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Understanding “Internet plagiarism”

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Abstract

Current concerns about plagiarism participate in a culture-wide anxiety that mirrors the cultural climate in previous textual revolutions. In today’s revolution, the Internet is described as the cause of a perceived increase in plagiarism, and plagiarism-detecting services (PDSs) are described as the best solution. The role of the Internet should be understood, however, not just in terms of access to text but also in terms of textual relationships. Synthesizing representations of iText with literary theories of intertextuality suggests that all writers work intertextually, all readers interpret texts intertextually, and new media not only increase the number of texts through which both writers and readers work but also offer interactive information technologies in which unacknowledged appropriation from sources does not necessarily invalidate the text. Plagiarism-detecting services, in contrast, describe textual appropriation solely in terms of individual ethics. The best response to concerns about plagiarism is revised institutional plagiarism policies combined with authentic pedagogy that derives from an understanding of iText, intertextuality, and new media.

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My sense is that Internet plagiarism is becoming more dangerous than we realize.

Ellen Laird

A sense of impending doom hangs over the academy as the specter of “Internet plagiarism” threatens to undo the entire educational enterprise. Brian Kates (2003), reporting for the *New York Daily News*, articulated a widely shared concern: “In numbers growing by the thousands, students have found a quick-fix cure for their academic headaches—on the Internet. In the wonderful world of Web sites, scores of online companies are eager and able to provide slackers with whatever they need—for a price.” Similarly, an academic essay by Danielle DeVoss and Annette C. Rosati (2002) has posited a binary in which students are either “doing critical, thoughtful, thorough research” or “searching for papers to plagiarize” (p. 201).¹ Another essay by Karla Saari Kitalong (1998) has made a primary assumption explicit: At the heart

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¹ Elsewhere they offer a wider range of causes of Internet plagiarism (p. 195), but then they conclude their article with this binary.

of the current furor over plagiarism, she said, “is the indisputable fact that the Internet’s rich repository of online texts provides an unprecedented opportunity for plagiarism” (p. 255). Thomas Atkins and Gene Nelson (2001) specified that not only are a billion pages available on the Internet but so are two hundred “cheat sites.” In addition, students can cut and paste from other students’ online papers so that teachers will not recognize stylistic or conceptual dissonance in the plagiarized paper (p. 101).

The arguments of Kates, DeVoss and Rosati, Atkins and Nelson, and Kitalong participate in the near-universal belief that the Internet is *causing* an increase in plagiarism. While worrying about whether causal sequences can be ascertained, my 1999 book on plagiarism also postulates ways in which new media are “changing authorship by providing new models of and venues for collaboration and mimesis” (Howard, 1999, pp. 131–132).

In this essay, I take these questions further, looking at the ways in which the Internet participates in our culture of authorship. My desire is to develop a more nuanced understanding of that relationship—something beyond an uncritical assumption of causality. Only then will teachers be positioned to take effective action. What is being called “Internet plagiarism” is presently understood almost exclusively in terms of access to text with expanded access itself believed to be the primary cause of the phenomenon. The history of text, however, reveals that previous revolutions in access to text, such as those precipitated by the advent of the printing press and again by mass education, also incited cultural fears. This time, the cultural fears are focused on issues of property and especially on students’ incursions on the words and ideas of others. If, however, we consider not just access to text but also textual relationships, we can gain a more tempered, critical understanding of Internet plagiarism.

Indisputably, the Internet makes texts readily available for plagiarizing. Jeffrey R. Young (2001b) named the venues: “In recent years, professors have been frustrated by the way more and more students use the Internet to cheat—by plagiarizing the work of other students, by copying material from online reference works, by buying term papers from online paper-writing companies, and by other means” (n.p.). Seth Stevenson (2001) surveyed the possibilities for procuring entire papers online, ordered a custom-written paper for a silly, impossible topic of his own device, and offered wry commentary on both the purchasing of papers and on assignments that prompt students not to write:

When the custom paper came back, it was all I’d dreamed. Representative sentence: “The novel’s diverse characters demonstrate both individually and collectively the fixations and obsessions that bind humanity to the pitfalls of reality and provide a fertile groundwork for the semiotic explanation of addictive behavior.” Tripe. The paper had no thesis and in fact had no body—not one sentence actually advanced a cogent idea. I’m guessing it would have gotten a C+ at Brown—maybe even a B—. . . . If I were a just slightly lesser person, I might be tempted by this service. One custom paper off the Web: \$71.80. Not having to dredge up pointless poppycock for some po-mo obsessed, overrated lit-crit professor: priceless. (n.p.)

And as I work on this essay, Amy E. Robillard (2003) sends me the following email:

How much would you pay for a 7-page paper called “Plagiarism is Theft”???? Oh, the irony is just TOO much for me. go to this link when you want a good laugh. . . <http://search.essaysite.com:9000/cgi-bin/query?mss=essaysite&q=%20plagiarism> If it doesn’t

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