The Deans Corner

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April 2002: It Takes a Thief

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Unfortunately, the rising generation is proving to be footnote-allergic, or simply careless about plagiarism. That plagiarism is a form is stealing is irrefragable. One clue is the word itself.[1] In the Roman era, kidnapping –man stealing if you will– was known as *plagium*. Those who tried to make free men, slaves, or sold them into slavery were known as *plagiarius*. Martial (41-103 AD) uses the term to describe the borrowing of another's words, but the practice did not become a crime until after the Middle Ages.

One of the latent curses of the Internet –I abuse it so I will surely be called Luddite one day–is that it has made plagiarism too easy. With a quick search a student can find material for just about *any* topic. (You'll note I didn't say he or she would find *legitimate* material.) Once found, a quick point here, a click there, and presto! It's in your paper.

It's hard to determine the chicken and egg evolution of this among today's high school and college-age populations. The Center for Academic Integrity (Duke University) indicates that plagiarism is indeed common among students in both high school and college.[2] The Center found that 72% of high school students admitted to some form of "serious cheating on written assignments" while 50% admitted to cheating off the Internet. A *Toronto Star* report on a study by "Who's Who Among American High School Students" found that *80%* had admitted to cheating in some fashion on papers or tests. Meanwhile, the *Los Angeles Times* reports that *94% admitted to having cheated off the Internet* at least once.

One school of thought says it has to do with our cavalier approach to ethical behavior. For example, this school suggests that plagiarism occurs far more frequently now not only because it's so easy, but also because our mores minimize "slight" abuses. Pope may be representative: "Vice is a monster of such awful mien... But seen to oft, familiar with its face, we first endure, then fondle, then embrace."

There may be something to this school. After all, why should Tom or Carol get exercised when past presidents or former CEOs show disdain for truth-telling? If they can get away with lying, what's the big deal about taking a few words here or there? But *it is* a big deal: the stealing of intellectual property falls under the rubric of copyright infringement.

Moreover, this school of thought gets a shot in the arm when you look at today's famous historians. On the one hand stands award-winning historian Stephen Ambrose and his book-a-year industry. On the other hand sits Doris Kearns Goodwin, whose fingers are also ink-stained to the elbows with the words of others. In Goodwin's case, there was an out-of-court settlement. Then there is the incomprehensible case of Joseph Ellis, professor of History at Mount Holyoke who apparently didn't rob words, just a false identity. Ellis writes compelling, award-

winning books about Vietnam. Why he felt compelled to add that he was there, was a combat paratrooper *and* on General Westmoreland's staff (when none of this was true) remains a mystery. Go, as they say, figure.

Other schools of thought argue that students have less time (with so many recreational choices and work responsibilities), they naturally seek ways to economize the time they have (efficiency experts?!), or students always try to take the shortest distance between two points (conservationists?).

So, what's a faculty member to do? The library's webpage on plagiarism (created by Dacus Head of Reference, Bob Gorman) is an excellent place to begin. There plagiarism is thoroughly discussed and students shown how to cite everything from books, to poems, to websites, to e-mail postings. There is much for the faculty member to peruse.

After that, there are the for-profit plagiarism sites that offer the ability to check any paper. *Plagiarism.org* (and its portal *www.turnitin.com*) will check each paper against 100 million web pages on the Internet (current estimates place more than 1 *billion pages on the web*). Were the library to subscribe to *Plagiarism.org* (and we think it's important enough to consider), it would

cost us about twenty cents a paper.

EVE2 is another such site that requires a bit more work. For $20 per user (site licenses are available), users submit a text-only file, and the software checks each line for possible attributions. The report indicates the degree of probability about how much may have been borrowed illegally. It requires considerable computer space if the paper is to be "frisked" quickly. Other sites include IntegriGuard, Glatt Plagiarism Services, and *CopyCatch.com* (which works in a manner like *Plagiarism.com*). All require some manipulation and all have varying degrees of effectiveness. Of course the cheapest way to detect plagiarism is to run various suspicious phrases through something like *Google*, *Hotbot*, or metasearch engines like *Dogpile* or *Eureka*! While effective it's obviously very time-consuming.

There are other inexpensive ways to short-circuit the plagiarism urge, many of which are no doubt already in use. These include[3]:

✎restrict paper topics to narrow, current or local interest choices

✎limit number of web-based citations

✎require photocopies of all articles

✎require that bibliographies be turned in five days before

the paper is due and accept no new citations

✎for shorter papers, limit to five (5) pages since most mills require six (6) as the minimum

✎require research strategy diaries or logs and check them regularly

✎refuse last minute topic changes

✎talk about plagiarism, intellectual property & why it's wrong to pilfer others' ideas

Above all, the experts tell us there must be in place a standard punitive measure that is consistently applied in every discovered case. When students know it's wrong, know how well-informed about the practice their professors are, and see how often punishments are *consistently* applied, plagiarism may not disappear completely, but its occurrence falls precipitously.

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[1] I am indebted to Marc Drogin's *Anathema!* (Allanheld & Schram, 1983) for this discussion.

[2] This fact and the next three are from "Internet Plagiarism in America's Schools" at http://firstclass.wellesley.edu/~sparks/cs100/rp1.html.

[3] For this and more see: alexia.lis.uiuc.edu/~janicke/plagiary.htm; www.spot.pcc.edu/lrc/pam/plagiar.htm

www.millikin.edu/staley/plagiarism.html; www.lemoyne.edu/library/plagiarism.htm; www.library.ualberta.ca/guides/plagiarism/preventing.html; www.cln.org/themes/plagiarism.html;www.macalester.edu/academicprograms/

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