on Publication Ethics) which started, and still functions, as a ‘self-help group for editors’ where troublesome cases can be discussed in confidence.

One thing I felt was lacking was a distinction between the needs and behaviours of undergraduate and postgraduate students (or any discussion about whether this distinction was relevant). Editors may vary their response, especially to more minor or borderline cases of plagiarism, depending on the seniority of the author and whether he or she ‘should have known better’. I was therefore surprised that this book contained no discussion about the difference between copying in an undergraduate essay (especially if it does not count directly towards a degree) and plagiarism in dissertations.

The book contains a short chapter on “Differences across academic subjects” but I would have been interested to have more examples of such differences. Pecorari notes “At the risk of generalising, the STEM field deals in objective fact, and it is the facts themselves which matter; the form in which they are expressed is much less important”. While most editors only have to work within a single discipline, and therefore understand its particular conventions, this doesn’t help much for people in cross-disciplinary areas and seems to downplay the problem of plagiarism in the hard sciences.

While each chapter ends with helpful suggested activities and “Questions for discussion or reflection” I felt the overall ending of the book was rather weak. Rather than attempting to synthesize the arguments, the final chapter covers plagiarism in non-academic writing and I found it disappointing.

My overall conclusion is that, while this book may be helpful for university teachers, especially those who lack confidence in approaching cases of plagiarism, it doesn’t contain much of interest to journal editors. Finally, firmly wearing my editor’s and writing trainer’s hat, I couldn’t help but notice some horribly long sentences (containing 50-65 words). I also spotted some wordy phrases and use of jargon which would have benefited from careful editing.

Elizabeth Wager

Publications Consultant, Sideview, Princes Risborough, UK

liz@sideview.demon.co.uk