Tracking Down the Cheaters: A Review of “Mouse Click Plagiarism: The Role of Technology in Plagiarism and the Librarian’s Role in Combating It

I taught lower-level English courses at Xavier University full time for three years and confronted perhaps four plagiarizers each year. Once a student turned in a paper his brother had written (I had also had the brother in a class), and I avoided a confrontation by returning the paper to him ungraded and explaining that the paper did not match my assignment to the class. In all other instances, the plagiarism interview was similarly horrible, and I was always glad when the plagiarizer was absent (as often happened) the day I returned papers. First, the student would deny plagiarism, until I showed him the source from which the paper was taken. Then the student would say he didn’t understand what I had meant by plagiarism. Then he would ask what extra credit he could do to make up the work he had failed. Only one student cried, inconsolably; I finally told him to stop it, that it was only an English paper, and that he would still pass the class.

Auer and Krupar confirm my view that plagiarism is increasing. Virginia Tech’s Undergraduate Honor System statistics show 142 students accused of plagiarism in 1996-7; 282 in 1997-98; and 450 in 1998-99 (Auer & Krupar, 2001). Internet access plays a large role in plagiarism, the authors agree, because cutting and pasting from an Internet document is so easy, much easier than the old method of cheating, which involved retyping passages from a book or journal article (2001).

Auer and Krupar believe librarians can and should have a role in detecting, or better still, in preventing plagiarism. They point out that while many composition teachers are familiar with
methods of tracking down a suspicious source, teachers in other disciplines are often not (Auer & Krupar, 2001). They suggest that librarians have a duty to help professors find the source of a stolen document, either by tracking it down personally or by leading the professors to sites like Turnitin.com. (2001). Indeed, Auer and Krupar take the view that it is the responsibility of the librarian, rather than of the course instructor, to explain to students how to cite sources correctly within the text and at the conclusion of papers that involve research (2001).

A suggestion that librarians urge professors not to assign papers “that are a mere recitation or recounting of information”—in effect, that professors avoid assigning paper topics students will find uninteresting—seems a difficult one to implement (2001).

In the same way that the Internet has made it easier than ever to cheat, it has also made it easier than ever to find the source of a plagiarized document, since the instructor and the student generally have access to exactly the same documents and databases through school sources. Of the twelve plagiarizers I confronted, all but one had taken his paper verbatim from completely accessible Web sites. I found some paragraphs from the other student’s paper in a library book; she (or another student at a different time) had underlined the stolen paragraphs, which made them easy for me to find.

The authors of the Web-based papers my students plagiarized were graduate students or professional journalists with polished, elegant styles. That the papers had been plagiarized was instantly apparent. Nevertheless, following Auer and Krupar’s suggestion to obtain a writing sample early in the semester would certainly make it easier for an instructor to confront a plagiarizer when the student’s vocabulary and the paper’s do not match (2001).

It is also imperative that professors and librarians make the penalties for plagiarism very clear and emphasize that it is a crime with real victims (poorly performing students who do not
plagiarize, whose grades on the curve are likely to fall closer to the bottom of the curve than they would if other students did not cheat).

It is interesting and sadly reassuring to note that other faculty members, like me, are reluctant to turn in plagiarizers to honor committees. Auer and Krupar suggest some plausible reasons:

Maramark and Maline (1993) list some of these reasons: “lack of knowledge of institutional procedures,” “cases are difficult to prove,” “sanctions are inappropriate for offense,” the likelihood of damaging “the student’s reputation or career,” that it would “reflect negatively on their teaching skills,” and “fear of litigation” (as cited in Maramark & Maline, 1993, p.7).

Auer and Krupar suggest that there are times when students plagiarize not with malicious intent but because of a genuine lack of knowledge of the rules of citation (2001). They are correct in noting that until very recently—post 2001, in fact—composition textbooks have been negligent in explaining how to cite online sources correctly, spending paragraphs explaining little-used online access methods like FTP, and sources like MOOs and MUDs, while ignoring the personal or corporate Web sites students use most frequently (Axelrod & Cooper, 2000). It is not impossible that some students, confused by a lack of agreement even among MLA handbooks and writing-center Web sites, throw up their hands and decide to avoid the citation issue altogether.

Still, in my experience, it is easy to tell a lazy or confused student from a plagiarizer. A lazy or confused student, for example, will generally make some attempt at citation, even if it is inadequate. A student might include as a References page a single line of type, showing the Web site from which the source (or at least “http://www.google.com”) was accessed. In this case, it is
obvious that the writer did not mean to pass the work off as her own (although unlikely that the student will do well with other aspects of the paper).

There is no excuse for any student in a well-taught freshman composition class, in 2002, to misunderstand source citation. The most recent editions of popular English composition textbooks cover the citation of online sources clearly and extensively (Ramage, Bean & Johnson, 2003). Fewer students every year are taught in high school to cite their sources according to the pre-1985 MLA style requiring footnotes, which even with word processing can seem a daunting task.

The ALA Code of Ethics guidelines in this instance seem contradictory. Finally, academic librarians are probably bound more closely in situations involving plagiarism to Principles IV (“We recognize and respect intellectual property rights”) and the second half of VII (“We…do not allow our personal beliefs to interfere with fair representation of the aims of our institutions”) than to those Principles involving the student’s right to confidentiality (American Library Association, 1995). It is certainly part of every school’s aim that each student be responsible for the completion of her own work, and as academic librarians, we have the responsibility to assure to the best of our ability that this is, in fact, what is occurring at our institutions.
References


