

Chapter 2

Academic Misconduct and the Internet

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides a general background on the problem of plagiarism, how the Internet has been implicated as a negative influence on Academic Integrity (AI), empirical study data on the influences of the Internet on plagiarism, reasons why students may conduct plagiarism, and best practices in the use of plagiarism detection. Within the first section, three empirical studies are highlighted to indicate the actual occurrence of plagiarism in graduate education and the role the Internet may play in influencing AI. In the second section, a description of both how and why students conduct plagiarism is presented. Existing literature on the topic is explored to better inform stakeholders on the ‘why’ component with suggestions for potential mitigating solutions. The subsequent section describes plagiarism detection software that is commonly in use across the globe including best practices on how to interpret detection results. Lastly, recommendations and calls for future research are provided.

INTRODUCTION

Plagiarism has existed ever since the dawn of human creativity. The English word plagiarism first came into use in the early 17th Century and has its root in the Latin term *plagiarius*, meaning kidnapper or plunderer, which in itself is rooted in the Greek word *plagion*, for oblique or non-direct. In its earliest form, a literary thief was termed a plagiarist (‘Plagiarism’, 2014). During this time in history, it is understandable that the term plagiarism was born as words were becoming much easier to copy due to a combination of the advent of the printing press, improved literacy by the populace, and the widespread distribution and consumption of text (Febvre & Martin, 1976). In response to concerns about the copying of ideas and words, the concept of copyright was developed by British printers in the 18th Century.

Perhaps some of the best examples of the pervasiveness of plagiarism through history can be seen in the pirating of text by great writers such as William Shakespeare, Oscar Wilde, and Martin Luther King, Jr. (Moss, 2005). Within exigent literature is been a rising concern about the negative influences

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-8057-7.ch002

that the Internet has on the incidence of plagiarism. In a disturbing recent event, and intelligence report on the weapons of mass destruction reported to exist in Iraq that was submitted to Prime Minister Tony Blair, it was found that many of the materials that were used were plagiarized from various online sources (Howard, 2007). Another high profile plagiarism case occurred when New York Times writer Jason Blair was found to have utilized text without permission and without citation in many of his 600 articles (Roig-Franzia, 2014).

Beyond the literary world, plagiarism has infiltrated other areas of society as well. Specifically, it has been noted that plagiarism has been prevalent within Higher Education (HE) throughout its existence (Grijalva, Nowell, & Kerkvliet, 2006; Postle, 2009). Just as concerns about the ease of conducting plagiarism utilizing the Internet has been voiced in the news, numerous studies have reported that due to the amount of information available online, coupled with the ease of computer technology, the Internet has provided an almost irresistible means of carrying out plagiarism (Ackerman & White, 2008; Gilmore, Strickland, Timmerman, Maher, & Feldon, 2010; Grijalva et al., 2006; Lanier, 2006; Logue, 2004; Schiller, 2005; Selwyn, 2008; Townley & Parsell, 2005).

Complicating the issue, is that many students when queried about cutting-and-pasting of texts from various sources, these individuals did not realize that they were conducting plagiarism (Baker, Thornton, & Adams, 2008). This lack of awareness is readily confirmed by a study of 70,000 undergraduate and 10,000 graduate students, in which 62% and 59%, respectively, admitted to plagiarizing material from online sources (McCabe, 2005). The efficiency at which plagiarism can be conducted utilizing Internet sources carries even greater concern in light of the prolific growth that has occurred in the use of online environments in HE since the 1990s (Grijalva et al., 2006; Hart, 2010; Lanier, 2006).

BACKGROUND

According to the wide range of recent research on the rapid growth of plagiarism in the online environment, it is purported that such academic misconduct is highly prevalent within the entirety of HE (Gibelman & Gelman, 2003; Postle, 2009; Scanlon, 2003; Walker, 2010). Yet the majority of the concerns appearing in the studies are not based on empirical evidence but rather the admissions of students about their own indiscretions. And even in light of the number of studies that have been conducted on this topic, there is little consensus as to what the actual prevalence of plagiarism is among student populations with reports of incidence rates as low as 9% and as high as 95% (Scanlon, 2003).

As disquieting as these studies and their findings may be, there is yet to be a significant body of research built that has a foundation in quantitative data on the actual incidence of plagiarism at various levels of HE. Moreover, exigent literature is lacking in prevalence baselines as well as trends in the data. Considering the argument that the Internet has led to the degradation of academic ethical standards and the reported temptation technological advances provide students, it would be easy to assume that online education would be inundated with high-levels in the conduct of plagiarism. Howard (2007) summarized this assumption within the literature stating ‘a sense of impending doom hangs over the academy as the specter of ‘Internet plagiarism’ threatens to undo the entire education enterprise. [... there is a] near-universal belief that the Internet is causing an increase in plagiarism’.

Similarly, Wang (2008) stated that ‘it is speculated that the Internet has aggravated student plagiarism’. Yet again, few quantitative studies have been conducted comparing academic dishonesty levels in online versus traditional courses, in fact, those studies that have been conducted show diverse results.

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