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Cyberplagiarism and the Library: Issues and Solutions

Jennifer Sharkey¹
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SUMMARY. Plagiarism by students in academic institutions is an old but continuing problem facing teachers and librarians. Although studies disagree on the Internet's effect on student plagiarism, the easy availability of electronic information creates a challenge for librarians, who must be ready not only to detect and deter plagiarism, but also to educate their patrons about it. The purpose of this contribution is to summarize briefly the nature, extent and causes of plagiarism in its academic aspect, especially as it has been influenced by electronic information sources, and to review measures of its detection and deterrence.

KEYWORDS. plagiarism, academic dishonesty, Internet, online reference tools, paper mills, electronic information sources

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INTRODUCTION

Plagiarism has become a frequent item in the popular press in recent years; well-known authors have admitted to it, a college president has resigned because of it, and great newspapers have seen their reputations tarnished because their reporters have committed it. In addition, numerous anecdotal reports have given the impression that the Internet has dramatically increased the problem of plagiarism in schools and colleges. Librarians in academic institutions, especially those with instructional duties, need to be aware of the issues surrounding not only plagiarism in general, but especially as it pertains to the electronic resources they manage. In a 2002 *Reference Librarian* article, Jacqueline Borin stated "Reference librarians ...have a role in combating plagiarism because libraries 'provide and promote the Internet as a research tool.'"¹.

WHAT IS PLAGIARISM? DEFINITIONS AND SOME HISTORY

What is plagiarism? The Latin root for the word, *plagiare*, means to kidnap, and to many of those who have seen their words or ideas thus appropriated, there is that feeling that their child has indeed been stolen. The Modern Language Association Style Guide defines it by quoting Alexander Lindey: "It is the false assumption of authorship: the wrongful act of taking the product of another person's mind and presenting it as one's own."² The extent of a plagiaristic act can vary considerably, ranging from the most serious (copying or purchasing an entire paper) down to the omission of a few references or

attributions in a brief written assignment. The particular aspect of plagiarism that arises in the context of electronically-based information has been referred to as “e-plagiarism” or “cut-and-paste plagiarism,” but is now more commonly called “cyberplagiarism.” Of concern to educators at all levels are both its comparative ease and the vast information resources that potential cyberplagiarists have at their disposal.

Moreover, many educators are neither sure nor comfortable with how to deal with plagiarism, whatever its means of commission. In the preface to his elegant little book on the subject, *Stolen words*, Thomas Mallon goes immediately and neatly to the heart of the problem:

“No, it isn’t murder. And as larceny goes it’s usually more distasteful than grand.

But it is a bad thing.

Isn’t it?”³

And later he writes: “We are also as uncomfortable dealing with charges against the long-dead great as we are with those against the living obscure. [W]e often, and mistakenly, see plagiarism as a crime of degree, an excess of something legitimate...”⁴ This clearly illustrates the problem that teachers and librarians have when confronting plagiarism; many do not see it as a “bad” crime, and are reluctant to apply the full weight of their authority to punish it. Even in institutions with a clearly articulated policy on academic dishonesty, most faculty prefer to deal with incidents of plagiarism themselves or simply to ignore them.⁵

Another problem is that many instructors cannot clearly differentiate between copyright violation and plagiarism. While the former is clearly illegal, the latter may be legal, but it is clearly unethical. Copyright

violations, while subject to interpretation based on fair use principles, pertain only to documented expressions; an egregious act of plagiarism such as the copying of an entire chapter or article can violate copyright statutes, but the smaller and more frequent acts of “cut and paste” plagiarism generally fly under the radar screen of copyright law.⁶ Also, non-copyrightable concepts such as ideas and spoken words can be plagiarized, as can those writings which exist in the public domain.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The notion of writings, ideas or utterances as the property of an individual is not new in Western civilizations, nor is the act of another individual appropriating them; however, the concept and connotation of plagiarism as a reprehensible act (even if only slightly so) did not arise until fairly recently. Beginning in the 17th century, when writing was becoming a means of earning a livelihood, it became more important to authors that their words not be co-opted by others. The first copyright statutes were enacted in England at the beginning of the 18th century, initially to protect the publisher’s profits more than the author’s; however, their effect advanced the emerging idea of an individual author’s work as his or her property.

In colleges and universities, plagiarism was not considered a serious problem until the middle of the 19th century. Then, increasing enrollments and changing student attitudes ran headlong into a stultifying and outmoded pedagogy. Under pressure to produce an almost continuous stream of essays, many students came to rely on 19th century versions of term paper

mills.⁷ From those times until now, numerous studies have described – and decried – the various manifestations of academic misconduct (for a thorough annotated bibliography, see Anderson).⁸

RECENT STUDIES ON THE EXTENT OF PLAGIARISM IN ACADEME

The broader issue of academic misconduct, which includes plagiarism among other topics such as cheating on examinations, falsifying the results of research, and embezzling grant money has been thoroughly studied (for an overview of this broader subject, see Decoo).⁹ These studies show that the incidence of academic misconduct is widespread, but their findings vary considerably, and the variety of methodologies applied make comparisons difficult. Furthermore, specific data on incidences of student plagiarism are generally buried within these larger studies. In the only large-scale study of its kind, McCabe and Bowers compared the cheating behavior of students at the same campus in 1963 and 1993, before the influence of the Internet became widespread. They found that the percentages of students who said they had plagiarized at least once were 30% in the earlier study and 26% in the later one.¹⁰

Disagreement also abounds on the extent and growth rate of plagiarism in academe since the advent of the Internet. While media accounts and some publications use the terms “plague” and “crisis,” research has shown that there has not been nearly as steep a rise in incidences of plagiarism as indicated by anecdotal evidence.^{11,12} The only multi-campus study to date that specifically focuses on Internet plagiarism has shown

that, although a considerable minority (24.5%) of students commit Internet plagiarism “sometimes to very frequently”, these figures are no higher than those reported earlier.¹³ Similarly, campus surveys conducted at Stanford University in 1961, 1976 and 2003 even showed a slight decline in minor plagiarism from a high of 35% in 1961 to 28.2% overall (12.2% from print sources and 16% from Internet sources) in 2003.¹⁴

CAUSES OF PLAGIARISM

Research has found that the major reasons why students plagiarize center on ignorance and environment. Wilhoit states that most incidences are unintentional, and arise from ignorance of proper citation and attribution practices.¹⁵ A special case of this arises with some foreign students; they are not only unfamiliar with Western strictures against plagiarism, but they may have been schooled to believe that copying the exact words of a mentor shows intelligence and respect.¹⁶ Other reasons cited in student surveys are time and grade pressures.^{17,18} A number of studies have shown that, when plagiarism is intentional, students are strongly influenced by their perceptions of their peers' behavior, the likelihood of their being caught, and the severity of the resulting penalties. The presence or absence of a climate or culture of academic integrity on a campus is seen as the most important determinant of student cheating.^{19,20}

Some educators disagree with the “absolutist” view of plagiarism as expressed in many institutional code of ethics statements, and argue that the omission of quotation marks should not be treated the same as

passing off a downloaded paper as one's own work.²¹ Studies show that students understand the basic concept of plagiarism and believe that cheating is wrong; however, it is not clear if students are really aware of what constitutes plagiarism. The study by Ashworth and Bannister shows that most of the students surveyed had a difficult time clearly defining plagiarism.

The tendency of certain students to conceive of plagiarism in a very literal, concrete sense offered a clear indication of the limits of their understanding: the verbatim use of an author's words obviously counts as plagiarism, but paraphrasing their argument in one's own language renders the offence in some way different, lesser. Similarly, the 'mosaic' technique of constructing an essay entirely from disparate but suitably referenced sources, one's own input being only to thread the material together, was not seen as wrong by several.²²

In such an unsure environment, what can librarians do to help their patrons – both faculty and students – to avoid plagiaristic acts, either conscious or unintentional?

THE LIBRARIAN'S ROLE IN COMBATING PLAGIARISM: TRUANT OFFICER OR MENTOR?

Detecting plagiarism

As plagiarism gains more attention across the country at all levels of education, librarians often find themselves being consulted as experts -- experts in finding information, experts in detecting falsified

information, and experts in helping students become information literate. While most librarians are willing to play these roles, we need to think about the broader picture to determine how librarians can influence an institution's system-wide efforts in combating plagiarism. As we all know, being everything to everyone causes stress, burnout, and a potential decline in service quality.²³ Staying attuned to the institution's overall efforts in addressing plagiarism and academic honesty can help us determine what is the most effective way to participate and support those efforts.

Today, there are multiple options for detecting plagiarized texts and papers. Doing a keyword search on any search engine or online database yields many hits ranging from lists of quick tips to free web services to fee-based services. One of the most well known web-based services is Turnitin.com. This site states, "[s]ince 1996, Turnitin has been helping millions of faculty and students in 51 countries to improve writing and research skills, encourage collaborative online learning, ensure originality of student work, and save instructors' time — all at a very affordable price."²⁴ Visiting the site provides a showcase of the various products and services they have to offer. Many high schools, colleges, and universities, subscribe to services like Turnitin.com to help them address the attempts of plagiarism by students. Other companies that provide similar services are Glatt Plagiarism Services and Essay Verification Engine.²⁵

Detecting a plagiarist doesn't need to be done with a fee-based service. Often using a free search engine such as Google, AltaVista, HotBot, or Yahoo can yield the very web sites that have been copied. Also, using the

online databases your library subscribes to can be beneficial in detecting copied articles that free search engines cannot find. The trick of using these online resources is to choose a search string that will give specific results instead of thousands of potential hits. In his article 'Busting the new breed of plagiarist,' Bugeja recommends several techniques when using electronic sources for detecting plagiarism.²⁶ Two key techniques he suggests are to "enter a long phrase from the first paragraph" and "identify and enter phrases that [arouse] your suspicion."²⁷

How the identified phrases and word combinations from suspicious papers are searched greatly depends on the search engine or database being used. A resource like Turnitin.com or Google cannot successfully retrieve plagiarized passages from subscription databases.²⁸ Therefore, librarians' informational retrieval expertise can aid faculty by identifying and searching these resources for possible plagiarism. Bugeja suggests avoiding the use of Boolean logic when using search engines but to depend on this logic for online databases.²⁹ As more and more databases provide the full text of articles, reliance on each database's options for searching and limiting to full text will vary.

Using translation software to convert foreign text to English and copying verbatim is a unique type of plagiarism and quite difficult to track down. Stebelman suggests that using the 'Find related articles' feature in various online databases is a technique to find this type of plagiarism.³⁰ With additional features being added to search engines, their translation features could also be used to translate foreign text on web sites and then copied word for word. However, the 'Find similar sites'

option on many search engines like Google, Yahoo, and Alta Vista could likely identify plagiarized foreign sites.

In a recent CQ Researcher issue about plagiarism, several organizations are listed whose missions are to provide open forums about the various aspects of academic integrity and plagiarism such as detection and prevention.³¹ The Center of Academic Integrity, affiliated with the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University, is a consortium of universities and colleges across North America and “provides a forum to identify, affirm, and promote the values of academic integrity among students, faculty, teachers and administrators.”³² Other sites that deal with plagiarism and academic dishonesty provide articles, checklists, discussion groups, and curriculum kits.

Deterring plagiarism

In an academic environment there are many ways librarians can support the University in fighting plagiarism. As librarians we support not only information retrieval but the whole process of research and development of information literacy skills from identifying a topic to finding resources to using critical thinking and analysis. Promoting information literacy includes teaching students about plagiarism. Brandt defines a basic model for librarians when addressing plagiarism:

1. Define it...
2. Show examples to make it clear...
3. Describe its consequences...
4. ...promote its prevention...
5. Discuss it.³³

One powerful way to incorporate this model into the curriculum is in the classroom. Teaching a semester-long course, collaborating with faculty, or doing a workshop or seminar provides opportunities to address plagiarism on multiple levels.

A dedicated information literacy course or the full integration of information literacy into a course's curriculum are ideal situations to address plagiarism on these various levels. Unfortunately, we don't all have these opportunities; many of us still conduct the "50-minute" one shot classroom visits and it is a struggle to fit everything into a specific class. However, close consultation with the instructor often identifies areas that librarians need to address in the classroom environment and what areas can be addressed through assignment modification. As information professionals, we are in a position to guide the professor in identifying what aspects of plagiarism we should emphasize when teaching his or her students.

When librarians conduct instructional sessions, it can be a challenge to develop an activity or exercise that will work within the given time frame and also achieve the goal of bringing greater awareness to students. While developing a handout or conducting a mini-lecture will provide the necessary information, these approaches are less effective in demonstrating the multiple aspects of plagiarism. A simple interactive exercise to address plagiarism is to have students form small groups and develop their definitions of plagiarism, create examples that support that definition, determine reasons why plagiarism occurs, and identify ways of prevent it. Each group should report back to the whole class and use the comments to initiate further discussion. Additionally,

these comments can be recorded, specific points agreed upon by the whole class and then used to develop a non-plagiarism agreement form, which all of the students in the class would sign. Signed agreement forms can also help an instructor or professor when dealing with a case of plagiarism.

Another activity would be to present a case of plagiarism or a newspaper article reporting an incidence of plagiarism to the class. In small group discussions, students can address why they support or don't support the individuals involved in the case, discuss the punishment of the accused, and the consequences of actions by the individuals involved in the case. Students can each write a reflective piece about the case and their position.

Collaborating with faculty and key programs on campus can be a second major vehicle in plagiarism prevention. Being a detective for individual faculty is an easy way for a librarian to demonstrate knowledge and expertise. However, in reality, it is just a band-aid solution. One could be very quickly overwhelmed with requests to expose plagiarists. A broader approach such as working with instructors and professors when developing assignments, projects, and overall curricula addresses the many ways poorly designed assignments actually promote plagiarism rather than prevent it.

Hinchliffe suggests that educators:

- Emphasize the processes involved in doing research and writing papers. Ways to do so include requiring topic proposals, idea outlines, multiple drafts, interim working bibliographies and photocopies of sources.

- Require students to engage and apply ideas, not just describe them.
- Require students to reflect personally on the topic or the processes of research and writing, either in the paper or as an additional writing assignment.³⁴

Another preventative strategy is to “[l]et educators know how easy it can be to search for potentially plagiarized text.”³⁵ Providing a workshop through your library can achieve this; alternatively, you can utilize your institution’s professional development structure. For example, the Center for Instructional Excellence at Purdue University sponsors a development series for faculty and staff called the *Teaching Workshop Series*. This series provides opportunities for peers and colleagues to share their experiences and effective techniques or practices throughout the campus. Another venue is the *Focus on Teaching* program, which showcases instructional initiatives being developed and practiced by professors throughout the University. Other programs or departments that can be sponsors for workshops and seminars are the campus writing lab and campus copyright office. Another forum can be in local conferences, particularly the ones that promote teaching and technology.

LIBRARY WEB SITES ADDRESSING PLAGIARISM

Libraries and librarians are addressing plagiarism in multiple ways through their web sites. Gary L. Anderson suggests “[a] well-written plagiarism guide can be an effective tool. It should define plagiarism..., quote the institution’s policy on plagiarism and cheating, and

illustrate what is and is not plagiarism."³⁶ Many library web sites now offer informational guides for instructors and students on defining plagiarism, how to avoid it, and how to detect it. Below is a brief annotated list of selected web sites created by academic libraries in North America. Additionally, the search engines Google, Yahoo, and Alta Vista provide lists of plagiarism web sites in their writing or education sections.

Plagiarism and Cyberplagiarism

<http://www.aquinas.edu/library/plagiarism.html>

Provided by the Woodhouse Library at Aquinas College, this web page provides information for both students and faculty about defining plagiarism and ways to prevent it. The information sources are a combination of other web resources, print articles, and even seminar notes.

Plagiarism, Cyberplagiarism & Possible Solutions

<http://library.smsu.edu/LIS/workshops/wplagiarism.shtml>

A mini online workshop developed by the Southwest Missouri State University Libraries. This page, basically a list of online resources, provides access to various search engines, detection programs, and term paper mills & vendors.

eSearch: Spring 2002(1) - Dalhousie University Libraries

<http://www.library.dal.ca/news/esearch5.htm>

This is the feature article in the Spring 2002 issue of e-Search, an online newsletter produced by the Dalhousie University Libraries. The article entitled *Cyberplagiarism: The New Plague on Campus* overviews

the library system's web site resources for "avoiding, detecting and preventing plagiarism."

CyberPlagiarism: Identification and Detection

<http://library.mtroyal.ca/instruction/02-03/plagiarism.htm>

A resource list with some annotations guiding the reader to various resources and tools for doing what the title indicates -- identifying and detecting cyberplagiarism. What distinguishes this resource list are the examples of unique phrases that can be searched online, helping an instructor determine what to look for in a potentially plagiarized paper. Also, on this page are quotes from journal articles about plagiarism and academic dishonesty. These quotes are cited at the end of the web page.

Plagiarism Prevention Reference Resource

<http://www.uwplatt.edu/~library/reference/plagiarism.html>

This reference resource, developed by the University of Wisconsin - Platteville Karmann Library, is a brief article defining copyright and plagiarism, providing information on why students cheat, and ways to detect and prevent plagiarism. This article cites multiple resources to support the information provided as well as internet resources giving information on online paper mills and plagiarism detection.

Plagiarism Resources & Services for Faculty at the Osterlin Library and How do I avoid plagiarism?

<http://www.nmc.edu/library/faculty/plagiarism/>

<http://www.nmc.edu/library/faculty/plagiarism/avoid.html>

The Osterlin Library provides two resource guides, one for faculty and one for students. The faculty guide is

entitled *Plagiarism Resources and Services A Guide for Faculty*. This well-developed guide provides a definition of plagiarism as defined by the college's handbook, ways to detect & prevent plagiarism, as well as extensive resources for more information on this issue. The student guide, *How Do I Avoid Plagiarism?*, is a much shorter version of the faculty guide but provides key links to other resources for correct paraphrasing, appropriate citing of sources, and developing bibliographies.

Electronic Plagiarism Seminar

<http://www.lemoyne.edu/library/plagiarism.htm>

This seminar provides a comprehensive listing of subjects dealing with plagiarism such as detection, online paper mills, and guides for educators & students. The strength of this resource is the extensive use of web resources. This web site was created by Gretchen Pearson, Public Services Librarian, Noreen Reale Falcone Library, Le Moyne College.

Plagiarism in Cyberspace: Sources, Prevention, Detection, and Other Information

<http://www.library.csustan.edu/lboyer/plagiarism/>

This easy-to-navigate online resource includes extensive web links to tools, web sites, and articles about plagiarism in the electronic age. One of the unique articles cited is about high school students using hand-held devices, such as PDAs and calculators, for cheating on tests.

Guide to Plagiarism and Cyber-Plagiarism

<http://www.library.ualberta.ca/guides/plagiarism/>

This site developed by the University of Alberta Libraries is a well-structured guide that overviews the various aspects of plagiarism, including why students do it and how to prevent and detect it. It also provides numerous links to resources for faculty and students.

CONCLUSION

Plagiarism has been a part of the college and university environment since the 19th century and continues to be an issue today. Technology influences all aspects of librarianship and the academic learning environment; its tools challenge the classical perceptions of the ownership of expressions and ideas. While studies show that plagiarism has not reached “plague” levels, students will continue to steal passages, whether consciously or not, from all types of resources. The growing availability of online resources cultivates unintentional plagiarism with their easy accessibility. Librarians can apply their expertise by instructing students, collaborating with faculty, and developing online resources. As knowledge managers, librarians have an important role in educating their patrons about the meaning and dimensions of plagiarism and how best to deter and avoid it.

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