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STUDENT ONLINE PLAGIARISM

HOW DO WE RESPOND?

Patrick M. Scanlon

Abstract. The perception that Internet plagiarism by university students is on the rise has alarmed college teachers, leading to the adoption of electronic plagiarism checkers, among other responses. Although some recent studies suggest that estimates of online plagiarism may be exaggerated, cause for concern remains. This article reviews quantitative studies of student plagiarism over the past forty years, as well as academe's generally weak response. It also offers strategies for addressing cyber-plagiarism and argues that faculty should act as educators, rather than as detectives.

Teachers have long suspected that at least some of their students plagiarize some of the time. Recently, the anxiety level regarding student plagiarism, as well as academic honesty in general, has risen along with increased use of the Internet as a tool for research and writing. McCabe noted, "there is evidence that cheating has increased in the last few decades, and the Internet is likely to intensify the problem" (2001, 38). According to the July 6, 2001, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, "[O]fficials at some colleges say that in recent years they have seen a sharp increase in

students cutting and pasting material into papers from Web sites without attribution, or purchasing term papers from online term-paper mills" (Young 2001, A26). Also, the use of plagiarism-detection software "appears to be growing." That is, the Internet could be exacerbating the problem of student plagiarism because, presumably, the technology makes illicit cutting and pasting so easy as to be nearly irresistible. What is more, widespread use of the Internet may be shaping a new generation of students' conception of "fair use," leading them to view the mass of information so freely shared in cyberspace as public knowledge.

Are we overreacting? Internet plagiarism does present a challenge for col-

leges, but its prevalence may not be as widespread as popular reports and anecdotal evidence suggest. Moreover, the adoption of increasingly popular electronic plagiarism checkers, although probably effective in the near term as deterrents, could actually prevent faculty from addressing the problem before the fact, as a critical matter of students' intellectual and ethical development. Faculty and administrators should seek ways to attend to Internet plagiarism; however, they should do so as educators, rather than as detectives.

Cyber-Plagiarism: How Bad is the Problem?

For several decades, quantitative studies based on student self-reports have reported high levels of academic dishonesty, although results have varied widely. Depending on the study, anywhere from 9 percent to 95 percent of students surveyed admitted to some form of academic dishonesty (Maramark and Maline 1993). This variability should not be surprising, as many surveys of academic honesty are limited to a small number of students on a single campus and are dependent for their accuracy on how students are asked about this objectionable behavior—some will not be forthcoming despite anonymity. However, two multi-campus studies of thousands of college students found similar levels of cheating: McCabe (1992) reported that 67.4 percent of students admitted to at least one

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instance of cheating, and Davis et al. (1992) found that 76 percent had cheated in either high school or college, or both. Findings regarding the incidence of plagiarism among students reveal lower, but still troubling, numbers. For example, McCabe and Trevino (1996), when comparing two multicampus surveys of academic dishonesty conducted thirty years apart, reported that 30 percent of students in 1963 and 26 percent in 1993 admitted to having plagiarized.

Only recently has online plagiarism been studied systematically, with results suggesting that anxiety over Internet-facilitated textual theft by college students may be fueled by misperceptions. In a survey of 698 students on nine campuses, Scanlon and Neumann (2002) found that students who went online to cut and paste text without citation constituted 24.5 percent of the sample, a level of Internet plagiarism similar to the numbers reported by McCabe and Trevino (1996) for “conventional” plagiarism. Only 2.3 percent of students in Scanlon and Neumann’s study reported purchasing papers from online term-paper mills “often” or “very frequently,” and 6 percent admitted to buying papers “sometimes.” Another recent multicampus study revealed even lower numbers. Citing data from a survey of 2,200 college students on twenty-one campuses, McCabe found that 10 percent reported copying “a few sentences from a Web site without footnoting them,” and 5 percent admitted to turning in a paper “obtained in large part from a term-paper mill or Web site” (2001, 41).

Of course, no one should be happy that “only” a quarter of college students surveyed self-reported Internet plagiarism, even if this number argues against popular notions of an epidemic of online cheating. (See, for instance, the cover story of the November 22, 1999, issue of *U.S. News & World Report*, which announced that “a new epidemic of fraud is sweeping through our schools.”) Other related findings are troubling as well. Reporting the results of a large-scale study of high school juniors, McCabe noted that 52 percent copied online text without attribution and 16 percent handed in a paper obtained online. These levels of Internet plagiarism led McCabe to speculate on generational differences:

The fact that high school students do not take very seriously what we might call Internet “cut and paste” plagiarism is a cause for concern. High school students may be under the impression that lifting information from the Internet, even verbatim, is good research practice rather than cheating. Are we raising a generation of students who view scholarship as “borrowing” thoughts from a variety of different sources and simply assembling them into a final product? (2001, 42)

Higher levels of plagiarism among high school students as compared with undergraduates are not unexpected. McCabe pointed out that the younger students “are typically still learning about plagiarism and proper techniques for citation” (2001, 42). Nevertheless, he maintained that online cutting and pasting “is dramatically higher among the high school students. They find Internet plagiarism so easy and consider it so unlikely to be detected that it is almost too tempting to resist.”

That students would be more apt to plagiarize when detection is unlikely is a conclusion both intuitively obvious and supported by research. McCabe and Trevino (1993) reported that strong disincentives for academic dishonesty are the likelihood of being caught and the perceived severity of penalties. Yet, among the most powerful influential factors regarding any form of cheating are perceptions of peer behavior (McCabe and Trevino 1993, 1997), and in this respect some recent findings are disconcerting. Scanlon and Neumann (2002) found that college students perceived Internet plagiarism among their peers to be far more prevalent than their self-reports suggest is actually the case. For example, although only 8 percent admitted to engaging in Internet plagiarism “often” or “very frequently,” 50.4 percent indicated that they believed their peers did so; 8.3 percent reported purchasing papers online “sometimes” to “very frequently,” yet 62.2 percent estimated other students bought from Internet term-paper mills at that rate. These findings indicate that many students may view Internet plagiarism as more commonplace than it is, a misperception with potentially troubling consequences. Because academic dishonesty and perception of peers’ behaviors are strongly associated, “if students perceive

that a majority of their peers are going online to plagiarize, they may be more apt to plagiarize themselves” (Scanlon and Neumann 2002, 383).

The amount of Internet plagiarism likely taking place on college campuses should be a matter of concern, even if available evidence suggests estimates of online cutting and pasting may be exaggerated. Misperceptions among students regarding Internet plagiarism by their peers are troubling given the influence of perceived peer behavior on students’ decisions to plagiarize. Yet, perhaps most disquieting are the high levels of online plagiarism among high school students, as reported by McCabe (2001), and the possibility that these students, reared on the Internet, have come to see text in cyberspace as theirs for the taking. Therefore, how colleges respond to plagiarism may be more critical than ever.

Addressing Student Plagiarism: A History of Ambivalence

Universities’ responses to student plagiarism generally have not been strong. In a survey of 257 chief academic officers at colleges and universities throughout the United States, Aaron concluded that higher education has not moved aggressively to address any issues of academic dishonesty, including plagiarism. He reported that few faculty discuss academic dishonesty with their students and that few institutions offer student development programs related to academic dishonesty or even attempt to assess the extent of cheating on their campuses. These findings, he concluded, “raise questions about [universities’] commitment to academic integrity” (1992, 113). In an even sharper rebuke focused specifically on the academy’s handling of student plagiarism, White wrote, “When we notice how few colleges and universities really take plagiarism seriously—insisting on instruction in freshman composition, reinforcement in other courses, and campus committees to review and to deal with infractions—we must wonder why” (1993, A44).

This relatively weak response to student plagiarism on university campuses is not a new phenomenon. In the first large-scale, multicampus study of academic dishonesty, which was conducted nearly

forty years ago, Bowers asked deans and student body presidents to identify the penalty imposed on their campuses for various offenses. Among those infractions for which students were usually suspended or expelled, plagiarism of a term paper ranked last, identified as worthy of the most serious penalties by 10 percent of deans and 13 percent of student body presidents. Plagiarism was ranked far below “violating rules about having guests of the opposite sex in dormitory rooms” (71 percent of deans, 68 percent of student body presidents) and “stealing books from the library” (52 percent, 34 percent) (1964, 21).

More recently, Nuss placed at least some of the blame for student plagiarism on the academic community for its lack of success “in communicating the value of independent scholarship to its students” (1984, 140). White made this point more forcefully: “Plagiarism fits nicely into the gamesmanship of learning. We give too much weight to the passive adoption of others’ ideas, to the mindless repetition of slogans as if they were thoughts” (1993, A44).

Evidence also points toward considerable ambivalence and confusion among students regarding plagiarism. Plagiarism is “routinely misunderstood by students,” according to one review of academic dishonesty research (Maramark and Maline 1993). Similarly, Ashworth, Bannister, and Thorne, reporting the results of a study of student perceptions of cheating and plagiarism, concluded that students can find it difficult to determine or explain what constitutes plagiarism and that, in general, “plagiarism is a far less meaningful concept for students than it is for academic staff, and it ranks relatively low in this student system of values” (1997, 201). Another survey of undergraduate attitudes found that “slightly less than twenty-five percent agree with one or more arguments that plagiarism is acceptable behavior” (Hawley 1984, 38). Even when students profess that plagiarism is wrong, their behavior suggests a conflict between ethics and practice. For example, Scanlon and Neumann (2002) reported that approximately 89 percent of students surveyed agreed that using the Internet to copy text to hand in as one’s own is wrong, yet nearly 25 percent

admitted to doing so. Of course, there is abundant evidence that students’ actions often are out of line with stated principles. “Most students say that it is wrong to cheat,” concluded Davis et al., who noted that “the percentage of students answering yes to the question, ‘Is it wrong to cheat?’ has never been below 90%” at the schools they surveyed (1992, 17). Yet, the authors reported cheating rates as high as 75 percent to 87 percent among the same students.

As Howard pointed out, “Not only the difficulty in defining plagiarism but also the difficulty in adducing reliable statistics about its incidence raise the anxiety level of those who regard plagiarism as a threat” (1999, 24). Speculation based on hearsay—among faculty and students alike—has created a sense that online cutting and pasting is widespread. This impression, although not confirmed by recent research, certainly worries faculty and may convince students that Internet plagiarism is commonplace among their peers and therefore acceptable. Moreover, the evidence that a new generation of students will come to campus with vastly different conceptions of the fair use of online materials can only raise anxiety levels even higher. Therefore, colleges and universities must confront the issue of student online plagiarism vigorously, openly, and in a variety of ways, and they must do so primarily as educators, rather than as adjudicators, a role that the record shows we have taken on reluctantly and have filled ineffectively.

What Colleges, and College Teachers, Can Do

As previously noted, colleges and universities generally have not made institution-wide efforts to address student plagiarism. Any initiative to raise awareness—among faculty and students alike—concerning current trends in online plagiarism would be an important first step for any campus. Such a program could begin with an assessment of student attitudes and behavior, faculty opinion and procedures for dealing with plagiarism, and institutional sanctions and programs. For example, the Center for Academic Integrity, affiliated with the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University, offers an Academic Integrity

Assessment Guide to assist institutions in evaluating policies, assessing the level of academic dishonesty among students, and developing plans to encourage academic honesty, among other activities. (The Center for Academic Integrity’s Web site, <http://www.academicintegrity.org>, with separate “tiers” for public and members-only use, offers a host of other resources, including recent publications and data from current studies of academic honesty.)

Colleges and universities should update their policies on academic honesty to include definitions and sanctions regarding cyber-plagiarism, and they should regularly publish or otherwise draw attention to these policies. Plagiarism is a problematic and widely misunderstood concept for students, and the complicating factor of the Internet, where ease of acquisition too often is taken to mean common ownership, has only widened the divide between faculty and student notions of fair use. Moreover, faculty are not in universal agreement on what constitutes plagiarism or what faculty responses to student plagiarism should be. For example, Howard argued for a plagiarism policy that is “responsive to contemporary theory” and that “suggests an enlarged range of definitions and motivations for plagiarism, which in turn enlarges the range of acceptable responses” (1995, 789). Howard also suggested that plagiarism policies take into account the often collaborative nature of student writing and that they “allow authorial intention as a factor in the adjudication of student plagiarism” (798). More to the point, Howard asserted that new forms of electronic composition “promise to transform the nature of authorship in the twenty-first century,” making it difficult to account for that transformation “in present-day policy regarding student plagiarism” (803). Yet, colleges and universities must begin crafting such policies, particularly in preparation for students for whom online cutting and pasting has become the rule, rather than the exception.

Notwithstanding the academic community’s ambivalent response to student plagiarism, reports of online cribbing

have prompted concerned faculty to adopt plagiarism-detection software and services such as EVE2 (<http://www.canexus.com/eve/>), IntegriGuard (<http://www.integriguard.com/>), Turnitin.com (<http://www.turnitin.com/>), and others. These methods may prove effective to a degree, particularly as deterrents; to the extent that students believe plagiarism-detection software is effective, they will be less likely to cut and paste. However, the irony of using computers to correct a problem presumably caused by computers has not been missed. Howard pointed out the danger in solely employing “mechanical means for detecting plagiarism,” given the problematic nature of human factors involved in the act (1999, 130). “Plagiarism-checking software would mechanize the monitoring of textual purity, excluding all but textual criteria. Plagiarism-checking software excludes both authorial intention and reader interpretation in the construct of authorship.”

Although the potential deterrent effect of plagiarism-detection software may be considerable, and although it likely will sniff out the most egregious forms of plagiarism for which there is no excuse, reliance on plagiarism checkers could bring unforeseen and unwanted consequences. First, the probable motives for student plagiarism, as well as the reasons for student confusion over the nature of originality and textual appropriation, will have been left unaddressed. That is, faculty will not have taught students anything except that they have acquired better means to catch them. Second, the detection software could introduce an element of mutual distrust. As Kolich pointed out, “Nothing destroys trust between students and teachers as fast as the constant harassment of suspicion; students are sensitive to the lack of trust, reacting to it like poison” (1983, 148). Using plagiarism checkers appears to turn professors into detectives with new—and as yet unproven—high-tech tools at their disposal, rather than teachers instructing students in what, for many of them, are baffling principles and techniques. Finally, used solely as policing mechanisms, plagiarism checkers actually could cause faculty to avoid engagement with the pedagogical and ethical issues involved.

The handy technological fix may divert us from the real problem, which, at its heart, is not technological at all.

Mechanical detection of plagiarism certainly could be used as a teaching tool to assist faculty in identifying apparent plagiarism during the writing process, rather than afterward, and it can provide an opportunity to discuss the proper handling of sources. The software then becomes another means of addressing those persistently knotty problems of originality and the correct uses and citation of sources. It also would present an opening to raise ethical and philosophical arguments related to the Internet as an information “commons,” where ideas and text seemingly are available for the taking (see especially Lessig 2001). For a generation raised on Napster, as well as for many others who regularly work and play within online communities, questions of ownership on the Web have become deeply problematic. This is not to excuse or mitigate egregiously dishonest behavior—a cribbed paper is a cribbed paper, whether cut and pasted from the Internet or methodically typed out from a book—but to recognize that definitions of plagiarism, always difficult to pin down, are becoming even more complicated.

If used, plagiarism-detection software should be only one part of an institution-wide initiative, with the onus on individual college teachers to attend to online plagiarism among their students. Simply broaching the subject in class and in course syllabi is a good beginning. The amount of misinformation on this topic appears to have grown exponentially in the past few years, as access to the Internet becomes nearly universal. By discussing online cutting and pasting in class, faculty and students can examine the nature of information on the Web while considering writers’ responsibilities to their sources, as well as to their readers. Such a discussion could move seamlessly to a lesson on published standards for citing online sources. Faculty also can do things that they ought to be doing anyway: avoid assigning term papers on general topics and themes, review multiple drafts of papers, and discuss writing projects with students as their work progresses.

Conclusion

In the not-so-distant past, plagiarism at least required time-consuming physical work: going to the library, searching, reading, and copying. Now a student can cobble together a paper from online sources literally in minutes. Although it is not yet clear whether this new behavior constitutes an epidemic or whether the Internet actually creates cheaters, the relative ease of cyber-plagiarism has set off alarms among college teachers everywhere and has sent them casting about for solutions, particularly for better detection methods and harsher penalties.

Yet, the apparent rise in online textual cribbing also presents college teachers with an opportunity to address student plagiarism as educators first. In addition to discussing the academic and ethical issues openly and modifying assignments appropriately, they can explore with their students the ways that the Internet is altering the nature of authorship and the ownership of texts, without in any way lowering standards of academic integrity.

Key words: Internet, plagiarism, technology

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