The Impact of the Internet on Plagiarism

Sandeep Krishnamurthy
sandeep@u.washington.edu

Surveys conducted by Roger McCabe of Rutgers University reveal that over 75% of college students admit to cheating and self-reported incidents of cheating have increased from 11% in 1963 to 49% in 1993 (http://www.nwu.edu/uacc/cai/). One form of cheating is plagiarism- i.e., representation of others' work as one's own. The Internet has reduced the effort required to plagiarize and has made available resources that adept students can use in their coursework. I will focus on two issues that I find particularly important- term paper databases and the role of the copy-and-paste function.

For those of you who are not aware of this concept, there are at least fifty websites that are devoted to disseminating papers that students can submit in their classes for academic credit. Sample titles of papers on one website (http://www.schoolsucks.com) include "History of the Ford Motor Company" and "Tobacco Advertising and Its Dangerous Effects on Children".

These sites are of two types: free or fee-based. The free sites are compilations of papers contributed by other students. Since these papers are written by other undergraduate students, the quality is generally low. Students can typically submit their papers for addition to such a database by clicking on a button and confidentiality is assured. The fee-based sites consist of papers written by professionals and are available at a cost to the student (e.g. The Evil House of Cheat- http://www.cheathouse.com/index.html).   I could not get into these sites since it requires some sort of payment- either a one-time fee or a membership fee for frequent users! One site I visited offers a rush service- at an extra cost, of course. I suspect that the quality would be higher on these sites in comparison to the free sites and that worries me more.

I found both types of sites to be quite prosperous. The number of hits were rather high and both types of sites had a lot of banner advertising.

These databases are superior to the 1-800 numbers for ordering term papers that have existed for some time. Obviously, since some give this information free, a larger number of students can use it. But, they also provide students with unlimited flexibility. For example, a student may extract two paragraphs from such a paper making it very hard to detect. This was not an option with the 1-800 numbers.

Second, the copy-and-paste function provides students with innumerable opportunities to plagiarize. Recently, students in my *Introduction to Marketing* class had to write a report on the environmental factors affecting the auto industry. One report had several paragraphs that were directly lifted from the website of the United Auto Workers union without citation.   This is not an isolated case.

Students can now copy-and-paste information from the websites of companies (e.g. Procter and Gamble), brands (e.g. McDonalds), advertising agencies (e.g. Bozell Worldwide), trade associations (e.g. Newspaper Association of America) and business magazines (e.g. Fortune) to name a few. Also, students can draw from websites focussing on financial analysis (e.g. http://cnnfn.com) and those that have marketing articles from practitioners (e.g. http://www.marketinglibrary.com). Of course, just because the number of on-line sources has increased, it does not mean that students will plagiarize more. However, the ease of doing this and the ready accessibility lead me to believe that this will occur more often than some of us may think.

One of the issues that this also brings up is the difficulty of detection. An individual faculty member who suspects such plagiarism must conduct detailed research and collect evidence before making a case. This requires a lot of effort and takes away from scarce faculty time.

Given the challenges involved, I would like to present some of my thoughts on how instructors can limit such plagiarism in the courses they teach-

1.   *Create unique and challenging assignments*:

        Students are most likely to plagiarize when the assignment requires dealing with conventional topics in a standard format. If the assignment requires careful interpretation and analysis, construction of persuasive arguments using different types of evidence and taking a balanced approach on an issue, students would be less likely to plagiarize.

2.   *Discuss plagiarism and appropriate citation methods in the first class and include relevant material in your syllabus*:

        Discuss the important of original thought and writing in preparing term-papers. Clarify the appropriate use of citation. I think that several students have misunderstood the role of citations. For example, one segment believes that they should cite only if they take some material verbatim from a source! Others may think that such plagiarism is acceptable if the assignment is worth 5% of their grade! Clarification in the first class spells out the importance of this issue to students.

3.   *Work to develop an honor code*:

        McCabe's work suggests that presence of honor codes especially with some degree of student involvement leads to a drop in cheating rates (http://www.nwu.edu/uacc/cai/). Make sure the honor policy includes a note on appropriate use of web sources.

4.   *Discuss this matter with colleagues and senior faculty*:

Informal discussions with other faculty members on how they deal with plagiarism has helped me develop my own strategy. I also always try to keep senior faculty involved when I am faced with such a situation so that they can deal with students when they approach them.

5.   *Not all students plagiarize*:

I think it is important that we are not over-zealous in this matter. I believe that the majority of students are still interested in learning and do not plagiarize. Hence, we must be careful and prudent in our approach.

I believe that this problem has the potential to grow larger as the Internet grows and students become more aware of the available options. This is an especially important problem for marketing educators, given the unethical image of marketers. In the long-run, we must coordinate our efforts to limit this phenomenon and maintain the integrity of the educational process.