
What kinds of solutions can we find for plagiarism?

Jude Carroll

Summary

Plagiarism is probably increasing in HE and worries about it certainly are. Although many would like the ever growing number of electronic detection tools to solve the problem, this kind of 'catch and punish' approach will be less effective than a more holistic review of course design and assessment. Practical suggestions are offered alongside useful detection sites.

Biography

Jude Carroll works as a Staff Developer at Oxford Brookes University. Her work on plagiarism and parallel interest in international students has led to invitations nationally and internationally to consider how best to ensure students get credit for work they themselves have done.

Keywords

Plagiarism, assessment, course design, academic dishonesty, induction

Plagiarism: a cause for concern?

There are few published references to plagiarism in the UK before 1995, yet in June 2000 Laurie Taylor's THES column referred to it twice. In the same month, a national conference on it overbooked by 50% and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) made recommendations for good practice. See the QAA Code of Practice on Assessment at <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/public/COP/COPaosfinal/genprin.htm#coa>.

Academics are probably right to worry. A 1995 study called 'Undergraduate Cheating: who does what and why' (*Studies in Higher Education* 20:2) found that 64% of students questioned about academic dishonesty reported they themselves had copied with knowledge, 66% paraphrased without references and 54% copied without references. In the intervening years, estimates of how much cheating is going on, though problematic to confirm, have grown ever more alarmist. Fintan Culwin of South Bank University called the problem 'overwhelming' in July 2000 (*The Daily Telegraph* 3 July 2000 p. 8).

Anecdotally, a colleague in a Midland university recently wanted to experiment with an electronic detection tool designed to spot plagiarism and told students he would be doing so. Seventeen out of 50 students still submitted work that did not 'pass' this electronic test and most proved to be unacceptable in the strictest sense of 'passing off someone else's work as your own'. So 40% plagiarised even though they knew it would be checked.

Whatever the current level, plagiarism is bound to increase, in part because of new technology. Jim Evans from the University of Warwick in a recent paper on what he calls 'the new plagiarism' comments: 'Plagiarism used to be hard work...hours in the library, researching what to copy...the plagiarist used to learn a lot while trying to get out of doing the work'. Not any more. A few clicks and a student either has significant chunks to knit

together or (at a price) a fully finished piece of work. (See the full text plus useful hotlinks to explore the topic further on <http://www.warwick.ac.uk/ETS/interactions/vol4no2/evans.html>)

What's to be done?

Frank Faredi in the 14 July, 2000 THES says (in what sounds like despair), 'I don't know what to do.' For Faredi (and whoever else is interested), here are a few suggestions but also a word of warning. Like all complex problems, it turns out that only a combination of actions and approaches will have any effect. Despite the hope that IT solutions might solve IT-inspired problems, this is probably not the case. However, these will be touched on later. But before you focus on detection, you might try any or all of these:

- **Design out the easy cheating options.** It may surprise you but there are courses that use the same essays or practicals year after year. Students are still asked to collect information rather than analyse or evaluate it or set a task which is so closely defined that only one solution or artefact will result. They may even all be asked to do exactly the same thing with a grade based on assessing the final product. Students say that cheating in these kinds of tasks is a victimless crime - it's just common sense to lessen your workload.
- **If you only change one thing on your course, change your assessment.** Students are unlikely to be able to buy ready-made coursework that integrates theory and practice, uses personal experiences or reflects on a case study you made up. You could ask for coursework plus photocopies of three or four significant references with highlighted bits. It might even be more useful to ask for an annotated booklist rather than a finished essay. I know one teacher who asked students to write a "meta-essay" with ever-changing titles like "what I learned from writing the coursework" or "the hardest bit and how I solved it". You could do a five-minute viva or set a timed piece of work in class. The key thing is to create a piece of coursework that cannot easily be stolen, bought or faked.
- **Teach the skills.** I have met academics who assume that defining plagiarism and telling students not to do it is enough. It isn't. Students need to learn how to paraphrase and summarise others' words. They need to practice, get feedback, and see others' efforts, then try again. They need to work with definitions to really understand them. One way might be through an exercise like this - try it yourself:

What constitutes plagiarism?

Based on an exercise in *Academic Writing for Graduate Students* by Swales and Feak, University of Michigan, 1993, here are six ways to use sources. Example number one is plagiarism; example six is not. Where do you cross the line?

1. Copying a paragraph verbatim from a source without any acknowledgement
 2. Copying a paragraph and making small changes - e.g. replacing a few verbs, replacing an adjective with a synonym; acknowledgement in the bibliography
 3. Cutting and pasting a paragraph by using sentences of the original but omitting one or two and putting one or two in a different order, no quotation marks; with an in-text acknowledgement plus bibliography
 4. Composing a paragraph by taking short phrases from a number of sources and putting them together using words of your own to make a coherent whole with an in-text acknowledgement plus bibliography.
 5. Paraphrasing a paragraph by rewriting with substantial changes in language and organisation; the new version will also have changes in the amount of detail used and the examples cited; citing in bibliography
 6. Quoting a paragraph by placing it in block format with the source cited in text & bibliography
- **Do something about blatant examples.** Alarm bells should ring if you see: students with very weak English producing polished prose; URLs left on the headings of pages; sudden changes in font; Americanisms (unless the student is one!); no references later than 1996 in a topical essay. Of course, the temptation to ignore such things must be great if you feel overburdened but avoidance has a high price. It threatens to devalue the academic achievements of all students and the quality of your own course. Recent changes in academic regulations should make doing something about plagiarism much easier but they depend on you as whistle-blower. For example, they suggest appointing misconduct officers who will handle formal complaints once the academic has alerted the Academic Registrar to the problem.
 - **Practice good housekeeping.** Coursework is valuable and should be treated as such, not left outside doors for collection or handed back by leaving a pile at the front of the room.
 - **Create a climate of involvement and interest rather than one of detection and punishment.** Several studies have shown that students are less likely to submit work that is not their own if they believe the teacher has made an effort to design and deliver the course and if they care about what they are learning. A focus on detection and punishment alone could encourage students to become ever more inventive in their attempts to get around a task they do not believe is worth doing or to 'win' against a teacher who is trying to stop them.

Catch and punish?

Some would have you believe that because the problem is exacerbated by technology, the solution, too, is technological. This seems over-optimistic but may be worth considering. By using any of the large search engines and asking for the source of a four-or five-word phrase that makes you suspicious, you are likely to find what the student found - probably about as easily and quickly. However, DIY electronic detection is quickly being overtaken by a plethora of commercially designed tools which claim to be reliable and relatively painless to use. You can find detection tools by typing **plagiarism** into a search engine. Six or seven should appear. Otherwise try any of the sites listed at the end of this article. Do they live up to their hyperbolic claims?

At Oxford Brookes University, a colleague and I are trying to find out by applying two different tools to a range of coursework in several schools, then seeing how best to train others in their use. We might have a few answers within 12 months. In the meantime, we would like to hear from you about what you are doing. Contact me at jrcarroll@brookes.ac.uk.

Breathtaking examples of cheating and workable solutions for ameliorating the situation are particularly welcome.

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An annotated list of references and links:

Evans J., 'The New Plagiarism in Higher Education: From Selection to Reflection', Jim Evans, Centre for Academic practice, University of Warwick. <http://www.warwick.ac.uk/ETS/interactions/vol4no2/evans.html>.

Jim has summarised the issues and offers a comprehensive series of hyperlinks to sites on detection of plagiarism, its correction, and prevention. A good starting point.

Franklyn-Stokes A. and Newstead S. (1995) 'Undergraduate Cheating: who does what and why' in Studies in Higher Education Vol 20 no 2, 1995, pp 159-72. This paper is one of the first to look at academic misconduct in Britain.

Ashworth, Bannister P. and Thorne P., (1997), 'Guilty in whose eyes? University students' perceptions of cheating and plagiarism in academic work, in Studies in Higher Education Vol 22 no 2 June, 1997 pp 187-203.

On how differently students and teachers see plagiarism and why students choose to cheat.

Hinchcliffe L. (1998) 'Cut-and-Paste Plagiarism: preventing, detecting and tracking online plagiarism'

<http://alexia.lis.uiuc.edu/%7Ejanicke/plagiary.htm>.

This paper takes a more overtly staff-development line, aimed at the academic reader.

Possible detection tools

The Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) is commissioning a technical study on the software available in this area. For information contact Gill Chester, email: g.chester@jisc.ac.uk tel: 0117 931 7257.

1. <http://Plagiarism.org>
...asks you to register, then offers to check submitted work against other similar work on the Web. This system is being trialled at five UK HEIs under a JISC project.
2. <http://www.plagiarism.com>
... uses the Glatt Plagiarism Screening Programme which offers either a self-teaching package to help students learn not to plagiarise (probably only useful for postgraduates) or a package that removes every fifth word from the document. It then times how long it takes the student to replace them and how accurately the task is done. It claims this will detect plagiarism.
3. CopyCatch detects collusion by comparing essays in a student cohort, looking for shared material. For information, contact davidwoolls@copycatch.freeseve.co.uk tel: 01608 662068. David has sold the package to many UK Higher Education departments.
4. FindSame is at <http://www.findsame.com/>. It's a search engine that looks for content, not keywords. You submit an entire document, and FindSame returns a list of Web pages that contain any fragment of that document longer than about one line of text. Or try www.alltheweb.com a search engine which one of the plagiarism detection sites uses. www.integriguard.com is a very quick service. You can sample it but then must purchase the service.

Additional References

Brown S. and McDowell E., (1998), 'Assessing students; cheating and plagiarism', Red Guide No 10 series 11, University of Northumbria at Newcastle.

Cole S. and Kiss E., 'What can we do about student cheating?'(2000) in About Campus, May-June, 2000, pp 5 - 12.

Newstead SE., (1998), 'Individual differences in student motivation', pp189-199, in Brown S, Armstrong S. and Thompson G., (eds) Motivating Students Kogan Page

Newstead SE., Franklyn Stokes A. and Armistead P., (1996), 'Individual differences in student cheating', Journal of Educational Psychology 88, p 229-241

Sambell' K., McDowell L. and Brown S., (1997), 'But is it fair?', an exploration of student perceptions of the consequent validity of assessment, Studies in Higher Education 23 (4), p 349-371