Chapter X
The Phenomena of Contract Cheating

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the issue of contract cheating. This is where students have work completed on their behalf which is then submitted for academic credit. A thorough background to this phenomena is presented, and a list of the main contract cheating Web sites is given. These contract cheating sites are placed into four classifications: auctions sites, discussion forums, essay mills, and feed aggregators. Approaches are proposed for tutors to set assigned work that is less susceptible to contract cheating than standard assessments. The chapter concludes by arguing that urgent attention needs to be paid to contract cheating to avoid it becoming an educational problem of the same scale as plagiarism.

INTRODUCTION

The sheer volume of information that is conveniently accessible to students has grown dramatically in recent years. The Internet provides educators with new opportunities to innovate with the instruction and assessment methods they use. The Internet also offers students new opportunities to commit academic dishonesties, such as plagiarism. It appears that the educational community is starting to take the plagiarism issue seriously as it grapples with the necessity to ensure the maintainability of academic integrity for all.

The same level of publicity and understanding has not yet hit the related phenomena of contract cheating. First publicised by Clarke and Lancaster (2006), contract cheating refers to the outsourcing.
of assignments by students to have work produced on their behalf. As was the case for plagiarism, it is the availability of an online world which provides students with easier opportunities to commit contract cheating than they may have had in the past. Unlike plagiarism the area of contract cheating is still only loosely defined, meaning that standard prevention and detection techniques are neither widely known, nor easily applicable.

The work submitted by contract cheaters has been produced exclusively for them. This means that sources for their submissions will not usually be found on the Internet. This immediately eliminates the use of plagiarism detection engines or the technique of searching the Web for unusual phraseology.

The presentation of this chapter may be considered non-standard. The primary objective is not to present new results, even though advice about contract cheating has not been published in this depth before. Instead, the aim is to publicise a growing area of concern. The authors believe strongly that more tutors need to be made aware that some original coursework submitted by their students will not be the results of the labour of those students.

A number of smaller objectives exist within this primary aim of publicity. The small amount of existing contract cheating research is discussed. An initial attempt is presented to classify the type of online sources that students can use to contract cheat. Methods are proposed that can, ideally, prevent students from contract cheating, but, if necessary, enable this cheating to be detected. This approach can be considered as an analogy to the way that the anti-plagiarism movement has evolved with its two pronged approach of prevention and detection. The chapter considers ways in which an individual contract cheater within a larger cohort can be identified or made identifiable. This is a problem when a tutor knows that their assignment has been placed on an auction outsourcing site, but not who the originator is. The chapter concludes by discussing the future direction that the anti-contract cheating movement should be taking and detailing the need for a community based approach of prevention and monitoring.

BACKGROUND

The issue of students plagiarising materials from the Web is a key theme of this book. From the early reporters (Austin & Brown, 1999), to the key issue reviews (Carroll & Appleton, 2001; Culwin & Lancaster, 2001) and the advice manuals (Lathrop & Foss, 2000), it can be noted that a comprehensive set of literature exists, detailing how to prevent and detect those items that students use without acknowledgments. These sources offer a number of standard suggestions for tutors to employ. To prevent plagiarism these include requiring tutors to regularly generate new assignments for which model answers cannot be retrieved from the Web. To detect plagiarism these advocate the use of anti-plagiarism services, such as the self-professed world leader in Web database scanning software TurnItIn.com (Turnitin, n.d.). This chapter assumes that the reader has a working knowledge of the plagiarism problem and potential solutions.

The literature devoted to contract cheating is only in its infancy. The newer discipline of study, popularised by Clarke and Lancaster (2006) and covered in the media (Cheating students put homework to tender on Internet, 2006; Lightfoot, 2006; Morton & Tarica, 2006; Student cheats contract out work, 2006) specifically covers the submission of work that has been produced on behalf of a student, whether for money or not. It can be inferred that such a submission is original; however the work is not by the claimed author. This originality means that a standard plagiarism detection engine, such as TurnItIn.com will not detect this style of cheating, as a source for the work cannot be found.
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