[WWW.2CHEAT.COM] UPDATE

Presented by Clay Rooks

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Clay D. Rooks, Letters Department Chair, Fresno City College

Plagiarism and cheat sites began appearing on the Internet in the mid-1990's and proliferated rapidly. Since presenting and publishing this paper some years ago at an online conference, I've learned many faculty and others have found it useful. Recently I was asked to update the paper and publish it again. I'm happy to do so. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2006 Summer Institute at Fresno City College.

BROWSING THE PROBLEM
During an online faculty meeting, someone brought up the subject of cheating and plagiarism via the Web. This old problem has new life on the Internet. If you thought the discovery of these sites in the past several years had succeeded in getting them shut down, it hasn't. They are spreading. After spending just a few hours browsing on the Internet, I easily found dozens of interesting and disturbing cheat sites offering term papers of all kinds. I counted 40 links at one site alone. Others have links to the "Top 100" term paper sites. When I typed "term papers free" into the Advanced Search feature on Google, I received 471,000 hits.

Some sites charge a fee for papers, some sites only request that students join by sending in one of their papers to add to the list, and some sites offer what they have for free--to anyone, including professors. Most sites now offer free papers, pre-written papers (on commonly assigned topics), and custom papers on any topic requested. Prices start at $4.95 per page for pre-written papers, and jump up to $8.95 to $35 per page for custom papers. Some innovative sites offer to split the proceeds with students if they submit term papers and let the cheat site resell their papers. Papers offered ranged from high school to college to graduate school level. Some will even provide dissertations for the right price. For an extra charge, some papers can be delivered electronically, same day service.

Virtually every site has a disclaimer. They vary from insincere to arrogant to in-your-face. Most assume or argue they are protected by the First Amendment. Some warn students not to turn in the papers from their sites. Several sites state that their papers are only for "research purposes." The School Sucks site (motto: "Download Your Workload") warns students that plagiarizing the site's papers is foolish because they're so well known that teachers, professors, and the media visit the site regularly. A new tactic is that some sites now claim they are simply a resource to let students "publish" their papers on the Web, and they are not a paper mill for plagiarism. eCheat.com's site says, "It's not cheating, It's collaborating."

Sites vary greatly offering from a handful of papers to thousands, though most small sites are gone now. The largest sites can access more than 50,000 documents. It's all about business now, though some sites still claim they are just there to "help" students. All subject areas are available, but term papers are not the only thing offered these days. Some sites now also offer college essays, book reports, case studies, speeches, and admission essays for admittance to university, graduate school, medical school, or law school. Admission essays available have titles like "A Chance for a Dream" and "A Crippled Teenager." Some sites offer free online Cliffs Notes and study notes on famous novels. NoStudy.com also offers links to SparkNotes, which has links to SAT, ACT, and AP test preparation materials.

However, the quality of these papers varies greatly from atrocious to excellent. Few are excellent. Many brag about how recent their papers are--none older than three years, for example. Most sites offer some papers with in-text citations or footnotes and bibliographies, no extra charge. CheatHouse (formerly The Evil House of Cheat) brags that it is the "biggest site online" for thousands of free essays and papers and registration is free. Papers are rated by size, grade, and level. It offers access to more than 66,000 essays covering more than 130 categories for $9.95 a year. As a bonus, the site has a link that describes different ways to cheat at school on exams.

123HelpMe.com color codes its essay categories. Red ones are free. Out of curiosity I followed the literary paper link and indicated I wanted a paper on the "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." I was offered 67 essays ranging from one page (320 words) in length to 5.7 pages (2012 words, with three works cited). As alarming as this was, I next tried a hot current topic. I requested papers on "Global Warming." I was offered 139 essays ranging from a few pages in length up to a 16-page research paper (5586 words, with four sources).

Many of the more disingenuous sites pretend to be research outfits that send papers to students to use only as "reference" or as a "resource." Research Papers Online's information page offers "Instant Gratification" (instant delivery) and reads, in part: "We now have 2 Research Paper Databases with more than 60,000 new research papers.... These papers are intended for reference and research purposes. They are not intended to be turned in "as is" for academic credit. Research Papers Online is not responsible for any consequences arising from improper use of any research paper. All papers...are new and have not been previously circulated." [1]

The real message being sent isn't even subtle. They might as well have written "wink, wink" between each line. Not all sites have information or disclaimers this obvious or bold, but the true intent of each site is not lost on even the most casual student. How could it be with sites that have names like OPPapers.com (Other People's Papers)?

Though most students I know don't admit to using or subscribing to the sites, many admit they have visited them. If you're curious, Sharon Stoerger of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign has compiled an extensive list of plagiarism articles and cheat sites (www.web-miner.com/plagiarism) and has an annotated list of more than 60 of the most popular cheat sites. It's a real eye-opener and a good resource that was recently updated.

Previously, a surprising number of students had created their own cheat sites usually containing their papers and often other student papers, but there seems to be fewer now since commercial sites have taken over. However, one site still sticks in my mind. This college student, who had his own site, complained self-righteously that he had received a formal warning on his site from a "Net Nazi" informing him that to traffic in term papers in Texas is illegal and subject to a fine of $500 per violation. The student's printed response was one of outrage, cursing, and an in-your-face attitude of "how dare you." The "Net Nazi" was the university dean of student affairs. I admit I have trouble figuring out if students like this simply have no fear, no scruples, no clue, or no sense.

Like other instructors, I used to have some luck catching plagiarizers by checking writing styles against other work and noticing if the level of writing didn't match; for example, a C student turning in an A research paper (can be legitimate, but is usually suspicious). Plagiarizers used to always go for only A papers, or so it seemed. But several cheat sites offer papers that originally received only a passing grade. Some report the actual grade or percentage score the paper previously received. For many students (customers), it seems that avoiding the work of research and writing is the most important consideration, not the grade. The "B" range actually seems to be the most common and popular.

Ironically, for assigned topics beyond the generic or mundane--in most of the categories I checked-- students would probably spend as much time checking out sites to find a paper that fits their assignment than they would just doing the paper themselves. But the custom places will provide just about any paper on any topic if the price is right--about $9 to $15 or more per page. One site, called The Paper Store, which sells on-file papers and provides custom papers, has eleven affiliate cheat sites. Credit cards or online payment are accepted by several sites. Cheathouse.com accepts VISA, MasterCard, American Express, Discover, and PayPal. [2]

Still, I thought perhaps the problem was overblown. How many students can know about this? Then I found out the School Sucks site reports receiving about 10,000 visits per day and 2 million page views per month. Seventy percent of visitors are from the U.S., 10% from Canada, 10% from Israel, and the other 10% from the rest of the world. Since July of 1996, the site has grown to be able to now offer 50,000-plus papers, free. It also links to a custom paper site known as JunglePage.com. offering 100% original papers from scratch, available 24/7, with a toll free 800 number.[3]

COUNTERMEASURES
Though it is difficult, if not impossible, to stop cheating and plagiarism completely, several successful strategies have been developed and tried over the years. Some are updates of older methods and others are as new as using the Internet. However, the consensus of opinion seems to be that the key to combating plagiarism is in the requirements instructors give for creating the paper. Though the strategies outlined below do not appear to be unique to any particular individual, I've cited texts where I found them mentioned, for reference purposes.

To begin with, one strategy is to avoid giving open-ended or generic topic assignments. Allowing students to write about any topic of their choosing ("pick some topic related to this course") or giving general topics ("write on a social concern") makes plagiarism appealing and easy. Literally thousands of papers are available at online cheat sites on such topics. [4] A good countermeasure is to require that paper topics and the information used be particular to the specific topics of the class and the class discussions or current events. [5] Some instructors require comparison/contrast papers on specific books or topics, which are much more difficult to find on the Internet.

Requirements for what must be in the paper can also be effective. Setting specific criteria and standards for the material that must be in the paper can make plagiarism impractical if not nearly impossible. For example, consider requiring that students include material from class lectures or

discussion. [6] Have them use their own class notes as a resource for material for their paper. This will make it extremely unlikely that they can find anything on the Internet or elsewhere that can come close to matching your lecture material. Another, older strategy is also still very effective. Simply require that they conduct an interview or a survey that must be cited in the paper. [7] Further require that a transcript of the entire interview or copies of the individual surveys be included in an appendix. Depending on the assignment, it may be possible to require students to use personal experience in their papers. [8] This isn't appropriate for all types of papers, such as the classic research paper, but it can work well for some assignments that call for experiential information.

Other strategies that work well involve using "peripheral" requirements, those that enhance the paper scholastically, but are not actually necessary to the meaning or argument presented in the paper. An example would be requiring an annotated bibliography. [9] If every reference had to have a synopsis, it would create a significant burden for students trying to pass off a plagiarized paper (even with a bibliography) as their own. Though many papers available on the cheat sites brag of having bibliographies included (at no additional charge), few have annotated bibliographies.

A natural for papers with scientific, medical, or technology topics is to require that an abstract be included. [10] A clever student could take a paper off the Internet and adapt it and write an abstract, but since the material would be unfamiliar, it creates a situation where the effort and risk make plagiarism a less attractive option. Another strategy that has gained in popularity is to require that a description of the research process be included with the paper or as a supplemental document. [11] It would be difficult to create a believable description of a research process that one did not do.

One of the easiest and most effective methods is to require that students hand in copies or print-outs of their research and highlight or in some way mark any sections used or cited in their paper. Collecting students' "raw materials" makes turning in a plagiarized paper virtually impossible. Make sure to check the print dates on the copies or print-outs. The access date and time usually appears on the bottom margin of material from online sources. All dates should fall between the time the assignment was given and the date it was turned in. This requirement for copies or print-outs can be strengthened by insisting that the great majority of information used or quoted be current, within the last two or three years, for example.

Perhaps the best anti-plagiarism method is to prescribe and carefully monitor the paper writing process, including the research, if research is required. Typically, this would include taking students through a step by step process that requires them to turn in, on a schedule covering a certain number of weeks, first, a topic statement, followed by a preliminary bibliography, copies of research notes, an outline, a rough draft(s), and a final draft. [12]

This process method is nearly fool-proof, though I know of an instance where a student tried recycling a friend's paper because the friend's instructor the previous semester had used the same requirements for completing and submitting research papers. The student was only found out because she bragged openly and was turned in by an honest student. So if several of your colleagues use this method, beware. Some combat the situation by keeping file copies of papers

and then rely on memory to spot the recycled ones. The only major drawback to using the process method is that it is incredibly time-consuming. If you are teaching three sections of 30 students each, it's a scramble to keep up with the process. Other than that, it works very well.

PLAGIARISM OR NOT?

No matter what you do or how hard you try to help your students, sooner or later that suspicious paper is going to land on your desk. How can you tell if it is really a plagiarized paper or not? First look for obvious things, like the sophistication and style of the writing. Has the student shown in previous work that he or she is capable of that level of writing and scholarship? If you are suspicious, talk to the student privately about the paper and ask questions about the material and the writing. It is surprising how many students will figure they are caught and simply confess they lifted the material.

Also look at the bibliography closely and at the dates of the material. I caught a student once because a personal interview the student supposedly conducted, and listed in the bibliography, was dated the previous semester. When I pointed this out, the student confessed the paper was her roommate's. If some of the sources seem unusual or esoteric, ask the student where he or she found them and then probe for some details on the source material. If they can't explain where the material came from or give specific information on the source, their veracity is in question.

A somewhat more extreme, but I'm told very effective method is the Glatt plagiarism program. This method can be used without actually having to find the source of the plagiarism. Glatt used a simple "cloze" test in which 300--400 words of the paper are retyped or copied leaving out every fifth word. The student is then requested to fill in the missing words. If the student cannot supply more than 80% of the omitted words in the excerpt from the paper he or she supposedly wrote, then chances are the paper is above his/her reading and writing level and is plagiarized. [13]

A method pioneered on the Internet is to use search engines to find the sources of plagiarized work. In the past I've had good luck using the Advanced Search feature in Google, but any good search engine will work. By entering an unusual phrase, a suspicious sentence, or a direct quote into a search engine, the engine will find the source for you. This includes everything, everywhere, especially papers on the cheat sites. If the phrase or quote is found, it will bring up the entire text. [14] If this happens, you can print out or save the document and confront the student with the evidence.

The newest countermeasure for fighting plagiarism is using plagiarism detection software. My campus has been using Turnitin.com quite successfully. Instructors must sign up and create a class site, but it is simple and quite easy to do. Class sites only need to be given a name by the instructor, who then lists assignments that he or she wants checked for plagiarism; that's it, basically. Students must also sign up for the site the instructor creates, but only those that have the pass code that the instructor gives the class can sign in. Once they've created a "user profile," they need not do it again all semester. Instructor profiles last as long as your campus uses the program.

Turnitin.com requires that papers be uploaded electronically to the Turnitin website, which is the students' responsibility, but it is also easy to do. Class sites are blind to students in that they cannot view their papers, or others' papers, like instructors can. The Turnitin.com program compares, then color codes everything in each student paper that matches anything on the Internet or in the Turnitin.com database. You can click on the site that color matches and see the document that had matching content. The instructor then need only look to see if the student cited these color coded sections. If not, then plagiarism is likely. Some instructors simply show students what the program can do, and simply demonstrating it, they report, cuts plagiarism dramatically.

Plagiarism is not a new problem, but with the Internet, it may be more challenging than it has ever been. The sheer volume of cheat material available is staggering. Though it can appear to be an overwhelming problem, several strategies, old and new, can be used to encourage students to use the Internet as the resource it is meant to be. Perhaps the best strategy is not to try to shutdown Internet cheat sites, which is probably illegal and impractical, but to render them useless or too risky to use. The best strategy is to make assignments that will engage students in the process of research, discovery, and writing in order to enhance their learning. Let part of that learning be the realization that plagiarism is not a viable option.

ENDNOTES

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[2] CheatHouse. 2006. http://www.cheathouse.com/ (5 June 2006).

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[6] Tiane Donahue. In "Educators Fighting a Web of Deceit." by Doreen Iudica Vigue. The Boston Globe. On The New York Times Syndicate Computer News Daily. 27 May 1997. http://nytsyn.com/live/Web/147_052797_130005_8235. html

[7] Galles.

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[9] Galles.

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[13] C. J. Schumaker, Jr. "Plagiarism." 5 Dec. 1997. UOP Online faculty lounge message. (5 Dec. 1997).

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