Maintaining Academic Integrity in Online Education

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Abstract

Online education has come under a great deal of scrutiny over the issue of academic integrity. It is assumed that cheating and plagiarism are a greater problem online than in a traditional class. In reality, maintaining academic integrity is equally a challenge in both delivery modes. However, by the very nature of online education, a case can be made that it is more conducive to both detecting and combating plagiarism than is a traditional class.

Introduction

With over 23,000 students, Baker College is the largest private school in Michigan. It has been offering online education since 1994. Today, there are more than 5,000 students worldwide taking classes through Baker's Online College. Baker's online MBA program is among the largest in the country. Online education is extremely popular with working adults and for those with children. It is now possible to continue one's education in a way that minimizes the competing demands of both work and family. In spite of its advantages many people are uncomfortable with the whole concept of online education. A major reservation seems to center on the issue of cheating and plagiarism in the online classroom. The perception, right or wrong, is that more cheating takes place in an online class than in a traditional class. The sad truth is that cheating and plagiarism are equally a problem in both types of classes (Carnevale, 1999).

Many people not familiar with online education tend to equate this format with that of a glorified correspondence course. Those who are familiar with online education know that this is not the case at all. Students who have taken courses in both traditional and online formats continually say that online courses require far more work. Every online course at Baker College has a significant discussion component in addition to term papers, case evaluations and exams. Under these conditions, it would be very difficult for a surrogate student to complete an online course, or even a portion of one, given the inter-relatedness of all the activities and extensive on-going time commitment that is required.

Tools to Fight Plagiarism

Ironically, a strong case can be made that it is actually harder to cheat online and that it is also easier to detect. In a traditional class, the instructor does not have the benefit of seeing ongoing written products from each student. A few intermittent written assignments do not provide the same level of insight into a student's writing style that one would find in an online class. This in depth knowledge of each student's capabilities makes it much easier to expose fraudulent work.

If a student's online writing style suddenly changes, this would alert the instructor to the possibility that cheating could have taken place. If this were to occur, an unsolicited phone call to the student to discuss the questionable material might be appropriate. If the student cannot intelligently discuss (or defend) what was written, the work is probably not his or her own (Carnevale, 1999).

At Baker College, an electronic record of all correspondence is maintained for online courses. Entire courses are archived for future reference and for quality control purposes. During the term, the instructor has a readily accessible record of everything done by each student from the first day of class to the last. As a result, it is very easy to compare a student's writing style on different class assignments. In one class, the instructor noticed that there was a marked improvement in a student's writing style for the term paper. Upon closer examination, she noticed that there were almost no citations in the body of the paper. The instructor did a search on the Internet and found that the student had plagiarized eight pages directly out of a company's annual report. With absolutely no remorse (which is unfortunately very common), the student appealed his "F" grade on the grounds that this was simply a case of a citation omission, not an act of plagiarism. Baker's grade appeal committee did not agree.

The Internet has made it very easy to cheat in any classroom setting (traditional or online). Students can cut and paste lengthy passages from multiple Internet sources and then splice them together for term papers. This cut-and-paste technology makes cheating so easy that the students get both lazy and sloppy. In the old days, when students were plagiarizing, they at least had to transcribe the copied material by hand. This additional step made it more likely that the student would at least use his or her own writing style. Today, putting the plagiarized material in one's own writing style is simply too much work for our technologically advanced students. "The laziness that prompts students to cheat can also prompt them to do a terrible job with their plagiarism." (Ryan, 1998) As a result, the plagiarized papers read as if they are "spliced" together from multiple sources. For the student, the absolute hardest part of this process is to give proper credit through a citation. Consequently, many students (both traditional and online) don't take the time to do what is academically and ethically required. They don't even bother giving citations. While not much can be done to detect or prevent this type of plagiarism in a traditional class, this is not the case when online.

Internet Searches "In Reverse"

Since papers are submitted electronically in an online class, they can be analyzed for plagiarism using tools readily available on the Internet. A number of commercially available plagiarism-fighting tools allow the instructor to search and compare large portions of a student's paper with material available on the Internet. To use the service, the teacher simply copies the questionable segment of a student's paper and then pastes it into the search window on the site. The search shows where on the Web that text appears. These commercial plagiarism-fighting tools come up with documents that contain phrases, sentences, and paragraphs that match with the student's paper. Some have the capability to give side-by-side comparisons with a percentage figure showing the degree of similarity. In this way, the instructor has the ability to evaluate an entire paper for plagiarism.

It is also possible to use some of the more popular Internet search engines such as *AltaVista, Northern Light*, *Google*, *Lycos*, *Excite*, *Yahoo, MetaCrawler*, *Ask Jeeves*, *GoTo,* and *HotBot* to help ferret out plagiarism. Instead of examining lengthy passages, these search engines evaluate a single phrase. If you receive a term paper that does not seem to be in keeping with the student's writing style, select one phrase such as the topic sentence or one with several unique words in it.

Enter this phrase into one of the above search engines. Be sure to enclose the suspect phrase in quotes. The quotes direct the search engines to only look for an exact match. Since each search engine looks at different parts of the Web, it would be better to enter the phrase in two or three of the search engines. If the student lifted the work off of the Internet, there is a good chance that the instructor can find the original source using these search tools.

The following example shows how it is possible to do a "search-in-reverse" to expose plagiarism. As part of the admission process into Baker's MBA program, each student is required to submit an essay. Here are the first two paragraphs of one applicant's essay.

> "The day slowly faded into night and our planning for the mission had just been completed. All appropriations had been reconciled for reconnaissance and operation was to commence in less than 20 minutes. The butterflies in my stomach awoke and began fluttering about, and I felt the urge to turn and run off. In a dreamlike trance, I affixed my gear, shouldered my weapon, and stepped onto the aircraft that may decide my fate in combat. All I could hear was the faint whisper of helicopter rotor blades gliding through the steamy night sky. Suddenly, the night came alive and the resounding noises heard only in combat enveloped me. An exhilarating sense of humility and wonder came over me as I thought, "Why am I here?"

> My career as a United States Marine had a tremendous impact on my life. Being part of a combat unit that was disciplined and was geared toward one objective was impressively intriguing to me. Being a United States Marine represented a challenge: transcending the familiar confines of my own life and entering a completely unknown territory. I wanted to mature and grow, meet other people, and experience cultures other than my own. I wanted to travel to foreign lands and learn what it feels like to provide the very freedom that so much of us take for granted. The dark, mysterious atmosphere of war was a far cry from the farming area that I grew up in and the living arrangements that I was accustomed to."

The first person to review the essay in the application package was very impressed. In fact, she wrote: "Awesome Essay!" on the last page. Fortunately, the admissions process requires multiple people to read each essay. One of the subsequent reviewers felt that this particular essay was a little bit *too awesome*.

When the following sentence:

> *"The butterflies in my stomach awoke and began fluttering about, and I felt the urge to turn and run off."*

is put into the *Google* search engine, an essay entitled "The Guitarist" pops up on the web site: www.accepted.com. The first two paragraphs of this essay follow:

> "The lights dimmed; the crowd began to hush. As I walked onto the stage, I saw that the club was packed with people. The butterflies in my stomach awoke and began fluttering about, and I felt the urge to turn and run off. In a dreamlike trance, I picked up my bass guitar and strapped it around my neck. A spotlight cut through the darkness and focused upon the stage, blinding me momentarily. I heard the drummer begin a four count. Suddenly the club came alive, and resounding music filled the Whisky-A-Go-Go, where twenty-five years earlier, The Doors had begun their musical career. An exhilarating sense of humility and wonder came over me as I

thought, "How did I get here?"

> My career as a bass guitarist in a rock and roll band has had the greatest impact on my life. Playing in a band was important to me because it represented a challenge: transcending the familiar confines of my life and entering completely unknown territory. I wanted to meet people from different backgrounds and go to places that I might never have gone otherwise. The dark, mysterious atmosphere of a Hollywood night club was a far cry from the neat and tidy math and engineering classrooms I had been accustomed to."

On their website, "accepted.com" president Linda Abraham explains what her company is all about.

> "For those of you applying to college or graduate school, we want to help you write the best personal statement or application essay that you can write. Since you aim to receive the fat envelope, we are developing an evolving resource providing information on different aspects of the admissions process to undergraduate and graduate programs. If you would like personal assistance in structuring and editing your essays or in editing and writing your resume, you have come to the right place. Our top-notch professional editors will help you to write your best. After all, that's our business. That's our purpose."

For the record: The student who "wrote" the awesome essay using "accepted.com" did not receive a "fat envelope" from Baker College.

Digital Paper Mills

The Internet has also facilitated the growth of "Digital Paper Mills" that allow students to buy pre-written term papers. Margaret Fain and Peggy Bates (2001) of Coastal Carolina University have provided a list of Internet paper mills as a service for faculty to help deter their use. They found over 225 active Internet paper mill sites. Here are the names of some of the sites: *A1 Term Papers*, *The Cheat Factory*, *SchoolSucks.com*, *Cheater.com*, *Genius Papers*, *Evil House of Cheat*, and *Superior Term Papers*. Although very few paper mill "Web sites outwardly endorse cheating, their tag lines make it clear that cutting corners and plagiarism are likely outcomes of their services" (Anderson, 2001). Some of the digital term paper mills offer "free papers." Instead of selling papers, they generate revenue by providing advertisements on their websites.

On one site (www.termpapers-on-file.com), *The Paper Store Enterprises Inc.* states that it has "the largest catalog of expertly-researched model term papers all written by our company after 1995." The company charges $9.95 per page for their on-file papers and $19.95 per page for custom-research. "All Papers Feature 225 Words Per Page! All Papers Contain Original Ideas & Supporting Sources. All Papers Use APA, MLA, or Turabian Style!" They accept *Visa, MasterCard*, *American Express, and Discover*.

The following disclaimer appears at the bottom of *The Paper Store Enterprises, Inc*. website:

> "The intended purpose of our term papers is that they be used as models to assist you in the preparation of your own. In accordance with NJ Statutes 2A: 170-77.16-18 and similar statutes that exist in other states, neither T.O.P. nor any subdivision of The Paper Store Enterprises Inc., or its affiliates will EVER sell a model paper to ANY student giving us ANY reason to believe that (s)he will submit our work , either in whole or part, for academic credit at any institution in their own name!!!

Plagiarism is a CRIME! IF YOU QUOTE FROM OUR WORK, YOU MUST CITE OUR PAPER AS ONE OF YOUR SOURCES. The Paper Store does not engage nor participate in any transactions for the purpose of assisting students in committing academic fraud. This service is NOT available to anyone who does not have a valid, ethical reason for seeking our tutorial assistance. The organization's rights to research, write, and globally-publish example papers on the Internet are protected Free Speech and shall continue unabated and uncensored."

It should be pointed out that the use of these paper mills is equally a problem for both traditional and online classes. However, technology makes it easier to detect their use in the online class. The commercial company *Turnitin.com* (formerly known as *Plagiarism.org*) of Berkeley, California maintains a database of papers from term paper mills and academic works available online. To use the service, the instructor uploads the electronic file of the student's suspect paper. Each term paper is checked against a database of other manuscripts collected from paper mills, different universities, classes, and from the Internet.

Once the paper is analyzed, the instructor receives an originality report. This report highlights the plagiarized portions (if any) of the paper and it also provides the original sources. For this service, individual faculty are charged $25 a year. If the entire school signs up for the service, the price varies depending on the size of the school from $1,750 to $4,000 per year (Young, 2001). Two other plagiarism detection companies similar to *Turnitin.com* are *IntegriGuard* and *EduTie.* A service that is currently free is provided by *PlagiServ* (www.plagiserve.com). Unless instructors in traditional classes start requiring their students to turn in both an electric and a hard copy version of their papers, these plagiarism-fighting services are basically limited to online classes.

As stated earlier, it is easier to catch cheating online than in a traditional class. The following example serves to illustrate this point. Earlier this year, a student turned in a term paper for his online class. He did not realize that the top border of his paper said *"12000 Papers.Com."* He had apparently, and unwittingly, formatted his paper with the top border "turned off." Unfortunately, for this student, his instructor had his word processor configured to have the borders "turned on." As a result, the student received an "F" in the course and was warned that if this were to happen again, he would be dismissed from the program. If this had been a traditional class, the student would have seen *"12000 Papers.Com"* at the top of the page when he printed the final hard copy. He would have then gone back and removed the incriminating evidence before turning in the paper.

Conclusion

Maintaining academic integrity is equally a challenge in both traditional and online education. Student cheating is, unfortunately, a given at all colleges and universities. While it is impossible to eradicate student cheating completely, it can be minimized if both the faculty and administration work together. At the beginning of each course, it is incumbent upon the faculty to make students aware (verbally and in the course syllabi) that cheating in general and plagiarism in particular will not be tolerated. As a deterrent, it might be worthwhile to let the students know that the Internet can (and will) be used as a tool to combat plagiarism by doing searches in reverse. For its part, the administration must make the school's position on plagiarism very clear through the catalog, student handbook, and during student orientations. Plagiarism is unacceptable and severe consequences up to and including expulsion await those students who wish to test the policy.

Finally, the administration needs to assure the faculty that they will not be put on trial or endure a bureaucratic nightmare for simply maintaining ethical standards in their classroom. This means that the administration must be willing to stand behind the faculty when the students seek to mitigate or overturn their punishment. When the administration and faculty work together, it sends a clear and unified message to all students that cheating and plagiarism will not be tolerated in any class (traditional or online).

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