

PLAGIARISM AND NEW MEDIA TECHNOLOGIES: COMBATING 'CUT 'N PASTE' CULTURE

Caroline Miall

Queensland University of Technology, AUSTRALIA

c.miall@qut.edu.au

Abstract

Whilst plagiarism has been around since pen was put to paper, the inextricable relationship that education now enjoys with new media technologies has seen its incidence increase to epidemic proportions. Plagiarism has become a blight on tertiary education, insidiously degrading the quality of degrees, largely thanks to ICTs providing students with ways to seamlessly misappropriate information. Many students are increasingly unsure how to avoid it and are being overseen by educators that cannot agree on what exactly constitutes academic dishonesty and how it should be effectively handled. This paper analyses the issues facing students and academics in light of new media in education and increasing moves to online learning. It considers the issues aggravating the problem; rising financial pressures, ambiguous cultural practices, practices in high school education; and seeks to provide a starting point for consistent, pedagogically sound approaches to the problem.

Keywords

plagiarism, plagiarism detection, academic dishonesty, academic integrity, cheating, intellectual property, copyright

Introduction

Whilst transforming and improving educational practices, new media technologies can simultaneously undermine academic rigour, and devalue the quality of degrees, by providing an environment where the act of plagiarism is almost effortless. In a study commissioned by the Department of Education, Service and Training (DEST) in 2001, all 40 Australian universities surveyed (out of a total of 43) are using the Web to some extent for teaching and learning purposes, with 90% of universities providing access to online journals (DEST Higher Education Group, 2001, p1). In this digital age, where so much manipulable information is readily available, plagiarism has become an issue of greater sensitivity and relevance to academia. It is the difficult task of universities across the globe to detect, address and prevent the growing incidence of plagiarism, increasing with direct proportion to the ubiquity of new media technologies for study resources and course delivery.

Whilst this study will focus on tertiary education, providing a valuable tool in educating the educator and student alike, the same paradigm will certainly apply to the substantive impact that new media, like the internet, has had on other arenas such as journalism, creative industries, business and government. Instead of academic integrity being at stake, in these arenas the death of originality results in shoddy reporting, copyright issues and patent violation, creating serious issues in our litigious society. Plagiarism in its various forms is a long-standing problem, however, it is one thing to

paraphrase poorly or fleece the odd paragraph from a textbook or journal article, and another to cobble together whole assignments after punching a few words into a search engine.

Of course, the search n' swipe method is by no means the only form of academic dishonesty that has been proliferated by the misemployment of new media tools. Electronic means of communication have made it simple for those wishing to profit from cheating to do so. 'Digital Paper Mills' (Grant, T., Jeffreys, J., Romano, V., Schlappi, K., 2002, p3) abound on the net where a student can have an assignment custom written or download one chosen from a multitude of topics.

Conflicting views exist among academics about plagiarism also, resulting in different perspectives on the gravity of the problem and what should be done about it. Some believe that there are few ideas of original origin, so that plagiarism is unavoidable and that the new evolution of this problem as fostered by new technologies is to be embraced, as it provides desperately needed academic challenges that can only improve pedagogical practices. (Hunt, R., 2002, p3)

The challenge of this paper is to analyse the weight of the problem in understanding what it is to plagiarise and what is new about an old problem in an age where education relies heavily on ICT's (Information Communication Technologies). It is necessary to look at universities' attempts at detection, prevention, and enforcement of policies in place; their efficacy and whether there are legal implications that apply. Also asked will be the question of which students cheat this way, why, and whether there are cultural issues at play in understanding what is acceptable and what is not.

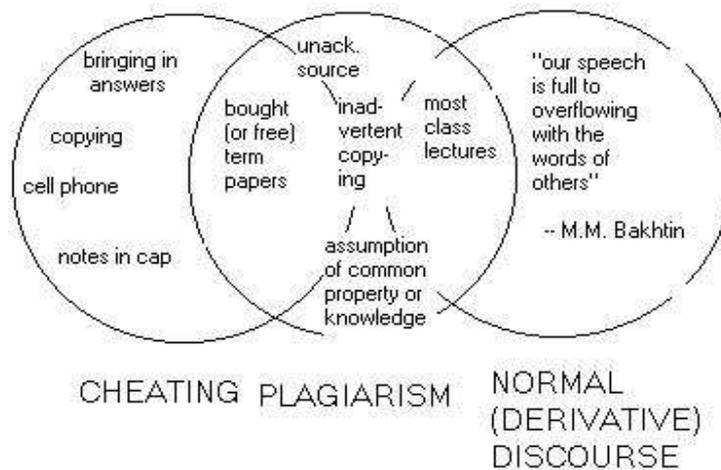
How Big is the Problem?

As a university administrator I was unaware of the prevalence of the problem until spot checks of assignments revealed that the students' practice of lifting large chunks of information directly from the web was rampant. An inestimable number of student's assignments were a veritable patchwork of pilfered information from the net, stitched together with a few words of their own. A marker's success in detection of such a practice may only lie in how familiar they are with the material and the degree of stealth that the student exercises in unifying the borrowed information, hence a dilemma in assessing the size of the issue. Some students, of course, don't manage this very well, their poor writing skills revealing why they plagiarise in the first place. Others, I imagine, manage to escape detection throughout the course of their degree. It was clear that to really take the problem in hand would require many hours of attention, which staff just didn't have.

A computer science professor, Professor Alex Aiken of University of California at Berkeley, who has had some success in developing plagiarism detection software called "Measure of Software Similarity" (or MMOS), explained in 1998 that there's a real problem, attributing it directly to the anonymity of electronic communication, the vast resources of the internet and the ever-multiplying speed of computers. "The fact that you can do it more quickly makes it easier to yield to an impulse." (Aiken., in Zack, I., 1998, p1). Detecting and measuring the problem is difficult since its various practices are enabled by a dozen different new abilities afforded us by new technologies, often used in combination. Certainly reports of incidences of plagiarism have increased - Virginia Tech noted the number of complaints rose from 80 to 280 in one year. (Zack, I., 1998, p1), but further complicating evaluation of the issue is the confusion that surrounds defining just *what* the problem is.

"It is often unclear as to who owns what information. It is not always possible to break up information into discrete pieces and give each an ownership tag. Similarly, it is often difficult to determine who "discovered" the information in the first place, and who can thus claim legal title to its "ownership". Far from being transparent, in an information and knowledge-rich society, what is "mine" and what is "thine" may become increasingly mysterious. (Hodgson, G., 2000, p89)

What Hodgson refers to here with regard to Intellectual Property in a 'knowledge economy' points, in part, to the root of the problem in academic plagiarism. There is much misunderstanding and disagreement among students *and* educators as to what constitutes cheating, and/or plagiarism; what is deliberate and what is inadvertent or perpetrated as a result of ignorance. Who draws the line in the sand that distinguishes emulation and paraphrasing from outright appropriation of information or ideas? Russ Hunt, in *Perspectives on Plagiarism* emphasises the need to focus on plagiarism as distinct from forms of cheating. Explaining what he terms a 'bizarre and, arguably, Western emphasis on "originality" in utterances, running counter to most language practice', Hunt offers the diagram below as a way of thinking about the situation (Hunt, R., 2002, p2) incorporating both old and new media versions of the problem.



What is New Plagiarism?

So, what of the nature of technology assisted plagiarism? The ways in which new technologies are encouraging a culture of 'cheating' are many, and vary in the degree of seriousness. Some are just old media or practices with a new vehicle of distribution, thanks to the internet, whilst others are far more subtle, but just as disturbing in degrading the process of critical thinking. "The New Plagiarism may be worse than the old because students now wield an Electronic Shovel which makes it possible to find and save huge chunks of information with little reading, effort or originality." (McKenzie, J., 1998, p1)

Cut 'n Paste

The cases I have detected have predominantly been offenders of this nature, searching for relevant information then borrowing whole passages with no quotation marks, little or no referencing, or deliberately misleading references used to make proving a serious case nearly impossible. This practice is directly facilitated by use of the internet, and confusion about what is acceptable, seemingly due to the nature of the internet, as explained by Joan Gajadhar of The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand:

A book has a physical tangible presence, whereas the internet is almost ephemeral. Without exception a book has a specific warning such as “all rights reserved.” Alas, this is not a prominent feature of the Internet. (Gajadhar, J., 1998, p2).

Digital Tools

Further to the cut ‘n paste phenomenon enabled by the coupling the internet and a word processor, basic functions on all PCs make clever plagiarising far simpler. One student copied an essay on computer technologies and intelligence operations from an American web-site. Using *Find and Replace* function on MS Word, she substituted the “United States” for “Australia”. Unfortunately for her, the marker was familiar with the site. This is an example of a clumsy attempt, but used more covertly, a more cunning plagiarist will often get away with it.

“With inexpensive and easy to use OCR (optical character recognition) software and a scanner, printed text can be quickly imported into a word processor for “doctoring” (McPhee, L., 2004? P1). This practice effectively makes a tangible source of information (i.e. a book) into a digital one ready for manipulation. Use of information in a digital form lends itself to reproduction. There is no longer even a need for rewriting by hand or retyping, as a student is able to duplicate information or entire assignments with no evidence of having done so, the nature of digital technology removing the potential for degradation from copy to copy.

Digital Paper Mills

“These sites are really only a new advertising medium. The services being offered are no different from those that have been offered before”, explains Tom Rocklin of University of Iowa. (Rocklin, T., In Lathrop, A., Foss, K., 2000, p25)

It is true there is nothing new about this type of plagiarism, as students have been able to purchase an academic paper for years. But it is certainly the most deliberate and disturbing form and the problem now is that, as a vehicle for its success, the internet and email have substantially increased the problem for universities. A student can now access papers for free, or pay for a custom written assignment per page. A quick search on Google© for “Free Term Papers” turns up a staggering 4,900,000 sites! Ironically, a search on the first of these listed – *Other Peoples Papers* <http://www.oppapers.com/> for assignments on Plagiarism resulted in seven possible papers to purchase, for example:

Plagiarism is Theft

[[Click here to purchase this paper](#)]

A 7 page paper which argues that plagiarism is wrong and is actually a form of theft.

Bibliography lists 7 sources.

Each of these sites has their own disclaimer, usually stating that they in no way condone plagiarism and they are to be used for ‘research’ purposes only. For example:

Disclaimer

1. *OPPapers.com does not condone plagiarism. OPPapers.com does not force anyone to turn in papers from this website. We are simply a research center for students having problems finding ideas for their research papers.*
2. *All text on this website is property of OPPapers.com. By donating a paper, the rights to the paper become the property of OPPapers.com and it's affiliates.*

See also: <http://www.chuckiii.com/topsites/index.shtml> for a list of the top twenty-five sites available

See also: <http://crpit.com/confpapers/CRPITV30Zobel.pdf> Case Study from RMIT - "Uni Cheats Racket"

Detection and Deterrence

Search Engines

This issue presents academics with the laborious and burdensome (not to mention unpleasant) task of exposing and confronting offenders. The most accessible method is to turn the technology around and use internet browsers to detect word strings and paragraphs that may not be written in the student's style of writing. Relying on the willingness of the marker to identify patterns in the student's style, and affording time to the searches, this is often not a realistic expectation given the time already consumed by marking. One might also consider comparing the grades of examinations against those of research papers to see which assignments to check, but again this is a time consuming practice that is hardly sustainable.

Detection Software

Many are fighting fire with fire by subscribing to merchants in, what would appear to be, a growing industry of plagiarism detection systems now available. New applications of remotely accessed and stand alone desktop software have emerged in response to plagiarism (also indicating the scale of the problem). These programs use technology such as 'digital fingerprinting' or 'document source analysis' (<http://www.plagiarism.org> from Turnitin.com) based on vast databases formed from internet resources, paper mills and previously submitted assignments.

In 2003 The University of Sydney's Teaching and Learning Committee reported on the software that is currently available and being used by Australian universities. The committee found indications that the number of these packages available was decreasing rather than increasing, listing a number that are no longer in business (Uni of Syd T&L Committee, 2003, p2), suggesting that this kind of software was not popular among institutions for various reasons, or that a monopoly was developing. Indeed this is the apparent intention of "Turnitin.com" founder, who is reported as saying the company intended to "have it all wrapped up... There will be no room for anyone else, not even Microsoft, to provide a similar type of service because we will have *the* database." (Masur, K., 2001, p3 author's italics). Whether it is because of its efficiency or aggressive marketing is arguable, but Turnitin is certainly the software most frequently referred to by articles on the topic.

Reports generated by such software pose their own problems. They may be effective in detecting the words of others but cannot, in many cases, distinguish properly cited from uncited texts, necessitating intervention by the marker (Uni Syd T&L Committee, 2003, p11) effectively defeating the purpose of employing the system.

(See also: *Turnitin.com, a Pedagogic Placebo for Plagiarism* at - <http://bedfordstmartins.com/technotes/techtiparchive/ttip060501.htm>)

Teaching, Learning and Assessment Practices

By far the most positive and pedagogically sound response to the problem has been two-fold; the need for very clear guidelines to students, providing programmes embedding explicit examples of unacceptable practices, but maybe more importantly, approaching assessment in a way that makes plagiarism a far less probable outcome.

As Russ Hunt persists in *Perspectives on Plagiarism*, the problem is to be welcomed, forcing the creation of more imaginative and rhetorically sound writing situations (Hunt, R., 2002, p3). In

general, there is consensus among educators that assessment set around case studies and a student's own experiences are effective in removing the problem. Academics at RMIT attributed a reduction in plagiarism to students using their own experiences and requiring them to engage and apply ideas, rather than providing a description of them (Gajadhar, J., 1998, p6). If changes such as these are not made to assessment practices, then as observed by Lathrop and Foss, the bottom line for students will continue to be (1) Plagiarism is easy, especially with new technologies, (2) fewer than 10% are caught, and (3) most of those who are caught get off without serious penalty. "The byword appears to have changed from *Don't cheat* to *Don't get caught*." (Lathrop, A., Foss, K., 2000, p1)

Are University Responses Effective, and what are the Legal Implications, if any?

Ambiguity prevails over how to handle the offence as much as it does over what constitutes plagiarism. Each educational institution has its own policy outlined on its websites and handbooks; however, interpretation of these can vary greatly.

Whilst universities' policies are all much the same, with penalties ranging from failure of the unit to expulsion, the offence may well be dealt with solely by a sympathetic tutor, or at the other extreme, reported as serious to a faculty Academic Misconduct Committee; merely exacerbating the problem by sending different messages to students about what some get away with.

It is my recent observation that, as reported incidences increase, the time afforded to the issue, and the severity of the penalty awarded, decreases. Faculties simply do not have the time and resources to effectively deal with the problem. It is too great. Also, as noted by Piety, "we assign beleaguered adjuncts to instruct them (students) and thereby almost guarantee that most instances of plagiarism will not be caught." (Piety, M.G., 2002, p3)

Legal Implications

If university policy is proving ineffective in fighting plagiarism, then what are the legal implications? This question is not only being tackled by education with regard to the net and Intellectual Property, as there is an unclear distinction of what is punishable by law and what is merely unethical. 'Copyright' is a legal term, but 'Plagiarism' is not (Coffey, M.A., Casey, K.E., 2001, p77), even though (noted in the same text) "copyright applies to all formats of information, including electronic. The laws are designed to protect the expression of an idea." (Coffey, M.A., Casey, K.E., 2001, p73). And from James Cook University policy on Student's and Intellectual Property: "Using the ideas of others without acknowledgement may well amount to plagiarism, but that in itself does not constitute a breach of any law or any policy dealing with intellectual property rights." (JCU, 2003, p2).

Clearly, the purpose of the terms copyright and Intellectual Property are difficult to clarify with comparison to that of plagiarism as well as being met with some amount of disagreement, or in the very least, ambiguity due to the moral and ethical responsibilities and dues.

Put succinctly, copyright indicates that permission need be sought before reproduction of a work or idea, and hence, someone can be in breach of copyright by using excessive amounts of a work, and not be committing plagiarism, if they have cited the creator. Similarly, "extensive copying with permission, but without attribution would be plagiarism, but not copyright infringement." (NCSU Libraries, 2003, p1). Fair use clauses in copyright laws prevent all cases of reproduction from being outright breaches, for example, for educational purposes; short quotations of a work offend neither plagiarism nor copyright laws if properly cited.

Aside from the practical differences, however, the fundamental distinction between the two concepts is that copyright refers to the particular way in which a concept is articulated; 'Copyright covers the expression of an idea, not the idea itself – this is called the idea/expression or fact/expression dichotomy.' (Wikipedia, 2005)

'Copyright law only covers the particular form or manner in which an idea or information has been manifested. It is not designed or intended to cover the actual concepts, facts, styles or techniques which may be embodied in or represented by the ideas or information.'
(Wikipedia, 2005)

The legality of the existence of companies involved in the business of plagiarism has also been challenged with institutions attempting to shut down digital paper mills via legal channels. Boston University filed a federal law suit, under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act, to stop companies from selling term papers over the internet in Massachusetts (Zack, I., 1998, p1). They were unsuccessful, and one only has to view the millions of term paper sites online to realise that attempts at litigation of this sort have failed. (*For details of BU Law suit, see also: <http://articles.student.com/article/bulawsuit>*)

Legal implications for software detection companies also prove problematic. A company such as Turnitin.com will retain a copy of all papers that are submitted for scanning, adding it to their own database for future detection purposes. Without student's permission, this raises issues of violation of a student's own copyright entitlements and possible invasion of privacy. (Foster, 2002 in Uni Sydney T&L Committee, 2003, p7).

(For example; see also: *McGill student wins fight over anti-cheating website*
http://www.cbc.ca/stories/2004/01/16/mcgill_turnitin030116)

Which Students Plagiarise, and Why?

Most academics recognise that a minority of students plagiarise, prompted by laziness, desire for a higher grade or fear of failure. Changing fiscal pressures can point to why students choose to plagiarise with rising financial burdens on students they now have more at stake. "We put students in what is sometimes an intolerable economic position and encourage them to view cheating as an acceptable method of ameliorating these conditions." (Piety, M.G., 2002, p3).

Paying more for education and supporting themselves through it, time-poor students may be more tempted to take such short cuts. International students in particular, pay a hefty amount for a foreign university education (often viewed with higher status than a degree attained at home) and must complete within a timeframe dictated by a study visa. The possibility of failure must pose immense pressure on these individuals, creating the potential for a cultural divide in the issue. Not only the financial burden, but accepted cultural norms complicate the problem for the growing population of international students in English speaking institutions. Particularly in Asia, students are encouraged to memorise and reproduce respected authors as a sign of intelligence and good judgement. (Thompson, C., & Williams, P., 1995 In Lathrop, A., Foss, K., 2000, p25). In light of increasing reliance on international enrolments for funding of our universities, teachers will need to be educated in methods to help foreign students overcome cultural misunderstandings about academically dishonest behaviour.

Conclusion

Ultimately, regardless of anti-plagiarism tactics employed, the problem will not vanish; certainly not whilst the research essay remains necessarily an important part of academic study, but in light of the

new technologies making it consequently easier and more concealable, plagiarism must be addressed strategically. It is apparent that no one can even be sure how severe the problem is, given the difficulty in identifying offenders. Also academic plagiarism, it would seem, falls outside the letter of the law. Disparate judgements on what amount to an offence coupled with a variety of, often inconsistent, responses and penalties cloud the issue even further. Whilst detection technology developed to remedy the situation is an option, it is somewhat of a bandaid solution that brings with it its own issues.

Essentially, the problem is providing universities with an opportunity to think carefully about assessment and how they request students to go about researching the writing of others, and subsequently synthesizing ideas. Requisite submission of a research proposal for major essays should help outline a process of investigation for both the student and the marker. In addition, the methods of evaluating a student's learning must necessarily be broader, possibly combining shorter papers with such tasks as oral presentations, and analysis of case studies and drawing on the student's own experiences. This approach to assessment should encourage students to understand and evaluate points of view and to form their own, whilst properly citing the sources which led them there. Such methods could limit the number of sources that a student will use to a smaller and more valuable list of resources, making the copy and paste problem less of a temptation. Clearly, staff and students must also be well educated in what it means to plagiarise and how they might be at risk of crossing the line, and ultimately, individuals need to understand the value of the assessment they are set for their long term goals.

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