

Plagiarism

The widespread use of the Internet to disseminate information and offer services has also led to a rise in the concern over plagiarism. Whilst this may seem of prime importance for online courses, it actually affects all forms of learning where there is some element of assessment or recognition. Students on a traditional campus university are often in the position of being more knowledgeable about the Internet than many of the academics. It is thus often possible to simply copy material from an online resource of which the academic is unaware, and the use of cut and paste facility makes it very easy to incorporate sentences, paragraphs or whole pages into an essay. Alternatively, there are a number of sites, commonly called 'Internet Paper Mills' that offer students access to a database of essays or provide essay-writing services.

As with many of the problems associated with the Internet, this is not an entirely new phenomenon. Throughout education there have always been students who will test the boundaries between what is original composition and what they can copy directly from another source. Similarly, there are many accounts of poor, talented students who supplement their income by writing essays for richer students. The reason that online plagiarism is causing such concern is that the range of resources from which students might easily copy is now vast, and thus difficult for any marker to be knowledgeable about. The expansion in all forms of education has greatly increased the number of students, and also put increasing demands upon the time of the educators, making the number of cases of plagiarism likely to increase and also decreasing the time and energy educators have in checking all the material they encounter, and their familiarity with the students who are producing the material. When an educator knows each student very well, they soon develop an appreciation of what each student is capable of, and where their individual strengths and weaknesses lie. It is thus relatively easy to identify when one piece of work is significantly at odds with this appreciation, for example the student who struggles to understand concepts in tutorials who suddenly produces a masterpiece. When an educator is dealing with very large numbers of students, this appreciation is not developed.

One of the issues is that often students do not see such behaviour as cheating. The nature of our relationship with resources is changed through the use of digital media, the very nature of a highly connected knowledge resource such as the Web blurs the boundaries between ownership and originality. Using the Internet students are encouraged to find different resources and make use of these. Of course, when the material is not acknowledged then the student can be seen as passing other's work off as their own, which is fundamentally at odds with the core values of education, which encourages active sharing of knowledge, but with proper acknowledgement for the work of others. So as well as detecting plagiarism, educators have a duty to raise students awareness as to what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.

The means of combating Internet-related plagiarism can be broadly separated into two categories, which we will explore in more detail:

1. The technological solution - by using plagiarism detection software material the likely sources of any material can be found, either by searching the web for key phrases or comparing the material against that held in a large database. Other systems analyse the student material in terms of the consistency of the writing style and approach.
2. The redesign solution - by changing the teaching approach, and rethinking the assessment of a course, plagiarism can be designed out of a course, or at least its likelihood to succeed dramatically reduced.

Plagiarism detection software

There are a number of companies offering services and software that will detect plagiarism. . A few of the most popular ones are described below:

[EVE \(Essay Verification Engine\)](#) - this is software that you purchase. It focuses on finding web sites where material may have been copied from. The software takes essays in a variety of formats and then using different search algorithms locates sites from where the material may have been copied. It produces a report giving a percentage score for the degree of plagiarism and indicating the plagiarised text within the essay. A free trial is available.

[Turnitin.com](#) - students or educators can upload material to the company's web site, which then produces report in 24 hours. It performs a number of searches identifying any similarity with online resources and those in its internal database, giving a comparison report and highlighting plagiarised material. There are 5 free trials available.

[Plagiserve.com](#) - essays are uploaded to the site and a variety of searches performed both on the Internet and in Plagiserve's database, which contains essays from the digital paper mills and those uploaded by previous students. It produces a report identifying the plagiarised text and the source. The service is free, but you have to register.

[Glatt plagiarism software](#) - the plagiarism screening software works on the principal that everyone has an individual writing style. It deletes every fifth word and then requires the student to fill these in. If the student has plagiarised the material there will be a mismatch between their individual style and that of the original text. Available on CD, no free trial. You can also do checks for yourself, by using one of the powerful search engines such as [Google](#), or [Alltheweb](#). From your material you select some key phrases that make you suspicious, for example they seem out of context, or do not match the style of the student and enter these in the search engine. Use the exact phrase option or put the phrase in quotation marks depending on the search engine to get accurate results. This will usually find a likely source.

Activity 1

In this activity you are going to try and detect the level of plagiarism in two pieces of material. Firstly you should familiarise yourself with the software detection services offered above. For two of these services visit the site and explore the information they provide. Try to ascertain the following:

- How the software works
- The quality of the testimonials provided
- The usefulness of the reports provided (most provide sample reports so there is no need to register)
- How cost effective you feel this solution would be
- Any disadvantages with this approach

Once you have done this you then need to find an essay that is definitely plagiarised. To do this visit one of the Internet Paper Mills that provides free papers. A list of these can be found here:

[Essay Banks on JISCPAS](#) - a list of popular paper mills provided by the JISC Plagiarism Advisory Service.

Select a site that provides free sample essays, and does not require you to register or pay a fee. Choose an essay in any topic that interests you.

Next you need to find some material that should be free from plagiarism. In this case select a page from this course, or one of your own essays. Although the material has not been deliberately plagiarised, even original material can sometimes bear a close resemblance to other material. If quotes from other sources have been used then these should be found, but provided they have been properly acknowledged then it does not constitute plagiarism. There is thus a need for some interpretation of any results one gains from software.

Now that you have your two sources you should try and find evidence of plagiarism. To do this you can either register with one of the services listed above that offers a free trial, or you can perform the check manually, using search engines as described above. If you register

with a service you will need to provide an e-mail address, and so may receive follow-up messages from the company. It is at your discretion to do this. Once you have performed your plagiarism tests you should identify any sources and text that has been plagiarised.

Designing out plagiarism

Whilst the plagiarism detection software seems to be effective in many respects it is avoiding the main issue, which is that conventional forms of assessment are very susceptible to plagiarism. In some respects this approach resembles the ongoing battle between software viruses and virus checkers. The people who make virus checkers create software to reliably detect the most recent viruses. The creators of software viruses take this as a challenge and develop viruses that are capable of avoiding the virus checkers. The virus checkers then create a new version, and so on. So it goes with plagiarism. Students, and the Internet paper mills are now developing strategies that can 'fool' the plagiarism detection software, for instance by using synonyms of words, altering sentence construction and so forth so that the 'new' essay differs enough from the original one not to be detected.

The increased concern in plagiarism particularly as it relates to online courses can be seen as part of a much debate, namely the suitability of traditional education practices to online learning. This has led to people reassessing their teaching approach, the role of students and educators and the nature of assessment.

In order to avoid plagiarism then the best approach is probably to make it less tempting for students. This means changing the type of assessment. For example, many courses use collaborative work where students have to work as part of a group, and the group outcome is assessed. Online the educator can monitor the contribution everyone makes, and so it is also possible to reward not just the outcome, but participation in the process also.

Other approaches involve asking students to comment upon their own, or other's work. For example students can be asked to comment on each other's essays and marks awarded for their critical appraisal. Similarly students can be asked to analyse a journal article or web site. This type of activity is much less conventional and provided it is changed for every presentation of a course, it is much more difficult to plagiarise.

Any such approach also needs to be combined with an overall raising of awareness on the part of students on what is acceptable in terms of referencing and how to properly acknowledge material.

Activity 2

Write a list of five methods of designing out plagiarism from online learning. For each one provide a few sentences explaining the method and how it can help reduce plagiarism.

You should also compare your list against those suggested by Jamie McKenzie in his article *The New Plagiarism: Seven Antidotes to Prevent Highway Robbery in an Electronic Age* McKenzie, J. (1998) "[The New Plagiarism: Seven Antidotes to Prevent Highway Robbery in an Electronic Age](#)" From *Now On* 7(8).

Further Reading

[Technical Review of Plagiarism Detection Software Report](#) (PDF format) - prepared for JISC by Joanna Bull, Carol Collins, Elisabeth Coughlin and Dale Sharp.



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