

June 28, 2001

Lessons in Internet Plagiarism

By KATIE HAFNER

To a student at Spring Lake Park High School outside Minneapolis, it seemed like a formatting problem: the margins on the research paper he was trying to print out for an English class this spring were not aligning correctly. But when he complained to Jane Prestebak, a librarian whose duties include running the school's computer labs, she immediately suspected the actual cause.

Ms. Prestebak took the first five words of text and put them in a search engine. Up came the Web site from which the student had taken the paper, in its entirety, margin formatting and all.

When she confronted the student, he was taken aback to be caught so swiftly, by a 43-year-old school librarian of all people. "Maybe a teacher who wasn't as computer literate as I am wouldn't have known to be suspicious," Ms. Prestebak said. She alerted the student's teacher, who decided to turn the incident into a lesson in scholarly ethics.

"The student needed a wake-up call," Ms. Prestebak recalled. "His teacher allowed him to rewrite it and hand it in again a week later. It gave us a chance to reteach him."

At a time when Internet literacy seems in inverse proportion to age, a new generation of students is faced with an old temptation made easier than ever: taking the work of others and passing it off as one's own. In this era of cut and paste, hundreds of sites offer essays and research papers on topics as abstruse and challenging as Shakespeare's "Troilus and Cressida" and Sartre's "Being and Nothingness," some at no charge. And e-mail has made it simpler for students to borrow from one another's work.

Indeed, a scandal last month at the University of Virginia, where 122 students are being investigated for possible plagiarism of term papers for an introductory physics course, not only revealed how precarious the notion of an honor system can be, but also painted in sharpest relief how easy cheating has become.

Donald McCabe, a management professor at Rutgers University in Newark who conducts periodic surveys on cheating at college campuses, recently surveyed 4,500 high school students at 25 schools around the country. When it comes to plagiarizing from the Web, he found, high schools seem to present a far larger problem.

More than half of the high school students surveyed admitted either downloading a paper from a Web site or copying a few sentences from a Web site without citation. On the college level, Dr. McCabe said, just 10 to 20 percent of those surveyed acknowledged such

practices.

Often, teachers are suspicious from the start. "If a student hasn't done a lick of work or produced anything during the stages of a research paper, then suddenly this beautifully typed-up paper materializes, that's a sign," said Cathy Aubrecht, an English teacher at Hononegah High School in Rockton, Ill.

At other times, the problem presents itself in a more subtle fashion. "I have kids every year who have a hard time understanding that ideas can be plagiarized as well," she said. "If you get a good idea from someplace, or a concept is related to you via a book or Internet site, it needs to be recognized. But they assume that everything is public domain."

Dr. McCabe said he was deeply concerned about the cavalier attitude toward plagiarism among students coming up through high school and beginning to enter college. "Many students say, 'We're way ahead of our teachers when it comes to the Internet,'" Dr. McCabe said. "And they say, 'Everybody's doing it.'"

In high school, moreover, the consequences are not so grave as they are in college. High school students caught cheating are usually given a stern lecture or, at worst, a failing grade. On rare occasions, seniors will not be allowed to graduate. College students caught plagiarizing, especially at institutions with strict honor codes, are often suspended and may even be expelled, Dr. McCabe said.

Dr. McCabe said he believed there was less cheating in college than in high school not only because of the consequences but also because students take college more seriously.

At the same time, Dr. McCabe said there was a "steady erosion" of students' sense of right and wrong when it came to plagiarism. When he reads the comments accompanying his surveys, he said, he is struck by how readily students place the blame for their cheating on societal problems and pressures.

"The college students say, 'When Clinton can do this,' or 'When Milken can do that,' who can blame them for what they do? It's very, very pervasive."

This is a line of justification Dr. McCabe said he increasingly saw among high school students as well. "High school students tend to blame the competitiveness of the college admissions process," he said.

At the same time, the Web has made it much easier to catch plagiarists. A growing number of educators routinely use Web-based services for detecting unoriginal work.

Turnitin.com, a popular service, offers a simple method that allows both teachers and students to submit papers to electronic scrutiny. The service compares the paper against millions of Web sites, a database of previous submissions and papers offered by the so-called term-paper mills. Turnitin.com then sends a report with the results to the teacher. High schools using this service pay around \$1,000 a year for an unlimited number of submissions. Colleges pay roughly \$2,000.

Dr. John M. Barrie, a founder of Turnitin.com, estimated that of all the work submitted to the site, nearly one-third is copied in whole or in part from another source.

"When it comes to cheating, at the top of the list is plagiarism, and at the top of that list are students cutting and pasting, mostly from the Internet," Dr. Barrie said. He said about 1,000 institutions subscribe to the service. Roughly 60 percent are high schools and the rest are colleges. A handful of middle schools subscribe to the service, and Dr. Barrie said he has also had inquiries from some elementary schools.

Such services are surprisingly effective, especially as a deterrent.

Dr. Steven Hardinger, a chemistry lecturer at the University of California at Los Angeles, said he had students submit their own papers to Turnitin.com, with the results sent to him.

"The use of Turnitin.com as a deterrent is perhaps much more valuable than as a way to ferret out plagiarism," Dr. Hardinger said. "We really hate to see plagiarists and hate to punish them, but we want them to know we're watching."

Dr. Jamie McKenzie, editor of From Now On — The Educational Technology Journal, an online publication at www.fno.org, said he saw a more disquieting problem associated with youthful plagiarists — what he calls "mental softness."

"Students are caught up in a cut-and-paste mentality that relates to an old belief that longer is better," Dr. McKenzie said. "They're confusing the size of their pile, of what they've accumulated, with wisdom. Instead of finding the right stuff, they're just finding lots of stuff."

"They don't think of it as cheating. They are simply collecting information and don't understand the whole concept of intellectual property."

Even when caught, many high school students are relatively blasé about their transgression. Dr. Peter G. Mehas, superintendent of schools in Fresno County, Calif., blames parents, at least partly. He said he was chagrined to see a shift in parents' attitudes over his 30 years as an educator.

"Some of the teachers who have stood up and said, 'This is cheating,' are accused of being too harsh and too strict," Dr. Mehas said. "I have some parents complain, saying, 'Why give the kid an F just because he plagiarized four or five points?'"

Each spring, he receives about 200 calls from parents, "asking why someone's little darling isn't graduating," Dr. Mehas said.

"In the cases where the child has been caught plagiarizing," he added, "what I hear is, 'Well, it's really not cheating, he just didn't cite all the sources.'"

But Dr. Mehas stands firm on his decision to deny graduation to plagiarists.

He said that many school districts remain silent about the problem because it reflects poorly on them. "It's our responsibility to say there are consequences when you sign your name to something you have not produced," he said.

When confronted with the notion of serious consequences, high school students do appear

to pay attention. Nancy Breedlove, the writing center coordinator at Hononegah High School, told a group of students about a sports writer for the local newspaper, The Rockford Register Star, who was recently fired after he admitted using quotations from an article in The Star Tribune of Minneapolis without attributing them.

"We wanted to let them know that not just in the academic world, but in the professional world, it could hurt them," Ms. Breedlove said. The story had an impact. "You could have heard a pin drop in the room."

Ms. Breedlove said she was willing to do whatever it took to reinforce her point. "I just hope that somehow the kids do get the message," she said, "because this new temptation has been put out there, and it begins with www."

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