

Plagiarism in a Digital Age

Introduction

I wish I could say I'm happy to have you at this workshop, but it is unfortunate that there's even the need for this gathering. However, before we lament too much, it is important to remember that plagiarism is not a recent phenomenon. The word plagiarism dates back to an accusation by one Roman poet that another had stolen some of his poems and tried to enslave them. The Latin word for abduct and enslave is *plagiarius*; hence, our word "plagiarism," meaning to abduct and enslave the words of another. It's also true that students have been purchasing academic papers long before web based paper mills were ever created. As David Russell explains, there were well known "literary gentlemen" who were hired to write papers for some students at Harvard during the 19th century (320). However, web based plagiarism does represent a new challenge for us to confront, and it is increasing at an alarming rate. One study has found that the percentage of students who admit to committing some form of plagiarism has increased from 10% in 1999 to 41% in 2001 (Price par. 5).

If you are attending this workshop, you probably have dealt with at least one disturbing case of plagiarism. Can a few of you describe some of the most troubling cases of plagiarism you have dealt with recently?

Blatant Copying from a Source

It is rather easy to detect and catch this kind of plagiarism. For an example, visit the RLC website at <http://uhaweb.hartford.edu/rlc>, and select Research Strategies → Academic Honesty versus Plagiarism → Academic Honesty versus Blatant Copying.

If you suspect that a student has engaged in some blatant copying:

1. Go to <http://www.google.com>
2. Pick a suspicious phrase or sentence, such as "The NAACP successfully campaigned for African Americans to be commissioned as officers"
3. Type these suspicious words in quotation marks in the search box
4. Click on search and Google will try to locate the source on the web.

Search engines like Google do not cover more than about a third of the free, visible web so you may need to use more than one of search engine. Google also cannot detect plagiarism from non-electronic, meaning print only, sources, but most blatant student plagiarists don't ever enter the library to locate a book to copy!

Sloppy Note Taking

Sometime students plagiarize due to sloppy note taking. To see an example, visit the RLC website at <http://uhaweb.hartford.edu/rlc>, and select Research Strategies → Academic Honesty versus Plagiarism → Plagiarism by Sloppy Note-Taking.

To help students avoid this possibly unintentional plagiarism, it is helpful to review what kinds of information do and do not need to be cited. Refer to “Research Strategies: Citing Sources Properly” located at <http://uhaweb.hartford.edu/rlc/citingsources.html>.

Patchwork Plagiarism

A third more subtle and more deliberate form of plagiarism is based on lifting sentences from one source, slightly changing them, and then combining them with slightly altered sentences from other sources. This form of plagiarism has several names, such as cut and paste plagiarism or patchwork plagiarism, and it is more difficult to detect. Here are two examples from the previous paper on teacher tenure:

Student: Tenure is becoming more and more outmoded.

Source: Is tenure becoming and outmoded concept that stands in the way of sound educational policy?

Student: Tenure was created to protect teachers from being fired at the whim of the administration.

Source: Is tenure an essential means of protecting teachers from arbitrary and capricious actions on the part of administrators and school boards?

Now this type of plagiarism is much harder to detect because if you search with Google with the student’s exact phrasing, no matches will be found. However, if you search for tenure and outmoded without the quotation marks, you may find the original source.

In fact in this fortunate example, it is the first source listed from www.psparents.net/Teacher%20Tenure.htm. Do a Google search for tenure and outmoded - without quotation marks.

Given the array of sources located by Google, now imagine a student opening several of these sources and cutting and pasting certain paragraphs together while slightly altering some phrases to create a patchwork text.

Many students who deliberately commit patchwork plagiarism often make it easy to detect. The student of the teacher tenure paper occasionally cited her sources so when I read through the texts of the work cited list, I found the slightly altered sentences that had been cut and pasted into the student’s paper. Thus, this was deliberate but dumb plagiarism. Students who wait to the last minute, then panic and commit patchwork plagiarism often will reveal their own excessive reliance on several sources.

Purchasing or Trading Papers

Unlike students who panic after procrastination, there are other students who plan to plagiarize as soon as they receive an assignment. I would like to believe that these students represent a small minority, but they are most unethical plagiarists. These students calmly and callously plagiarize by purchasing or trading for entire papers. Just as there were file cabinets filled with papers and exams in some Animal House fraternities, there now are digital sites for obtaining papers. Here are three sites whose names make their cynical intentions explicit:

Papers for sale: www.schoolsucks.com
www.cheater.com

Papers for trade: www.cheathouse.com

The trading of papers is also flourishing on the internet. Go to www.cheathouse.com and search for a paper within your particular discipline

We, however can transform these sites into a teachable moment of close reading and critical thinking. Open the RLC Website at <http://uhaweb.hartford.edu> and select Research Strategies → Academic Honesty versus Plagiarism → Plagiarism by Tutoring and the Internet. Have students read the disclaimer from Schoolsucks.com

Fortunately, in addition to Google, there are many free and commercial sites that we can use to detect these forms of plagiarism:

Free sites: www.northernlight.com
www.fastsearch.com

Commercial Sites: www.turnitin.com
www.plagiarism.com

Using Blackboard, we can require students to submit an electronic copy of their papers in a digital dropbox and check every paper for possible plagiarism using a site like turnitin.com. Many American colleges are relying on turnitin.com to detect plagiarism; however, in a recent court case in Canada, a student at McGill University sued over being required to submit a paper using a digital dropbox. The student won the case because the mandatory checking of every papers for plagiarism violated the presumption of innocence until proven guilty (Alphonso par.4). Thus, the widespread use of turnitin.com by American colleges may soon face a legal challenge.

Why do Students Commit Plagiarism?

It's tempting to treat plagiarism as a cat and mouse game of pursuit and capture, but this punitive approach ignores the reasons why student commit plagiarism and the reasons are as varied as the forms of plagiarism. Without being as cynical as the students who purchase or trade papers digitally, can you consider what makes some college students resort to plagiarism, especially the first three forms? After examining how students plagiarize, can we consider why they do so?

1. Sheer ignorance of how to write using cited sources and why they are cited. Due to excessive teaching loads, high stakes mastery exams, and rampant plagiarism by high school students, fewer research papers are being assigned by high school teachers: “Across the country, high school English and social studies teachers have cut back or simply abandoned the traditional term paper” (Hayasaki par. 5).
2. Poor time management so procrastination leads to panicked plagiarism. When students feel overwhelmed by assignments, some will take “the shortest route possible through a course” (Harris par. 3).
3. Fear that their writing abilities do not adequate to the task assigned. If students think they are not equal to the task, some will “look for a superior product.” These students, however, are the least able to discern the great gap between their own writing and patchwork plagiarism as well as the poor quality of many purchased or traded papers (Harris par. 6).
4. Disinterest in an assigned topic or a required course. Students who are not committed to a topic or an entire course are more likely to want to “get by” and then rationalize that “everyone is doing it,” even Doris Kearns Goodwin and Jayson Blair!
5. Belief that the internet is a public space without any personal right to intellectual property; the “Napster Effect.”

Strategies to Prevent Plagiarism

If plagiarism is caused by ignorance and inadequacy as much as dishonesty and laziness, we can transform an apparently punitive situation (“cite or else”) into a productive teaching moment. However to do so, we must emphasize prevention more than detection. What are some of the strategies you use to prevent plagiarism?

1. Make assignments clear and discuss the requirements with students. State explicitly your expectations for not just the topic, length, and the due date, but also task (such as summary or analysis), key terms, format, kinds of evidence, variety of sources, and citation system (MLA, APA, etc.). To teach students to read assignments more carefully, see the “Analyzing the Assignment” of the RLC web site.
2. Create checkpoints for certain steps of the research and writing process. For example,
 - a. Devote some time to topic selection and require students to write a brief statement of interest.
 - b. Require students to submit sample notes long before the due date and review proper citation.
 - c. Teach thesis development by having several students write their theses anonymously on the board for class discussion (Is it only a topic statement?, Is it a debatable assertion?).
 - d. Contrast excerpts from strong and weak papers by former students.
 - e. Require students to engage in peer response and/or submit drafts for instructor comments.

- f. Finally, explain the reason for the checkpoints: research and writing are complex activities so they can be completed most effectively through a gradual process of development. Thus, time management is crucial.
3. Control at least some of the sources student must use. Purchased or traded papers are less likely to meet requirements if certain sources, such as a few course readings, must be used.
4. Require students to keep all notes, sources, and/or drafts. This preliminary work can be either submitted with the final draft or made available at the instructor's request. State explicitly in your assignment that "No paper will be accepted for grading unless all notes, sources, and/or drafts are provided" or ". . . provided upon request."
5. Have students discuss their research and writing in either oral presentations or written commentaries.
6. Discuss research strategies within your discipline: What are the best databases?, Who are the experts?, and /or What are the best search terms?
7. Discuss the writing conventions of your discipline: Why is New Critical literary criticism written in the continuous present? Why do social scientists cite using APA that includes copyright dates? Why is "I" forbidden in most scientific writing?
8. Teach plagiarism explicitly and with scholarly rigor.
 - a. Compare the Napster mentality with Medieval assumptions about authorship when scribes copied unattributed manuscripts
 - b. Explain the nineteenth debate over copyright as printing presses transformed publishing into a commercial endeavor.
 - c. Discuss examples of blatant plagiarism and sloppy citation (see screen three of "Academic Honesty" in the Research section of the RLC web site).
 - d. Confront purchased papers by examining the "research aid" disclaimer at school.sucks.com (see the screen four of "Academic Honesty" in the Research section of the RLC web site).
9. Present citation positively as an academic convention. Rather than threaten students with penalties for plagiarism, present citation as a means for marking the student's achievements in research and thought. Explain that signal phrases, such as According to ____ and As _____ asserts, "signal" a student's good research. Then the writing that follows a citation again is marked as the student's own elaboration, reaction, application, his/her own good thinking. Thus, proper citation not only avoids punishment but also invites praise.
10. Finally, present writing and research as beneficial activities for personal, academic, and professional growth; try discussing one of the following quotations:

To be nobody-but-yourself—in a world which doing its best, night and day, to make you like everyone else—means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight. – ee cummings

Many of the students who come to my classes have been trained to collect facts; they act as if their primary job is to accumulate enough authorities. . . . They most often disappear behind the weight and permanence of their borrowed words, moving their pens, mouthing the words of others, allowing sources to speak through them unquestioned, unexamined. . . . [I want them to learn to bring] their judgments to bear on what they read and write, learning that they never leave themselves behind even when they write academic essays. – Nancy Sommers

The long run costs to business from inept writing have been estimated in the millions in slowed productivity, confused instructions, inexact reports, and defaulted contracts. The costs to individuals in diminished confidence, blasted hopes, and unfulfilled ambitions are incalculable. – Pearl Aldrich

Conclusion

In the last hour, I have been able to present an overview on plagiarism, but there are many more resources available to you on this campus. In addition to the RLC web site, the library offers an extensive guide for students called the “Information Skills Tutorial” on the home page of the library (go to <http://library.hartford.edu/llr>) as well as comprehensive list of sources at <http://library.hartford.edu/llr/services/plagweb.htm> – see Faculty Services and Plagiarism Web Sources. Finally, I would like to thank Kitty Tynan for suggesting some of the sources I have cited during this presentation.

Works Cited

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<http://globeandmail/servlet/story> (January 16, 2004).
- Harris, Robert. “Anti-Plagiarism Strategies for Research Papers.”
<http://www.virtualsalt.com/antiplag.htm> (April 8, 2001).
- Hayasaki, Erika. “2 Rs Left in Nigh School.” Los Angeles Times 5/19/2003 1.1
- Price, Monica. “Plagiarism Violations Drop 40 Percent.”
<http://www.arbiteronline.com/vnews/display> (February 2, 2004).
- Russell, David. Writing in the Academic Disciplines. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1991.

Faculty Services & Plagiarism Web Sources

University of Hartford Sources

Contact Kitty Tynan, Head of Reference Services in Mortensen Library, for additional information.

Sources about Plagiarism

- Anti-Plagiarism Strategies for Research Papers
- Avoiding Plagiarism (University of California, Davis)
- Avoiding Plagiarism (Purdue University Online Writing Lab)
- The Center for Academic Integrity
- Cheat Wave: Busting Online Plagiarism: Yahoo Internet Life, Wired Colleges 1999
- Cheating 101: Paper Mills and You (Coastal Carolina University)
- Cut and Paste Plagiarism (University of Illinois)
- EduTie.com
- Electronic Plagiarism Seminar (Le Moyne College)
- A Faculty Guide to Cyber-Plagiarism (University of Alberta)
- Instructor's Guide to Internet Plagiarism (Carlton University)
- JPlag: Detecting Software Plagiarism
- The Plagiarism Court: You be the Judge (Fairfield University)

Commercial Plagiarism Checkers

Note that these services are listed for informational purposes only. We have not evaluated any of them, and do not imply opinions on any by their inclusion or exclusion.

- Essay Verification Engine (<http://www.canexus.com/eve/index.shtml>)
- Glatt Plagiarism Services (<http://www.plagiarism.com/>)
- Plagiarized.com: The Instructors Guide to Internet Plagiarism (<http://www.plagiarized.com/index.shtml>)
- Plagiarism.org (<http://www.plagiarism.org>)
- PlagiServe (<http://www.plagiserve.com/>)
- turnitin.com (<http://www.turnitin.com>)
- WordCheck KeyWORD Software (<http://www.wordchecksyste.ms.com/>)

Specialized Service

- MOSS: A System for Detecting Software Plagiarism (free from UC/Berkeley): <http://www.cs.berkeley.edu/~aiken/moss.html>