

Teaching Students about Plagiarism: An Internet Solution to an Internet Problem

by *Eleanour Snow*

The Internet has changed the way students research and write. Gone are the days of index cards with main ideas on one side and the source on the back. Students can research and write without ever touching a piece of paper until the final copy comes off the printer. They get most of their information from the Internet, and they do not view the Internet the same way they view a book (Townley and Parsell 2004). The Internet is somehow anonymous; there is no author, publisher, and copyright date. While they know using words from a book is wrong, they may not consider a Web site to be intellectual property (Frand [2000](#)).

Virtual libraries further blur the boundaries. While some research material has been available electronically from the first days of the Internet, libraries are putting more and more material on the Web. For example, the University of Texas made a move this fall toward a bookless library system (Deahl [2005](#)). They currently have 60,000 volumes online and are working to make their whole collection available electronically. While this move will improve access to information, it will also increase the probability of plagiarism because digital information is so easy to copy.

In what follows, I diagnose the problem of plagiarism in higher education with regard to student and faculty perceptions; I then address the role that online technology should play not only in the detection of plagiarism but also in the proactive prevention of plagiarism in the form of online tutorials. In doing so, I provide examples of my own use of such a tutorial as well as other tutorials that have helped to address this problem. While such practices offer vital strategies for educators, I believe they should be considered within the larger context of institutional policies that ensure consistent standards and practice for faculty and students.

Student Perceptions and Performance

There are many proposed reasons for the general increase of plagiarism in student writing, but prevalent among them is the notion that students do not know how to avoid it (Roig 1997; Price 2002; Robinson-Zanartu et al. 2005). Most students understand that copying a paper directly is wrong. However, they often lack the judgment to know how to avoid less obvious forms of plagiarism (Price 2002) or how to recognize it when they see it (Roig 1997).

In a 2002 survey at Northumbria University, 71% of faculty and 74% of students replied that they consider copying a few paragraphs from a source to be common (Hart and Friesner [2004](#)). In a 2004 survey of U.S. college faculty, 44% report an increase in plagiarism since the Internet has become widely used (Jones and Johnson-Yale [2005](#)). At the same time, student writing has suffered. One of the survey authors, Steve Jones, elaborates on this problem in an interview for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, noting that 42% of professors report a decline in the quality of student writing while only 22% report an improvement (Young [2005](#)). I have experienced this decline in my own classes; students do not work hard enough either to understand their sources or to synthesize the collected information into their own work. Thus their writing reflects too little of their own thinking. Even when they have managed to use their own words, they often commit plagiarism of ideas.

At the same time, I have dealt with increasing numbers of papers over the years that display more fundamental misunderstandings of what plagiarism entails. My first reaction was to impose stricter penalties for cheating, but that did not work; I continued to have more student papers every semester that were copied directly from the Internet. Some were blatant, making no attempt to hide the misappropriation. One student

even copied the words "click here for an animation of..." The paper that changed my approach, however, involved a really good job of editing. The student had cut and pasted sentences and paragraphs from several different Internet sources, and she had done so in such a way that she produced a coherent and "well-written" paper. It was three pages, single-spaced, and only seven words of the text were original. I found it (this was before [Turnitin](#)) because another student had done a less elegant job of copying, and I recognized some of the same sentences in that student's paper. But when the former student came to see me about her F, she was shocked. A graduating senior with a 3.7 GPA, she had always written this way, and she said she had no idea there was anything improper about it. I concluded that either she was a very accomplished liar or we were failing our students miserably. I decided to take a more proactive approach to teaching students proper research and writing techniques, beginning with this student and her rewrite of that assignment.

Faculty Perceptions and Responses

The standard definition of plagiarism is a person's use of other people's ideas or words without attribution. Most professional academics think they have a pretty good idea of what that means. However, evidence suggests that the definition of plagiarism and how we view it is not entirely clear (Price 2002). There are degrees of plagiarism—from a deliberate attempt to mislead to an inadvertent use of a familiar phrase. Faculty members do not always agree on what constitutes a serious breach of ethics and what implies incidental plagiarism (Robinson-Zanartu et al. 2005). As a consequence, responses to plagiarism, generally left to the discretion of the faculty member, vary widely.

For example, Robinson-Zanartu et al. (2005) surveyed 270 university faculty, presenting 10 different cases of plagiarism varying in degree, source, and use. In every case faculty response varied, but the most widely varying response regarded a case in which the assignment was to produce a Web site, and the student submitted a project in which 75% of the writing came from material written by students in previous classes. In this case, 28% of faculty respondents would have the student redo the assignment while 26% would give the student a failing grade for the course—certainly a widely divergent response. In addition, 13% would not report the incident and 41% would not expect sanctions at the university level, whereas 30% think it should be reported at the college or university level and 43% consider it serious enough to warrant probation, suspension, or expulsion. Clearly faculty are not in agreement about the severity of or the appropriate response to plagiarism.

Meanwhile, faculty have more information than ever about the plagiarism their students undertake. Universities are increasingly turning to electronic plagiarism detection as a way to catch and deter plagiarism, and such technology can be very effective. A study at Harvard University (Braumoeller and Gaines 2001) concluded that one in eight students plagiarize even when they are sternly warned not to; however, when they were warned that a plagiarism detection device would be used, plagiarism nearly disappeared: Only 1 in 151 students turned in a plagiarized paper. Perhaps plagiarism detection is so popular today because of its easy use. Electronic plagiarism detection software searches the source students most often use—the Internet—and then provides a report with the percentage of plagiarized text, including the source and thereby giving tangible evidence professors can use to impose sanctions.

While electronic plagiarism detection can help address the problem, it still falls short of preventing the problem because it fails to teach students the skills of information analysis, synthesis, writing, and editing. Moreover, Townley and Presnall (2004) point out that although the technology of catching plagiarism currently has the upper hand, the technology of cheating will eventually evolve to beat it—which will lead to more sophisticated detection systems, leading in turn to better cheating systems, and so on ad infinitum. The solution, they argue, must address why students plagiarize, and it must contain strategies to address both why and how to avoid plagiarism; others agree that a more proactive approach is required (Robinson-Zanartu et al. 2005; Devlin 2006).

Internet Solutions to an Internet Problem: Online Tutorials

In response to increasing plagiarism in the courses I teach, I developed a tutorial about plagiarism. Because several of my courses are online, it was important that the tutorial be self-contained, provide feedback, and keep the students interested. My goals were fourfold:

1. To increase student awareness of plagiarism and the penalties for it.
2. To teach through examples how to paraphrase material properly.
3. To teach through examples how to use quotation properly.
4. To teach when and how to use citation.

I deliberately left out formatting citations since styles vary between disciplines. I find that most students are familiar with at least one citation style, and I am content to let them use the style with which they are familiar.

First Iteration: Word Document, Blackboard Quiz

The tutorial was originally produced as a downloadable document with a simple quiz, delivered through [Blackboard](#)'s courseware package. I began to use this form of the tutorial in 2004. It was simple and effective. Students responded positively; they felt they learned some important distinctions, and incidents of unintentional plagiarism dropped. The tutorial contained examples of proper and improper paraphrasing and of proper and improper citation, drawn directly from former student assignments. The format, however, was very dry, and since it was linked to my classroom space in Blackboard, it was hard to make the tutorial available to a wider audience.

Second Iteration: Interactive Web-Tutorial

Students get most of their information online, so it makes sense to use that technology to educate them about how to use the information. To this end, an [online version](#) of the tutorial I created was developed with the support of the University of South Florida's ([USF](#)) Center for 21st Century Teaching Excellence; Neil Gomes of the Center did the Web design and production. The interactive tutorial is much more interesting to students. They can skip to the parts they need, get feedback about their understanding, and see real examples taken from my classes.

The first interactive Web version of the tutorial launched in Spring 2005, and the current version was completed the following summer. The Center added an [introductory scenario](#) that illustrates how the lack of critical skills can affect a student in the long term. Neil Gomes used photographs and names to make the content more real. The response from the students is positive—they like it, and they learn from it.

I use the tutorial in conjunction with electronic plagiarism detection. I instruct students to work through the tutorial before they turn in any written work. Not all of them do. The first time students are caught plagiarizing, I send them to the tutorial again. Because I began using the tutorial and the plagiarism detection at the same time, it is difficult to quantify the effect of the tutorial; however, the two measures together have reduced plagiarism in my classes from 10% to 2% overall. In addition, students who did plagiarize and then completed the tutorial did not repeat their poor performance.

Other Tutorials

Our tutorial is by no means the only online source for students and faculty struggling with plagiarism. Duke University has an [online guide](#) explaining plagiarism and how to avoid it and a [comprehensive outline of research practices](#) that teaches students step-by-step how to complete a research paper properly. Both of these sites contain excellent information and examples and are easy to navigate.

Dalhousie University has a [site](#) that links to many other university sites with examples and advice about plagiarism. It organizes a lot of information in a navigable format so that students and faculty can compare

ideas across academia.

Two of the best tutorials I have seen with examples and quizzes come from the University of Memphis and Taylor University. Both of these sites contain excellent information in a clear format. Both quizzes contain passages for the reader to analyze with respect to plagiarism, and they provide feedback on the answers. The [Taylor site](#) is more visually interesting while the [Memphis site](#) offers more options in the quiz and therefore requires more thinking.

The Need for an Institutional Response

Online tutorials, such as the one I have created and the others highlighted here, are an important step toward changing the focus from catching the cheaters to educating the students. At the same time however, universities need to address the inconsistencies in defining and applying policy as it relates to plagiarism. Faculty need to agree on what constitutes plagiarism and how to respond to it; they need to give a consistent message to students, with clear expectations and consequences that are universally applied; and they need to communicate with each other so that students cannot plead ignorance of the standards each time they encounter a new professor.

Devlin (2006) recently highlighted one such institution-wide approach to reducing plagiarism at Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne. The [Swinburne program](#) involves educating students about academic norms and expectations in writing, designing assessments that minimize the opportunity for and possibility of plagiarism, and enforcing a strict policy to discover, punish, and re-educate plagiarists. Online tutorials can be an important part of such a program since they can be easily accessed by students, they teach a common standard, and they can convey expectations and consequences in an interactive format. In conjunction with comprehensive programs such as the one implemented at Swinburne University of Technology, the widespread use of online tutorials should reduce incidents of plagiarism.

Conclusion

Educators facing the substantial challenges of the electronic age will face increasing pressures to ensure that the student writing they receive is free from plagiarism, whether in the form of misappropriated language or misappropriated ideas from the Internet. Rather than adopting online technology only to detect plagiarism, such educators may best employ such technology in a more proactive fashion to guarantee that their students fully understand what constitutes plagiarism in their work. Online tutorials in conjunction with clearly established norms and policies at the institutional level will provide a much stronger foundation for educators in this regard. Most importantly, students will learn accepted academic and ethical practice—vital knowledge for their academic and professional success and imperative for their personal development as responsible citizens of an evolving, increasingly digital, global community.

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