

Plagiarism: policy against cheating or policy for learning?

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4 February 2004

Summary

Compulsory use of plagiarism-detection software, specifically turnitin.com, is proposed for introduction at the University of Wollongong in 2004. The pros and cons of this are canvassed.

There are several types of plagiarism, including plagiarism of ideas, word-for-word plagiarism, plagiarism of sources and plagiarism of authorship. Using plagiarism-detection software can readily pinpoint only word-for-word plagiarism, and only some instances of it.

There are four main rationales for using plagiarism-detection software: deterring and detecting cheating; fostering learning of proper acknowledgement practice; building institutional reputation; and treating students fairly. None of these provides a strong case for compulsory use of the software. There are some serious negative effects of compulsory checking, especially reduced trust.

Plagiarism-detection software potentially can play a valuable contribution if it is used voluntarily by students, on a case-by-case basis by teachers and as part of a wider process of learning proper acknowledgement practice.

Introduction

The University Education Committee of the University of Wollongong is proposing to require use of plagiarism-detection service turnitin.com on a compulsory basis for honours, masters and PhD theses from 2004 and for selected undergraduate classes from 2005.¹ A number of staff are quite concerned about the implications. In this paper I cover a range of issues and arguments concerning plagiarism in a university context. I begin by outlining different types of plagiarism and then examine several rationales for using plagiarism-detection software, concluding with some recommendations. I focus on educational issues and do not consider workload issues or intellectual property matters related to turnitin.com.

I have been studying plagiarism issues for over 20 years and have published a number of articles about it, mainly about plagiarism by academics.² I was the principal (though unacknowledged) author of the University of Wollongong's document "Acknowledgement practice."³

Types of plagiarism

The verb "plagiarise" is defined in the *Shorter Oxford* as follows:

Take and use as one's own (the thoughts, writings, inventions, etc., of another person); copy (literary work, ideas, etc.) improperly or without acknowledgement; pass off the thoughts, work, etc. of (another person) as one's own⁴

Plagiarism thus involves claiming credit for ideas or creations without proper acknowledgement.

In an academic context, acknowledgement is typically given in the form of citations or explicit statements of thanks. This is important for several reasons, including to give credit for ideas or words, to provide support for one's argument, and to show that one is aware of sources. To speak of proper acknowledgement is to focus on the positive side of scholarly practice; to speak of plagiarism is to focus on the negative.

There are many types of plagiarism and it is worthwhile outlining several of them.

Plagiarism of ideas

Claiming credit for someone else's thoughts, ideas or inventions can be called "plagiarism of ideas." This occurs, for example, when a corporation adopts the idea of an independent inventor, claiming it as its own.

Proving plagiarism of ideas can be difficult, because of the possibility of independent creation. Alfred Russell Wallace is credited with the independent discovery of the theory of evolution; if he had known about Darwin's work prior to his own, he might be accused of plagiarism. Today, anyone claiming credit for the theory of evolution is assumed to be a plagiarist because the theory is so widely known.

A student reviewing a book might develop ideas on her own but would be guilty of plagiarism of ideas if she was inspired by a book review (published or unpublished) but didn't mention this review in her own. Another possibility is that she was talking with friends about the book and picked up an insight from one of them, and then used it in her review as if the idea was her own.

Word-for-word plagiarism

Copying the exact expression of someone's writing can be called "word-for-word plagiarism." Consider the following sentence written by Jeff Schmidt: "Indeed, the most difficult part about becoming a professional is adopting the professional attitude and learning to be comfortable adhering to the given ideological framework, which some students find quite alien."⁵ If this sentence is reproduced in an essay without quotation marks, this is word-for-word plagiarism, even if Schmidt is mentioned. Next consider this version: "The most challenging part about becoming a professional is adopting the attitude of a professional and learning to be comfortable in the given ideological framework, a process some students find alien." Some words have been changed but the basic structure of Schmidt's sentence remains. This could be considered word-for-word plagiarism or possibly very poor paraphrasing. Unless Schmidt is cited, it also involves plagiarism of ideas. Finally consider this: "It is very difficult for some students to adopt the attitudes and ideological framework required for them to succeed as professionals." This is an acceptable paraphrase of Schmidt's statement, but Schmidt should be cited, otherwise it is plagiarism of ideas.

Plagiarism of sources

If writer R uses writer S's citations, without acknowledging that the citations came from S, this can be called "plagiarism of sources." For example, in the chapter from which the above sentence was drawn, Schmidt cites several articles from the *New York Times*, Max Horkheimer's *Eclipse of Reason* and Robert N. Proctor's *Value-Free Science?* If A made an argument similar to Schmidt's, citing Schmidt, and used the same set of references — perhaps adding a few or omitting some — without noting that Schmidt had used the same ones for the same purposes, this would be plagiarism of sources. The more serious plagiarism is when the sources are not read by R: the references are simply taken from S's bibliography. A less serious form occurs when R reads the sources but does not reveal indebtedness to S for having discovered that particular relevant collection or sequence of references.

There is another form of misattribution not covered by the concept of plagiarism: citing sources that were not actually used to make the argument in question. For example, an academic might cite prominent figures in the field as a form of obeisance, without actually using their ideas in the argument.⁶

Plagiarism of authorship

If R claims to be the author of an entire piece of work — an article, an essay, a book, a musical composition — fully or substantially authored by S, this can be called "plagiarism of authorship." This occurs when a scientist submits a paper that has already been published by someone else, when a student submits an essay written by someone else (such as a friend or someone who has been paid to write it), when an academic is listed as author of work largely

produced by a spouse, research assistant or student, or when a subordinate, speechwriter or ghostwriter does the bulk of intellectual work for a work produced under the name of a celebrity, politician, corporate executive or someone else with money, position or status.

Plagiarism of authorship often involves word-for-word plagiarism, but not always. Translating an article from another language and publishing it under one's name, as if one had written it, is plagiarism of authorship but not word-for-word plagiarism.

It is worth noting that plagiarism does not necessarily involve copyright infringement. A ghostwriter might write a book for a celebrity who appears as the sole author; the celebrity or the book publisher would normally hold the copyright.⁷

In most cases, software for detecting plagiarism can detect only word-for-word plagiarism for those documents in its database. Such software cannot detect plagiarism of ideas, plagiarism of sources or plagiarism of authorship unless they also involve detectable word-for-word plagiarism. Students who take ideas from others but express them in their own words will not be detected. Nor will students who purchase custom-written essays.⁸ Nor will those who copy from sources not on detection databases, such as many printed texts, CD-ROMs, certain subscription databases and the deep web, or who use translations of documents.⁹

Rationales

The main rationales for using plagiarism-detection software seem to be:

- deterring and detecting cheating;
- fostering learning of proper acknowledgement practice;
- building institutional reputation;
- treating students fairly.

For each of these rationales, some strengths and weaknesses of using plagiarism-detection software are noted here.

Deterring and detecting cheating

Plagiarism-detection software can be used to detect students who attempt to cheat by using online sources rather than doing their own writing. If students know that their essays might be checked this way, they may be deterred from this form of cheating.

Cheating by students is undoubtedly a major problem, as attested by various surveys. Plagiarism is one important mode of cheating, though cheating occurs in all forms of assessment.¹⁰ Widespread student plagiarism predates the Internet but electronic sources have made the practice far easier.

Many academics believe that they can pick up plagiarism, but in most cases they can detect only a small proportion of what occurs. Thorough checking for plagiarism is incredibly

labour-intensive. One article on the topic, pre-Internet, recommended reading student essays four times each in order to detect plagiarism.¹¹ Plagiarism-detection software automates much of the process.

Plagiarism-detection software has a number of shortcomings. Most obviously, not all sources are included in databases. There is no check for plagiarism of ideas and no conceivable check for false authorship, as when students submit essays specially written for them by someone else. In these circumstances, a software check may give a false certificate of probity.¹² Students may even be stimulated to use other innovative methods of cheating.

Plagiarism-detection software should be compared to alternative methods of preventing cheating.¹³ One is to design assignments so that plagiarism is difficult, for example by requiring students to link their topic to current events or to activities in the classroom, for which no Internet or other sources are available.¹⁴ Another way of reducing cheating is by fostering adherence to an honour code in which students pledge not to give or receive assistance, and to report violations by others. Using plagiarism-detection software, with its presumption that cheating is tackled by screening essays, may discourage initiatives along these lines.

Fostering learning of proper acknowledgement practice

Quoting, paraphrasing and citing sources appropriately is something that has to be learned: it is neither obvious nor automatic for people new to writing. Scholarly acknowledgement practice can be likened to etiquette: doing the proper thing according to standards suitable for the occasion. This way of thinking about the matter focusses on learning.

There are various ways to foster learning of any social convention. One is the punitive approach, with severe penalties for transgressions. Research in learning shows that this approach is usually far less effective than encouragement of good practice, through modelling appropriate behaviour, regular practice and rewarding successful performance.

Much if not most plagiarism in student essays is due to ignorance, sloppiness or panic rather than an attempt to cheat.¹⁵ Most students treat proper acknowledgement practice seriously¹⁶; some are mortified when informed that they have done things inappropriately.

In line with this way of thinking, some teachers treat acknowledgement practice as something to be learned like other scholarly skills such as giving seminars or carrying out experiments. Others, though, treat plagiarism as a serious transgression, akin to a sin, deserving of the most severe penalties.

Plagiarism-detection software can play a role in fostering proper acknowledgement practice by alerting teachers and students to passages that are incorrectly quoted or insufficiently acknowledged. It can also frighten students about being caught plagiarising and hence stimulate them to learn proper practice.

Plagiarism-detection software also can have a negative effect on learning. If used on a blanket basis, the presumption is that every student is a potential cheat. This can discourage an openness to learning and instead foster an attitude that whatever gets through the system, such as plagiarism of ideas, is okay.

Surveillance in the workplace, intended to eliminate stealing and other abuses, can reduce productivity, as workers become more apprehensive and less trusting of management. The same processes can be expected to operate in surveillance of student work. If students trust their teachers — to help them learn, and not to penalise them unfairly — they are much more likely to put energy into their studies. Universal plagiarism-checking implies a lack of trust in students that will be reciprocated by some of them, with negative consequences for learning.¹⁷

Some teachers, believing the punitive approach to be pedagogically unsound, may decide not to follow formal procedures for reporting plagiarism, especially if the procedures are cumbersome.¹⁸ Some may choose not to take notice of suspected plagiarism.

When students are asked to satisfy high standards of acknowledgement practice, it is reasonable that they expect similarly high standards of university staff. But there are many instances of “institutionalised plagiarism” — plagiarism that is accepted, often as part of the institutional hierarchy — that reveal a double standard.¹⁹ As one student commented, “If the President can use a ghostwriter, why can’t I?”²⁰ There are many stories of lecturers who “borrow” material for their subject notes from colleagues and who present material in lectures drawn from unacknowledged sources. Memos are regularly circulated by university officials under their own names, even though the text was written by someone else. Many university documents do not specify authorship accurately. Students may well ask why they are expected to adhere to standards not followed by those who teach them and administer their education.

Building institutional reputation

University-wide use of plagiarism-detection software can provide assurance that the institution is maintaining quality in its students. This can aid the reputation of the university for maintaining standards.²¹

On the other hand, requiring plagiarism-detection software could reduce a university’s reputation if academics elsewhere see this as a simplistic or inadequate way of fostering good practice. Another risk is fostering a plagiarism-detection mentality that could lead to excessive scrutiny of writing by staff and previous students, leading to public disputes over alleged transgressions, large and small, and over discrepancies in penalties.

There are other ways to build reputation. For example, if students learn acknowledgement practice in a supportive, non-judgemental atmosphere, they may become ambassadors for the university through their good practice as well as their endorsements.

Treating students fairly

It can be argued that using plagiarism-detection software for all essays in a class is fair because students are treated identically. Just checking the essays of a few students who the teacher suspects of cheating would be unfair, according to this line of thinking.²²

The contrary view is that using a plagiarism-detection service for selected students is quite reasonable, assuming that the teacher has grounds for suspicion. Before the availability of software checking, it was always considered appropriate for teachers to check only for suspected plagiarism, not to check every source in every essay.

In other areas, students are not treated identically and objections are seldom raised. For example, many students submit certificates from doctors and counsellors to cover absences and obtain extensions. Some certificates appear suspicious — for example due to the handwriting — and can lead to checking, for example by ringing the doctor. If students were treated identically, then every certificate submitted would need to be checked the same way.

In many large classes, tutors mark the essays of students in their own tutorials. If all students were treated the same, then the same person would mark all essays in the class, or the subject coordinator would use some form of double-marking to standardise marks across tutorials. This is seldom done. Similarly, if a component of one student's assessment is reconsidered, then the same should be done for all students in the class. Again, this is seldom done.

These examples suggest that exact uniformity of treatment is far from standard practice and therefore not a strong rationale for universal use of plagiarism-detection software. Equity need not require uniformity of treatment. It could be said that students are treated fairly if further checking is only undertaken when academic judgement so indicates.

Conclusion

Given that there are several different rationales for using plagiarism-detection software and that for each rationale there are arguments pro and con, it is possible to draw different conclusions depending on one's values and priorities. Here I spell out some conclusions that I think are most compatible with the goal of fostering learning while minimising cheating. A wider discussion should also address workloads²³ and intellectual property.

- Fostering good acknowledgement practice is a worthwhile endeavour. It is important for both staff and students to develop a good understanding of the reasons for following citation etiquette, including giving credit for ideas and words, bolstering one's argument and demonstrating knowledge of sources.
- Plagiarism-checking should be part of a wider educational process. Given the challenges of learning proper acknowledgement practice, it is worthwhile using a range of techniques, including modelling of good practice (for example by acknowledging sources used in

lectures), formal teaching of research and citation practices, and voluntary use of plagiarism-detection software.

- Voluntary checking is far more defensible than compulsory checking. If use of plagiarism-detection software by students is voluntary, loss of trust is minimised and encouragement of learning is maximised.

Research students who are not absolutely sure of their use of sources can be encouraged to voluntarily check their work by pointing out that plagiarism can be detected in theses — which become public documents — years later, with potentially damaging effects on their reputation and career.

- Spot checking is satisfactory. Checking individual essays or passages remains an option when there is a suspicion of cheating, without the presumption that anyone might be a cheat. Plagiarism-detection software, consultations with librarians, and other techniques can be used for this purpose. Another option is checking a random sample of assignments.

- Plagiarism policy alternatives should be researched and assessed before and after adoption of any new policy.²⁴ There is a considerable body of writing about plagiarism, plagiarism prevention and plagiarism detection — and good acknowledgement practice. This work and its implications should be widely discussed before any major changes are made. If unbiased, independent studies show the relative advantage of one alternative, this should help win support for it. This is important because the success of a plagiarism policy depends on widespread support, including from university leaders, teachers and students.

Acknowledgements I thank Robert Briggs, Stewart Russell and especially John Royce for valuable comments on a draft of this paper.

Notes

1. "University use of electronic text matching systems for the detection of plagiarism," University Education Committee, University of Wollongong, Agenda Item C3, 3 December 2003 [henceforth referred to as UEC 2003]. Curiously, given that this document addresses proper acknowledgement, no author is given.

2. See especially "Plagiarism and responsibility," *Journal of Tertiary Educational Administration*, Vol. 6, No. 2, October 1984, pp. 183-190; "Plagiarism by university students: the problem and some proposals," *Tertangala*, 20 July - 3 August 1992, p. 20; "Plagiarism: a misplaced emphasis," *Journal of Information Ethics*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Fall 1994, pp. 36-47; "Academic credit where it's due," *Campus Review*, Vol. 7, No. 21, 4-10 June 1997, p. 11. Full text of most of these is available at <http://www.uow.edu.au/arts/sts/bmartin/pubs/plagiarismfraud.html>.

3. "Acknowledgement practice/plagiarism," <http://www.uow.edu.au/handbook/courserules/plagiarism.html> (accessed 2 January 2004). This document was originally titled "Acknowledgement practice."

4. Lesley Brown (ed.), *The New Shorter Oxford Dictionary on Historical Principles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

5. Jeff Schmidt, *Disciplined Minds: A Critical Look at Salaried Professionals and the Soul-Battering System that Shapes Their Lives* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), p. 148.

6. Michael H. MacRoberts and Barbara R. MacRoberts, "Problems of citation analysis: a critical review," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*, Vol. 40, No. 5, 1989, pp. 342-349, show the large extent to which citations misrepresent a scientific paper's sources both by omission of citations that should be present and the inclusion of inappropriate citations, including ones lifted from other sources. Michael MacRoberts wrote to me (1 December 1986) that "failure to acknowledge intellectual debts is universal, but not admitted to."

7. On the relation between plagiarism and copyright infringement, see Laurie Stearns, "Copy wrong: plagiarism, process, property, and the law," *California Law Review*, Vol. 80, No. 2, March 1992, pp. 513-553.

8. Robert S. Wolk, "'Dr. Research': a quick fix for plagiarists," *Journal of Information Ethics*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Spring 1993, pp. 63-71, reports on a prolific essay writer, "Steve," at a US college who "churns out 800-1000 term papers, book reviews, theses and take-home exams a year," comprising 10-15% of all assignments submitted at the college. "According to Steve, people who perform similar services exist on most campuses across the country, and several may co-exist at institutions with large enrollments." (p. 64). There is little evidence of how prevalent this practice is in Australia.

9. I thank John Royce (email, 8 January 2004) for suggesting these possibilities.

10. John S. Baird, Jr., "Current trends in college cheating," *Psychology in the Schools*, Vol. 17, No. 4, October 1980, pp. 515-522; John Croucher, *Exam Scams: Best Cheating Stories and Excuses from around the World* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1996); Harold J. Noah and Max A. Eckstein, *Fraud and Education: The Worm in the Apple* (Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001).

11. Patricia C. Bjaaland and Arthur Lederman, "The detection of plagiarism," *Educational Forum*, Vol. 37, 1973, pp. 201-206.

12. Robin Satterwhite and Marla Gerein, "Downloading detectives: searching for on-line plagiarism," http://www2.coloradocollege.edu/Library/Course/downloading_detectives_paper.htm, 2002 (accessed 31 December 2003) include the following strong words in their "preliminary conclusions": "Based on our findings this far, we are fairly confident in our ability to relate to our faculty that available detection software and services as they currently exist are not effective tools with which to identify on-line plagiarism. They are not reliable, not sophisticated enough to warrant the investment of college funds. Not only are they ineffective, but some of the products/services promote a real lack of trust and resentment between professor and student that, especially given their lack of success, makes such a purchase undesirable."

John Royce, "Has turnitin.com got it all wrapped up? (Trust or trussed?)," *Teacher Librarian*, Vol. 30, No. 4, April 2003, pp. 26-30, surveys four investigations of turnitin.com and says "The bottom line is that innocent students may be falsely accused of plagiarism, and that many plagiarists may go undetected." John Royce (email, 8 January 2004) pointed out the difficulties that may arise when a teacher strongly suspects plagiarism but turnitin.com detects nothing. He asks whether, in this circumstance, it is legitimate for the teacher to request copies of sources or to request a supplementary oral examination: "Is this harassment? Is it equitable?"

13. Robert A. Harris, *The Plagiarism Handbook: Strategies for Preventing, Detecting, and Dealing with Plagiarism* (Los Angeles: Pycszak Publishing, 2001).

14. This is recommended by a number of authors: "Thinking and talking about plagiarism," Bedford/St. Martin's Technotes, Technology and Teaching Archive, <http://bedfordstmartins.com/technotes/techtiparchive/techtip102401.htm> (accessed 31 December 2003); Royce, "Has turnitin.com got it all wrapped up? (Trust or trussed?); Satterwhite and Gerein, "Downloading detectives: searching for on-line plagiarism," state "As with many of the sources we consulted in our literature review, we recommend instead spending time and energy on proactively avoiding plagiarism in the first place, rather than trying to detect it after the fact."

15. Lisa Renard, "Cut and paste 101: plagiarism and the Net," *Educational Leadership*, Vol. 57, No. 4, December 1999 – January 2000, pp. 38-42.

16. Barry M. Kroll, "How college freshmen view plagiarism," *Written Communication*, Vol. 5, No. 2, April 1988, pp. 203-221.

17. Robert Briggs, "Shameless! Reconceiving the problem of plagiarism," *Australian Universities' Review*, Vol. 46, No. 1, 2003, pp. 19-23, argues that a moralistic attitude towards plagiarism can be counterproductive for learning and even inhibit deterrence and detection of plagiarism. "Turnitin.com, a pedagogic placebo for plagiarism," Bedford/St. Martin's Technotes, Technology and Teaching Archive, <http://bedfordstmartins.com/technotes/techtiparchive/techtip060501.htm> (accessed 31 December 2003), says of turnitin.com that "The service is not about teaching, it's about catching. ... It assumes the worst about students and the worst about teachers. It assumes students have no honor and need always to be watched and followed electronically, a big brother welcome to academic traditions. It assumes teachers are too beleaguered and inept to design classroom assignments and practices that teach students how to write responsibly."

Some editorial writers have highlighted trust as a key issue: "Catching the copycats: fighting plagiarism must not spoil the university experience," *Ottawa Citizen*, 20 October 2003, p. A14: "Plagiarism is a scourge that must be confronted. But in doing so we must be careful not to poison the student-teacher relationship and sour the university experience."; "Distrust cheats students," *Edmonton Journal*, 17 December 2003, p. A12: "The trend [to require use of turnitin.com] is disturbing, because it fosters a climate of distrust between teachers and students ... education is preferable to heavy-handed measures, no matter how desirable their goals."

18. I know of several academics who, for these reasons, have not formally reported serious plagiarism.

19. Brian Martin, "Plagiarism: a misplaced emphasis," *Journal of Information Ethics*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Fall 1994, pp. 36-47, <http://www.uow.edu.au/arts/sts/bmartin/pubs/94jie.html>.

20. Quoted in Christopher S. Hawley, "The thieves of academe: plagiarism in the university system," *Improving College and University Teaching*, Vol. 32, No. 1, 1984, pp. 35-39, at p. 35.

21. UEC 2003 opens with this sentence: "The University needs to demonstrate it has procedures in place to educate students about plagiarism and to detect and deal with plagiarism in an equitable manner across Faculties." This appears to be the document's major rationale for requiring use of turnitin.com.

22. UEC 2003 contains the following sentences: "If the system is not used for all students at some stage during their enrolment at university, then students who have not had work submitted to the Turnitin system are advantaged relative to other students who have had their

work submitted”; “If plagiarism is detected and a disciplinary process is initiated there is inequity between students in that class if all assignments are not subsequently submitted to Turnitin as the marker may be fallible in his her detection of plagiarism.” Note that the latter statement assumes, incorrectly, that Turnitin is infallible.

23. Checking citations can be time-consuming. Turnitin.com reports only the first source it detects that is identical to a submitted passage. Given that this source may itself have been copied from elsewhere, the citation in a submitted document would need to be checked separately.

The University of Wollongong’s new procedures for dealing with suspected plagiarism are complex and highly onerous. In this context, use of a detection-oriented approach such as turnitin.com could result in substantial increases in workload if all procedures were followed punctiliously.

24. UEC 2003 contains no references and no information about any systematic testing of the option it advocates.