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The Internet and Classroom Plagiarism: Dealing with the Problem

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Abstract

While the Internet offers many facilities for enriching the marketing classroom, it also facilitates plagiarism among students. An earlier article discussed the extent of the plagiarism problem on campus and various for fee and for free services on the Internet that help the college professor detect the copy and paste scholar. This article offers strategies for common assignments that will help to minimize student plagiarism.

Introduction

Controlling plagiarism begins with the design of the syllabus. Syllabi should include two elements: a discussion of proper citation styles and situations which require citation of sources, and a discussion of academic dishonesty and the procedures and penalties for dealing with instances of such behavior. Even students who know that material quoted from published sources must be cited may not know (1) that paraphrased material must be cited, (2) that information on the Internet must be cited properly, and (3) that there are different citation forms for Internet materials as opposed to paper publications, i.e. books, journals, magazines, and newspapers (Johnson 2002; and Landis 2002). Indeed journals or magazines cited from versions found on various article databases must indicate that the information was taken from the database, and not the original, version of the cited material. It has been the authors' experience, as well, that students often believe that the inclusion of a bibliography is sufficient citation of sources used in an assignment, and have no knowledge that proper credit must be given within the text of the paper, as well as in the bibliography or reference list (McCloskey 2002).

The professor's syllabus must be an educational device that alerts students to these fallacies. So, if a

professor desires to assign researched papers, cases or other types of exercises, an extended section in the syllabus on when to cite sources and how to do so properly is necessary (Landis 2002). An alternative is to direct students to various web sites or to a web site maintained by the professor that describes these issues in greater detail than may be possible in the confines of a syllabus. Figure one presents several useful sites that define and illustrate plagiarism issues for students.

**Figure One. Sites Concerning Plagiarism
and Good Citation Practice**

http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/wts/plagiarism.html

http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/research/r_plagiar.html

http://faculty.washington.edu/krumme/readings/res+writ.html

http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/Style.html

http://www.columbia.edu/cu/cup/cgos/idx_basic.html

http://www.lib.duke.edu/libguide/citing.htm

The syllabus should also include the university's policies and procedures for evaluating alleged instances of plagiarism and potential penalties. For example, in the authors' university the student handbook and the faculty handbook both describe a process in which the professor reports the violation to his or her department head in writing with a recommendation of penalty (or penalties) to be imposed. However, it is the department head who makes the decision and conducts any necessary hearings. The department head's recommendation is forwarded to his or her Dean. The instructor is directed to give the student a chance to explain his or her side of the incident, but the department head is primarily responsible for arranging for official hearings and deciding penalties. The Dean may or may not arrange hearings for appealed decisions at his or her discretion. This may not the represent the process at all universities and a professor should be aware of the correct procedures to follow at his or her university (West Texas A&M University Code of Student Life 2003; Faculty Handbook 2003). It may even help to impress upon the student the severity of the infraction to include information on the procedures in the syllabus.

Obviously, most professors would choose to avoid such potentially litigious procedures, if possible. Thoughtful selection of assigned exercises offers the best opportunity to do so. While term papers assigned at the beginning and due near the end of the semester are very popular assignments, even in business schools, they offer not only great opportunities for plagiarism, but also great temptations to students to plagiarize. If a professor desires to use the term paper assignment, there are strategies for minimizing the student's opportunity to plagiarize. First, consider how topics are chosen or assigned for the papers. Allowing students to choose their own topics allows great latitude for purchasing papers from paper mills. An instructor should consider assigning topics or providing a list of topics from which students may choose. The professor then has the opportunity to provide slants in the topic descriptions that make available commercial papers less useful to the students.

Even assignments to research particular companies provide ample opportunities for students to copy and paste from annual reports and company web sites. To assist in detecting such plagiarism, the instructor should assign particular companies. He or she can then establish files on these companies containing recent annual reports and printed copies of web sites, or can acquire such materials if plagiarism is suspected. Also, it is recommended to require students to submit intermediary assignments at specified times during the semester. For example, topics can be chosen and registered with the professor by the third week of class, an initial bibliography of specified length by the sixth week, a preliminary outline, or draft, by the ninth week, and the final paper at the end of the semester. The professor, or an assistant, will still have to use the detection procedures discussed earlier to attempt to identify those students using papers from mills or lifted from online sources. But, this approach to term papers forces students to begin their projects earlier and reduces the temptation to cheat that procrastination encourages and it allows the professor to take an early read on potential plagiarism problems (Clayton 1997; Johnson 2002; and Meltz 2002).

Book reports also allow great scope for plagiarism for reasons outlined in our earlier paper. Students have submitted reports plagiarized from reader opinions available online at amazon.com and other online book retailers. To help prevent the problem, assigning a paper in which the student must compare and contrast two books on the same subject makes it less likely that the student will be able

to find a full-blown paper ready-made on the Internet. The professor still needs to be alert to imported sections from published reviews of both books. However, our earlier paper that discussed detection strategies covered procedures for searching amazon.com and other search engines that regularly cover printed book reviews. Even case analyses offer potential for Internet plagiarism. First, the commercial paper houses can, and do, offer case analyses as well as reports on companies that students can buy and download. Again, materials in databases from trade and scholarly journals and from online sources of annual reports provide ample opportunities for the copy and paste scholar. Here the authors suggest that the professor consider more focused use of case assignments. For example, a professor could require students to answer a very specific question that requires students to perform some activity such as a critical events timetable or quantitative analysis routine. The absence of the requested activity will alert the professor to possible plagiarism. In particular, professors should consider changing key data in the case and asking students to perform specific analyses on the data as distributed by the professor. The professor could use the same technique as with book reports by asking students to compare and contrast companies described in two cases to illustrate key concepts of theory discussed in the course: i.e., the impact of internal environment on strategic decisions, poor branding decisions versus good branding decisions, poor new product development procedures versus an example of excellent new product development. Finally, the professor could ask the students to use the case as a starting point and update the information on companies whose identities are revealed in the case. However, these last two alternatives still offer the enterprising, but less than honest, student the opportunity to import published materials into selected parts of the report.

One last type of assignment deserves mention. In many classes, it is possible to ask students to develop a resource book. One of the authors used this assignment very effectively in a class on marketing strategy for nonprofit organizations. She devised five problems that any nonprofit organization might have and asked the students to find ten alternative and feasible solutions to the problem. For example, one of the problems concerned the need to raise $100,000. Students were asked to choose a particular type of organization and maintain that organization for all five problems. They were encouraged to interview professionals in organizations similar to their chosen organization and to use published reports of similar activities by nonprofits seeking to solve similar problems. From the outset, therefore, the students know that they are expected to generate the ideas from sources that need recognition. Also, since this assignment is intended to be a resource, or idea, book, students were only required to list their solutions in bullet points or short paragraphs, which the instructor hoped would decrease the temptation to copy-and-paste among the students. Finally, the five problems were scheduled for submission to the instructor at five different points in the session. The instructor hoped this would preclude some of the incentive that procrastination gives to the desperate student. It also allowed the professor an early check on the possibility of plagiarism by students in the class. However, even this type of assignment is subject to the same types of plagiarism as annotated bibliographies. While this author did not detect any serious problems in this class, she remains ready to attempt detection measures should she be suspicious of student efforts in the future.

Conclusion

Prevention of plagiarism involves planning by the professor. Beginning with the design of the syllabus, the professor can alert students to the seriousness of the problem and educate them as to acceptable citation practice. However, the selection and design of assignments can also assist the professor to minimize the incidence of plagiarism.

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