

The plague of plagiarism

Dennis Sleigh



Is there a teacher alive today who has not detected cheating somewhere in pupils' work? I doubt it.

There is nothing new about cheating. You only have to read the biblical account of Esau and Jacob (Genesis 27) to see how schemers thousands of years ago twisted the rules to get their own way. As teachers, our problem is less likely to be the fraudulent gaining of a birthright; instead, one of our major issues is copying. In an age of euphemisms, it is important to name this issue correctly. We might call it plagiarism but it all comes down to cheating and stealing.

It was Bob Hope, I believe, who first said "The world today is no worse than it was 50 years ago; today, news just travels faster." While this is not

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the time to debate that claim, we can probably agree there are certainly more ways today to cheat, while virtues like honesty, integrity and trust are under attack. Certainly, if you look at intellectual theft, you realise it is easy to commit, yet challenging to detect – even though detection processes are rapidly progressing.

The major factor that impacts on plagiarism is the incredible availability of information in copyable format. When I was a primary school

child, I borrowed a neighbour's encyclopedia and copied lots of material to write down on the standard piece of cardboard that one used in those days to present a Social Studies project. A generation later, my children were able to photocopy library texts, and then cut the copies, pasting the results onto similar sheets of cardboard. Today, my grandchildren – if the mood struck them – could call up the information on the net, select certain parts of it and reproduce it and include it in their HSIE or SOSE report. While I was praised for my handwriting and correct copying and my children were praised for their creative presentation, my grandchildren would probably be cited for plagiarism. It's funny how times change.

What is plagiarism?

Put simply, plagiarism means using someone else's work and claiming it as your own, without proper attribution. A very simple rule of thumb says "If it not yours and you need to use it, attribute it." Imitation might indeed be a high form of flattery, but it won't pay the original author's living expenses. Of course, like most simple rules, we need to flesh them out so that no loopholes remain for those people who thrive on flouting the standards. That is why educational institutions of all types today have developed rules and regulations about this topic, and this exercise has spread to junior school – perhaps on the basis that if people are taught properly in their early education, they might better understand the issues.

The wisdom of this approach is seen once we realise that many instances of plagiarism are inadvertently encouraged by teachers who give their pupils the wrong advice on copying. I heard a respected teacher tell the class "If you copy the work of other authors, e.g., from the internet, you must change at least some of the words to make the passage your own." I have also heard in a classroom "Since the internet is 'public domain' you can copy anything you want from it and use it as you see fit." This situation is compounded when we hear expressions such as 'open source' and 'creative commons licence' without finding out what they mean.

Are there levels of seriousness?

Yes, there are different levels of seriousness, just as there are different levels of bullying in schools, but this does not mean we can ignore the minor ones. Instead, by taking a reasonable stand on minor offences, we might be able to reduce the larger ones. It is clear that copying a passage about wheat production in the Riverina for a Year Four assignment does not compare to copying chapters from another work for your doctoral dissertation. However, out of fairness to our students and to society, we must work to prevent even minor examples of plagiarism. Universities continue to strengthen their stance on this matter, aided by sophisticated detection processes available today, but schools must get on board too, even primary schools.

If someone is caught plagiarising, the punishment will vary according to three common criteria: the seriousness of the offence, the academic level of the offender, and the financial implications of the action. Copying one unreported sentence can be enough to ring alarm bells in plagiarism detectors but it might earn nothing more than a stern warning, depending on the importance of the sentence in a person's submission. As noted previously, the offences of a graduate student will probably be viewed more seriously than those of a primary student, although this might be influenced by the

history of the offender – second and subsequent offences clearly warrant stronger penalties. Finally, if the offence has been profitable for the offender (e.g., used to gain a qualification or a job) the consequences might be harsher; if the action led to someone actually losing income or position or other benefit because of the plagiarist's theft, then again, who would object if the punishment took this into account?

When it comes to identifying the types of plagiarism, there is a huge variation among modern commentators. Even materials written 15 years ago have a much briefer list of possible lapses, so it is necessary to access current materials – particularly those produced by universities. Unquestionably, one of the most thorough of the available publications comes from *www.turnitin.com*. In their White Paper: *The Plagiarism Spectrum*, this company lists 10 breaches and ranks them according to their prevalence and their impact. The document rightly claims "*The Plagiarism Spectrum* is a guide to help educators, students, academics, and writers recognise the various forms of plagiarism. This spectrum moves plagiarism beyond the black-and-white definition of 'literary theft' to one that captures the nuances of how plagiarism can take form." (White Paper p.4)

Readers not familiar with the work of Turnitin might like to search the web for more

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details; it is a resource that is being widely used by universities and secondary schools today as a means of overcoming the threat posed by the advancing menace of plagiarism. As the White Paper notes "...the lines of what constitutes plagiarism are blurring as the Internet reshapes culture and education." (White Paper p.3)

But do they know?

As teachers, our usual emphasis is educative rather than punitive, and so we are understandably reluctant to charge in on a crusade to search for evil plagiarists. Thus it is reasonable that we ask whether our students are committing this offence deliberately or accidentally. While university and high school handbooks sometimes come across as punitive in keeping with the seriousness of what is a growing offence, other voices are less condemnatory. One empathetic paper worth reading comes from an Australian educator, Di Wilson, who asks "...how do we move from emotive language and punitive consequences to help our students avoid plagiarism?" (in EQ Australia, Winter 2006, p.19) Likewise, US academic and writer Robert Harris places at least part of the responsibility back on teachers, urging us to set assignments that actively discourage cheating. He offers concrete ideas to present assignments which help ensure that "...an off-the-shelf paper or a paper written for another class or a friend's paper will not fulfill the requirements. Only a newly written paper will." (<http://www.virtualsalt.com/antiplag.htm>). Harris suggests that by using such strategies teachers can "... help encourage students to value the assignment and to do their own work."

For those who think there is no excuse for ignorance, perhaps they could measure their own level of knowledge by completing the plagiarism quiz prepared by the University of New South Wales to see if their own knowledge is as complete as they might believe <file://localhost/http://www.lc.unsw.edu.au/plagiarism:plagquiz.html> nine straightforward questions will reveal any gaps in our awareness – perhaps helping us to be more understanding of alleged student ignorance.

Central to both Wilson's and Harris' approach to plagiarism is the desire to overcome the problem rather than to punish the offender. They challenge us to understand why students cheat, and to increase our own knowledge of the offence as a prelude to educating our students. Neither writer tolerates deliberate deception but they imply we must try to raise true awareness of plagiarism.

"Most students who plagiarise do so unintentionally, usually because they don't have the skills to avoid over-reliance on the work of others or because they aren't sure what constitutes plagiarism." This is the stated view of UNSW in a brief paper on academic integrity and plagiarism (<https://student.unsw.edu.au/>

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plagiarism) and I suspect that it would widely accepted. The logical consequence of this claim is that educational institutions must provide opportunities for students to develop such skills. The paper then suggests students must learn what plagiarism is, learn how it occurs, and develop the academic skills that will allow them to avoid it. If this is true in universities, it is even more important that schools also confront the issue – and that includes primary schools. We must ingrain correct habits while students are open to the process.

There is no point in complaining (as we often justly do) that the curriculum is already overcrowded; the reality is that this is a major issue in the new technological age in which we find ourselves. Our predecessors might have been able to avoid it, but that was before the technology existed that allows our students to access materials in a way that almost invites unethical copying. Unless we address it, our pupils will have refined the art of plagiarism long before they get to post-school education – and I for one don't want to be operated on by a doctor who got through university by "culling the cloud" rather than studying seriously as his forbears did.

Getting the message across

One starting point is to explain the casualties of such theft. Perhaps when students discover that plagiarism is not a victimless crime, this might make an impact. They need to hear that the person who really did the work – the author, the inventor, the speaker – gets no rewards for stolen work. They also need to know that other students, genuine workers willing to put in the effort required for success, are thwarted by this offence, and end up unable to compete fairly; it is akin to athletes on steroids winning medals or trophies, depriving the honest competitors of their reward. Furthermore, the perpetrator of this fraud might seem to win (until they are caught) but in fact they are simply becoming more talented in cheating, theft and dishonesty, hardly the skills that mature people would seek.

It is also worth remembering that once a person has been revealed as a cheat, it is very difficult to lose that reputation. Good reputations are hard to gain, but they are even harder to regain.

Detecting offenders

When I was doing my undergraduate study, a colleague in a Medieval History unit, said he always fleshed out his bibliographies by making up authors and titles. He explained that with so much having been written in the field, no lecturer could be on top of it all; he added three or four fictitious books to each listing and as far as I know, he was never detected.

Today, this act of plagiarism could be detected even with a cursory check by a lecturer using a web browser.

Other hints by which bogus work is detected include the difference in literary style between plagiarised sections and the actual work of the student; the presence of references in the phony section to illustrations that are not in the presented work; a bibliography without reasonably current inclusions (suggesting the material has been copied from a much earlier paper found in some 'paper mill'); and inherent contradictions between the stolen passage and the rest of the paper. If in doubt, a teacher can always ask a student to explain a passage and see just how well it has been understood. To address staff concerns about plagiarism, have a staffroom conversation to collect as many indicators as possible – and then warn students that you are all on the look-out for such signs.

At secondary level, I have found that the simple expedient of taking six or eight consecutive words from a suspected infraction and entering these in a web searcher will bring up the original source, assuming the work is plagiarised, even if the canny student has made one or two changes. Far more sophisticated processes, of course, are now available. I have mentioned Turnitin but alternatives also exist. Universities and schools (as well as publishers, government departments and others willing to pay the relevant fees) can submit student essays, theses, texts and so on, and through the marvels of modern technology, they can discover with a high level of confidence whether the work is original.

The problem of plagiarism is serious, and it will not go away. To protect our students from the risks involved, to defend creative people from theft, and to guarantee intellectual integrity in our schools, we cannot fail to confront it.

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