How to stop Internet plagiarism

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Most postgraduates are involved in some kind of teaching and marking of student work. One area that is receiving increased attention is Internet plagiarism. This is an area of increasing worry for all of us within the higher education system. Although there is little evidence as to whether downloaded internet essays are any good and/or gain good marks, it is still a worry given the number of assignments that increasingly quote references from Web sources rather than journals or books. It may be the case that a lot of plagiarism is "innocent". Students appear to copy indiscriminately from a wide variety of sources and then fail to give due recognition. The root problem is that some students have absolutely no conception that copying is wrong. Further to this, they may not take on board that independent thinking is desired, and/or may be unsure about how to use referenced material. Many students are taught that it is acceptable to quote heavily from texts so long as it's referenced. We may be failing to convey the idea that essays are a vehicle for independent thought.

Having raised the potential problem of internet plagiarism, what can we do about it? Here are some practical tips.

Be vigilant - Being "on our guard" is never going to be enough to combat plagiarism on its own but it should still be done. We are all aware of some of the elementary mistakes students make in covering their tracks (e.g., inconsistent language). Lecturers need to consider the overall style of the writing. Does it match previous work? Is it consistent throughout the

essay? Plagiarism is rarely a case of copying from just one source and the sentences that 'splice' these sources usually stand out.

Look at the bibliography - Many internet sources lack adequate source referencing casting doubt on the integrity of the information. Large chunks of unreferenced material of doubtful relevance should therefore arouse our suspicion. It is equally true that lots of references to (valid) material unavailable to the student may arouse suspicions. If suspicion is aroused, talking with the student about their work could provide further evidence of the originality or lack of it. Indicating to students that suspicious essays may need to be orally defended may also act as a suitable deterrent.

Look for cultural inconsistencies - Many of the internet paper mills are American. Therefore there are some spellings ('behavior', center', 'color') and vocabulary ('sidewalk', 'closet') which will deviate from our own and students may simply overlook them and/or they are not picked up by spell-checkers. Furthermore, many of the reference sources may bear little relationship to our own reading lists. Therefore the bibliography should be inspected in student submissions.

Develop very focussed assessments - Many downloadable essays address fairly wide-ranging topics. Therefore, there is the challenge for us to define our essay questions more precisely. Essay titles that don't ask for the obvious material - and non-standard assessments - make plagiarism less likely to occur.

Change assessment strategies - It might well be that we need to change and/or adapt the way that we assess students in order to overcome plagiarism. Many lecturers have planned for plagiarism over recent years

by maintaining the use of exams (which can be creative) or designing coursework that is not of the traditional essay format (e.g. oral presentations).

Develop student writing skills - Since we may be failing to convey the idea that essays are a vehicle for independent thought, one solution may be to develop more positive strategies for training students into good study and writing habits. If this is embedded early in the curriculum, it may reduce (although it will never stop) plagiarism.

Be tough on students who are caught plagiarizing - Students need to be told in the strongest possible terms what plagiarism is. They need to know that plagiarism is passing off someone else's work or ideas as their own, and that it is strongly disapproved of in academic circles because it is theft. They need to be aware that universities take the issue of plagiarism very seriously and that it attracts severe sanctions. They need to know that they could jeopardize their degree by plagiarizing someone else's work. If students think universities are soft on plagiarism and that they are useless at catching them anyway, then they will take risks

Keep up with the available technology - Given that the internet is something that students will and should use, we need to inform students of how and when to use internet resources. Not only must we keep up to date with the appropriate technology, we should also keep pace with the issues that surround those technologies. Give students a list of essay bank sites. Some American universities actually give students a list of essay bank sites. If students realize that staff are aware of internet essay banks they may be less likely to abuse them. Whether we should encourage students

to seek out sample essays is a debatable point but it is something we can not afford to ignore.

Use search engines - We should tell students that we will put suspected plagiarism phrases into search engines. Let students know that if they can find it, we can find it. We can do little things like putting a suspected suspicious phrase into AltaVista and seeing if we get a match anywhere. In this sense, plagiarism has become easier to detect than it ever was pre-internet when it used to depend on our claim that we had an in-depth knowledge of the literature.

Use plagiarism-spotting software - There are now a number of organizations selling software that can test suspect work for authenticity. These include Glatt Plagiarism Services (www.plagiarism.com) and Plagiarism.org.

Hopefully this article will raise awareness of what is a very important issue and give you some ammunition in fighting a growing problem.

PsyPAG Conference 2003

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