Avoid the Plague

Tips and Tricks for Preventing and Detecting Plagiarism

By J.V. Bolkan

Plagiarism is an ugly word. Copying someone else's work and attempting to claim credit for one's self is an act that involves a number of ethical failings—theft, laziness, coveting, and lying among others. Even in a complex world where many behaviors can be described as falling into ethical gray areas, few educators (or editors) have any tolerance for plagiarism. Yet, according to some studies, more than half of all college undergraduates admit to engaging in plagiarism. (***Editor's note:*** Find these studies and other resources on p. 13.)

Many educators blame the Internet for what they perceive as the rise of plagiarism. Although the Internet certainly enables more efficient plagiarism, blaming it for widespread copying is akin to blaming a bank robbery on the presence of cash in the building. It is a factor, of course, but not the root cause of the behavior.

Just as with bank robbery, the solutions to plagiarism must be multifaceted. Efforts must be directed at prevention as well as detection and punishment. Banks don't leave piles of cash stacked by the front door. Educators should take care to make assignments that hinder plagiarists. It is also important to remember that it isn't just vaults and security guards stopping bank robberies. The vast majority of people wouldn't rob a bank even if they could. They understand that it is illegal and unethical. ISTE's NETS for Students includes an ethics standard:

Social, Ethical, and Human Issues
- Students understand the ethical, cultural, and societal issues related to technology.
- Students practice responsible use of technology systems, information, and software.
- Students develop positive attitudes toward technology uses that support lifelong learning, collaboration, personal pursuits, and productivity.

Educators should strive to reinforce the ethical ramifications of plagiarism. Setting a tone is important. "I establish my disdain for plagiarism early in the course and therefore (hopefully) set a tone for academic integrity, which will be reiterated each time research is required for an assignment," says Carlan Kephart, an English Instructor at North Eugene (Oregon) High School.

Deterrents

In-depth discussion of plagiarism has another deterrent benefit. It is a popular misconception that the reports and papers available from online "paper mills" are easy A's. In fact, the quality of papers offered online for plagiarists is quite uneven. It can be an extremely effective lesson to actually download a few sloppy examples and critique them with your class—a student willing to cheat to get a good grade may not be so eager to take the risk and spend the money just to get a mediocre or poor mark.

Although emphasizing ethics will diminish the instances of plagiarism, unfortunately, it isn't always enough of a deterrent. Fortunately, other methods of prevention are available. According to University of Oregon Journalism School instructor Mark Blaine, "I try to design assignments so that they have as much of a fingerprint as possible. The more unique each student's work is, the less likely they'll

be to cheat by lifting someone else's paper." For instance, it is pretty easy to find an online report on the topic of "the ocean" but a report on ocean beaches in Hawaii would be more of a challenge, and a report on the effects of a new resort hotel built on Waikiki might be impossible to find.

Another strategy that has proven effective is to require students to submit the various stages of their research. Although completed reports are quite easy to find online, very few are offered with outlines, early drafts, and lists of alternate and unused sources. Of course, determined plagiarists can recreate these, but they're likely to discover that the effort is equal to or even more laborious than crafting an original report.

A related strategy is to require at least one recent source. Most papers found online are at least a few years old and include references and citations that are even older. Again, determined plagiarists can work around this requirement, but often, the research and effort needed to update an older paper's citations is enough of a deterrent.

The final deterrent strategy, solid assessment and good teaching, can't be over emphasized. If students understand that they will be graded not only on the artifact they produce (the paper) but also on their understanding of the topic expressed in an oral report, or an essay on "the making of my report," they aren't as likely to copy someone else's work because they're going to have to learn the content anyway. Motivation, of course, is the key. Motivated and engaged learners are much less likely to take shortcuts. If they're only in your classroom to get a grade and move on, the potential for plagiarism will be greater.

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—Mark Blaine

Detection

A plan for detecting plagiarism can also serve as a deterrent. For instance, Blaine lets students know that he does at least rudimentary checking for plagiarism. "We do Google things and let students know we're going to do it. Sometimes it works."

As with any security system, the best strategy is to employ both obvious and hidden methods. The obvious steps, such as Googling random sections of a report, serve both as deterrent and detection methods. However, if you tell them exactly how you use all the anti-plagiarism tools at your disposal, you may be ensuring that determined cheaters won't be caught.

Google is far from a sure-fire method of rooting out plagiarism. "Unfortunately, I think we only get the really clumsy ones with Googling," says Blaine. Although Google searches an incredible number of Web pages, it can't look into password-protected sites. Because potential buyers typically can't see the papers for sale online until they enter a password or credit card information, those papers are also protected from Google's search routines.

Despite Google's limitations, it is the choice for Kephart. "It can be pretty costly to get a school license" for commercial programs, "and when Google works just fine, I don't see the need to spend the money." Even with the digital tools available, Kephart relies more on herself, "when I do assign an outside writing assignment, I make sure that I've had a chance to really get to know the students' writing in class, first. Once I know their writing style, getting away with a plagiarized paper is virtually impossible. Even when students have only used paragraphs of material from someone else's essay—even a mere sentence—I can tell that it is not theirs."

There are much more sophisticated tools for rooting out plagiarism. Most of these tools are commercially based, and some are even quite controversial. Perhaps the most widely discussed and heavily used commercial anti-plagiarism tool is Turnitin. The self-described leader in "enterprise solutions" to the problem of plagiarism, Turnitin offers a variety of use and payment options. Essentially a combination of search engine technology (akin to Google) and a database registry, even critics of the service acknowledge its effectiveness at discovering instances of cheating.

It is the database portion of Turnitin that is somewhat controversial. When an educator submits a paper to the service, it is added to the database and compared to all the other papers previously submitted, as well as checked against the service's Google-like Web search engine. The fact that the service copies the entire submission into its database and then uses that content as part of its commercial operation is the source of the controversy. Detractors claim the service is violating copyright law by using the student papers in their entirety for commercial purposes, often without consent. Proponents answer with a

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number of arguments, including the fact that the service does not distribute or ever make those papers available. Most universities that subscribe to the service require students to sign waivers saying they understand that their papers will be submitted to the database.

Although the debate over the legal and ethical merits of services such as Turnitin continues, there are other services that are simply unethical. Before choosing an anti-copying service, you'll want to do some careful research. Demonstrating an evil ingenuity, at least one anti-plagiarism service has managed for a time to profit from both sides of the problem. Charging a modest fee to educators, this service did indeed detect plagiarized articles, but it only reported on those articles plagiarized from its competitors in the online research paper selling business. If a paper appeared to be original, this service would then copy the paper to its archive of papers for sale. In essence, unwitting educators were paying to submit papers to the very service they were trying to discourage.

Punishment

It is impractical, if not impossible to have an effective punitive policy in place without strong deterrence and detection policies. Furthermore, without a policy in place, deterrence is not as effective, and detection is unlikely to be a priority.

Statistics on the Plagiarism.org Web site paint a dire picture of the current plagiarism and academic environment. According to the site, nearly half of the students in one survey believed teachers ignored cheaters, and in another, 90% believed cheaters are never caught or adequately disciplined. Perhaps, in part because of these beliefs, large majorities of high school and undergraduate students admitted to having

cheated in various polls cited on the site. Although the Plagiarism.org site appears to be tightly affiliated with the commercial Turnitin.com anti-plagiarism business, there is little doubt online cheating is a huge concern not only for educators, but for students as well.

Conclusion

Although it is difficult to accurately gauge just how pervasive plagiarism is and whether the Internet has made the problem worse, as more than one wag has noted, it is the unoriginal sin. Eradicating cheating isn't likely to ever be accomplished, but there are tools and techniques that can help keep the educational environment much more honest.

Resources

Commercial Tools
EVE2 (Easy Verification Engine): http://www.canexus.com/eve/
Glatt Plagiarism Services: http://www.plagiarism.com/
SafeAssignment: http://www.mydropbox.com
Turnitin: htpp://www.turnitin.com

Ethics Resources
Computer Ethics, Etiquette, and Safety for the 21st Century Student by Nancy Willard. ISTE, 2001.
Copyright for Schools: A Practical Guide (4th ed.) by Carol Mann Simpson. Linworth, 2005.
"Plagiarism Tool Creates Legal Quandary" by Andrea L. Foster. *Chronicle of Higher Education.* Available: http://chronicle.com/free/v48/i36/36a03701.htm

General Resources
Penn State Cyberplagiarism Page: http://tlt.its.psu.edu/suggestions/cyberplag/
Plagiarism.org (sponsored by Turnitin.com): http://www.plagiarism.org
University of Alberta Guide to Plagiarism and Cyber-Plagiarism: http://www.library.ualberta.ca/guides/plagiarism/
University of Texas at Austin's Preventing and Detecting Plagiarism: http://www.lib.utexas.edu/services/instruction/faculty/plagiarism/

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