Chapter I

Student Plagiarism in an Online World: An Introduction

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an introduction to the problem of student plagiarism in an environment where use of the Internet is commonplace. What is plagiarism, and to what extent is it a problem? Why do students plagiarize, and what are typical attitudes towards such plagiarism? Why are academics, and institutions themselves, often reluctant to progress cases through official channels? What are some of the technologies used by students to plagiarise, and by academics to detect plagiarism? What solutions are possible, and what potential solutions might be just over the horizon? This chapter attempts to provide answers to all of these questions.

INTRODUCTION

The advent of the internet has made plagiarism by students not only easier, but also, easier to detect.

Statistics in this area tend to vary a little depending upon the methods used for their collection and calculation, but whether the percentage of students self-reporting plagiarism is 35 percent in one survey, or 45 percent in another, the conclusion is the same. Plagiarism no longer can be considered as a crime committed by a poor unfortunate few with questionable morals; rather, it is a crime (if it is indeed a crime) committed by a significant number of students, perhaps the majority, at one time or another.
WHAT IS PLAGIARISM?

Plagiarism...

• ....is the act of representing as one’s own original work the creative works of another, without appropriate acknowledgment of the author or source (University of Melbourne, 2007).
• ....is the theft of someone else’s ideas and work. Whether a student copies verbatim or simply rephrases the ideas of another without properly acknowledging the source, the theft is the same (Harvard University Extension School, 2007).
• ....is the copying or paraphrasing of other people’s work or ideas into your own work without full acknowledgement (University of Oxford, 2007).

What can we deduce from such definitions? First, that the plagiarist is using someone else’s work, or ideas; second, that he or she does so without proper acknowledgement; and third, that mere paraphrasing or rephrasing of such work or ideas in no way mitigates the crime.

Plagiarism sometimes is delineated as to whether or not the student has set out intentionally to deceive; if so, the crime is perceived to be more serious than if the plagiarism has been unintentional. At the extremely serious end of the scale would generally be such acts as purchasing an essay or a term paper from a “cheat” site on the Internet; at the least serious end of the spectrum might be the employment of a phrase taken from a source which has been incorrectly referenced, or perhaps not referenced at all.

WHY DO STUDENTS PLAGIARIZE?

Lists of reasons as to why students engage in plagiarism can be found in many places. A typical list might look something like the following, taken from the University of Alabama in Huntsville (2007):

• Lack of research skills
• Lack of writing skills
• Problems evaluating Internet sources
• Confusion about how to cite sources
• Misconceptions about terminology
• Pressure
• Poor time management and organizational skills
• Product-oriented writing assignments
• Cultural factors

A list of reasons why students plagiarize compiled by someone with a more cynical turn of mind might come up with one more item: because they can. So long as the objective is to achieve a particular grade, rather than to learn, and there are reasonable prospects of avoiding detection, then students are optimizing their time and resources by plagiarizing. Potential solutions which fail to recognize this basic underlying fact are unlikely to be successful.

THE EXTENT OF THE PROBLEM

Statistics in this area must be necessarily treated with caution, for at least two reasons.

First, since the online environment is changing all the time, it is possible that students’ attitudes to plagiarism are, too. Witness, for example, the changing attitudes to copyright issues in the music and video industries. So it is perhaps important to give more weight to evidence gathered in the last few years, rather than to that with origins in the last century.

Second, almost all such statistics are gathered through self-reporting. It should be fairly obvious, therefore, that such statistics might be quite unreliable; and perhaps more likely to underestimate the problem, rather than the reverse.