Tackling Plagiarism: Linking Hi-Tech, Low-Tech & No Tech Methods for Detection

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Abstract
Plagiarism is a growing problem, partially because of the ease of obtaining material from the Internet. A combination of methods is needed to deal with this important issue. This paper focuses on hi-tech/low-tech/no-tech methods for prevention, detection, and eradication of plagiarism and presents a typology of student plagiarism. Common faculty responses to plagiarism are also discussed along with strategies to prevent plagiarism.

Keywords: plagiarism, plagiarism detection, ethical issues in teaching, plagiarism prevention, technology in plagiarism detection

Introduction: The evolution of plagiarism

The origins of plagiarism are rooted deeply in history. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED, 1982, p. 932) informs us that the term likely originated sometime in the 1600s. The term originally referred to kidnapping children or slaves. This usage transformed over time into a metaphor for stealing “intellectual children.” In more recent times, the metaphor of a viral plague has been employed to capture the ease and self-replicating nature of plagiarism coupled with advances in information technology, notably word processing and the Internet. Legal and popular conceptions of what constitutes plagiarism also have changed greatly over time.

Whereas the idea that plagiarism is stealing has remained constant over time, several questions about the concept of plagiarism and its evolution over time are important for us to consider as we frame this discussion. The first question asks, “Can plagiarism, to some extent, be unconscious?” The corollary to this question asks, “If plagiarism is not consciously intended, is it still stealing?” The next question asks, “If plagiarism is unconscious, is it still unethical?” These
questions offer the beginning of a more sophisticated analysis of the issue and one more relevant to teaching social work values and ethics than is usually offered.

The profession of social work has a unique set of tools that can be brought to bear on the issue of academic honesty generally and plagiarism specifically. When we consider the Person in the Environment Approach, the Strengths Perspective, Developmental Thinking, Systems Perspective, the Advocacy Role, and our highly developed Code of Ethics, we realize that we are more equipped than most to address issues of academic honesty. In fact, social work may be in a unique position to develop highly effective prevention strategies for academic dishonesty by creating a professional culture where root causes are differentiated and dealt with successfully.

One example from the mid-seventies that many may remember involved the highly publicized case of musician George Harrison defending himself with an unconscious plagiarism defense. The gravity of this case indicated that the courts at that time took a dim view of plagiarism, whether conscious or unconscious. George Harrison was successfully sued by the publisher of the Chiffons 1962 hit “He’s So Fine,” which was claimed to be the basis of Harrison’s hit “My Sweet Lord” (Bright Tunes Music v. Harrisongs Music, 1976). The case turned on fairly technical musical analysis of the distinctive “grace notes” contained in the song. A strong case was made that if plagiarism occurred, it was the unconscious result of his listening to music rather than a deliberate attempt to copy it (DeCurtis, Henke, & George-Warren, 1992; Miller, J., 1980). The key question raised by this case was, “Can someone plagiarize someone else’s work without being aware that this is happening?” The judge’s decision was clear. Plagiarism, even if unconscious, is still plagiarism. This case also underscored that plagiarism can be criminally connected to copyright infringement and intellectual property laws.

Since that time, the practice of sampled music, sometimes parody, sometimes homage, has blurred the lines both legally and ethically (Bridgeport Music/Southfield Music v. Dimension Films/No Limit Films, 2004; Campbell v. Acuff-Rose, 1994). The rise of peer-to-peer networking has further changed the climate of copyright violation for what might be called the Napster generation. The social environment surrounding plagiarism and copyright is further complicated by the creation of hundreds, by some estimates thousands, of term paper mills furnishing generic term papers for free and customized papers for a fee (Kimbel Library, 2006).
As technology becomes more available and more powerful, the ease of committing plagiarism has increased, and as a result, more plagiarism routinely appears in student assignments as well as in scholarly writing and other media. For many, the attitudes around these ethical issues become a bit hazier. However, for the most part, today we see a change in degree of plagiarism, not a change in type of plagiarism.

The Proliferation of Plagiarism

The evolution of plagiarism is fueled by one aspect of modern technology, the copy and paste option. This option makes plagiarism far easier and less time consuming than before. However, earlier generations of students also had versions of copy and paste, involving scissors, correction fluid and tape, or extensive retyping, a less sophisticated version of copy and paste. A variety of sources report exponential growth in plagiarism (Szabo & Underwood, 2004). However, this raises questions about how much plagiarism has truly grown, how much awareness has grown, and how much have anti-plagiarism software tools improved the chances of detection. Although the Internet makes plagiarism easier and less complicated, the Internet also provides tools for easier detection of some types of plagiarism.

Let us consider the following “varieties of plagiaristic experience” that are familiar to all of us who teach:

- A student purchases a paper from a site such as www.cheathouse.com, a popular source for acquiring papers, and turns it in exactly as purchased.
- A student “tweaks” the purchased paper to make it less detectable.
- A student copies and pastes from a variety of sources and weaves an “original” collection.
- The student says, “I don’t know why you are so upset with me. I’ve always done it this way!”

A Typology of Plagiarists

Clearly, from the few preceding examples, there is a range of plagiarism from which one can develop typologies of plagiarists. Many authors have attempted to analyze what motivates plagiarism and distill a universal typology (Baggaley & Spencer, 2005).

One possible typology of plagiarists might include the following:

The Unconscious Plagiarist

- Thought Process: “I didn’t remember that I read it somewhere.”
Thought Process: “Isn’t this all just common knowledge?”

The Ignorant Plagiarist
- Thought Process: “I put the citation in the reference list at the end.”
- Thought Process: “I didn’t know.”
- Thought Process: “I didn’t know that I couldn’t quote from myself without attribution.”
- Thought Process: “I changed some words [the “and”s and “the”s]”

These first examples of plagiarists are difficult for most professors. If the student is genuinely ignorant or unconsciously plagiarizing, the professor often asks, “Does this justify heavy penalties that are often mandated by departments or universities?” and can be torn about how to best handle the situation.

The next group of examples generally produces less angst in faculty and often produces anger and frustration in students.

The Con Artist as Plagiarist
- Thought Process: “I can change the paper enough that no one will figure out the source.” This manifestation and subsequent detection of the “Con Artist” generally produces no angst in faculty.
- Thought Process: “I suckered someone else into writing my paper, my parent, significant other, or friend, by telling them if they don’t help me out, I’ll fail the class, flunk out, or won’t get into an MSW program”

Subcategory: The Con Artist Enabler

This subcategory raises for faculty the issue of how to handle the fellow student enabler. In other words, should the fellow student suffer the same penalty as the “Con Artist,” especially when it is clear to the faculty member that there is a power imbalance, or the “Con Artist” preyed on someone vulnerable and may even have framed this in a way that presented the failure to help a classmate as a violation of collegiality?

The Thoughtful Thief
- Thought Process: “I knew they wouldn’t mind if I used their paper.” Usually, the original author was not asked for permission.
- Thought Process: “Oh, I would not have used it without permission if I knew it mattered that much.” In this case, the original author is usually asked for permission, and if the
original author does not bluntly deny the right to use the paper, the “Good Thief” assumes permission.

The Big Spender

- Thought Process: “I bought it; it is my property.” This student has no apparent guilty conscience over the plagiarism.
- Thought Process: “I can’t believe you don’t believe I wrote this.” This student attempts to place the faculty member in a defensive position by attacking. Some students add tears to the attack, while others threaten to complain about the faculty member to the administration, hoping to trump the situation by adding anxiety.

The Opportunistic Plagiarist

- Thought Process: “My organization has files of papers... it would be a shame not to use them.” Sometimes this thought process is supplemented with the thought “If I don’t make a good grade on this paper and in this course, I will pull down the GPA of my organization,” or “I am just using the papers to get some ideas.”
- Thought Process: “After all, this is a free paper site on the Web...why not.”

Other Plagiarist Enablers.

There are a number of types of enablers. Faculty, administration, and fellow students can all appear in this category. Students in this category are generally not identified by faculty, either because they are not detected or because they deny complicity, so one half of the plagiarism often is undetected or unproven. Plagiarist enablers can appear in several subcategories, the “See No Evil” enabler, and the “Let’s not Make A Hassle Over Nothing” enabler.

The first subcategory, the “See No Evil” enabler, includes the following two enablers: the peer who says, “Go ahead, use my work, no one will ever know,” and the professor who says, “I know that this is not something you would do knowingly.” These two examples of enablers generally are not consciously complicit in encouraging plagiarism. Both are likely to see this as an exceptional circumstance calling for mercy, rather than an acceptance that plagiarism should be challenged or ignored.

A second subcategory, the “Let’s Not Make Cause a Hassle Over Nothing” enabler, includes the following situations: The professor who turns a blind eye to work that does not fit with the student who turns it in, and the administrator who says, “Let’s not make such a fuss over this.” or “Aren’t you overreacting?” Other versions of this category may include faculty members who say to colleagues who detect plagiarism: “Don’t you think you are being too hard on the
student?” or “Do you know what that student is experiencing in his/her life?” or “I don’t think this is a big enough problem to jeopardize his/her standing in the program, or mar a perfect GPA, or delay graduation,” or “Are you sure you were clear in your assignment?” This second subcategory is the more pernicious of the two categories. In these examples, the enabler is likely aware at some level that s/he is complicit in the plagiarism. Faculty and administrators who are unwilling to deal forthrightly with the problem promote an atmosphere in which plagiarism becomes the norm rather than isolated instances.

Other common errors made by students may include:

- Only citing sources used at the end of the paper
- Not citing on PowerPoint slides
- Changing a few words and not attributing the source as an “almost” quote
- Giving the source as a Web site rather than the specific part of the Web site used
- Giving a primary source obtained from a secondary source without crediting the primary source (as: as cited in)
- Not citing pictures and graphics
- Not citing conversations, classes, and so forth that contribute heavily to the ideas developed by the student
- Not citing from previous work done by the student
- Turning in a paper written for another class without instructor permission
- Copying and pasting and dropping the source as the material is transferred into the new document
- Not So Unintentional (i.e., buying a paper from a Web source)
- These sources vary: papers written to order, purchasing a prewritten paper on a topic
- Copying a friend’s paper, with or without the friend’s permission
- Copying a paper in an organization’s files (fraternities and sororities are notorious for paper files)
- Getting substantial help from a friend or another instructor on the paper
- Copying a published paper
- Our favorite: getting parents to write the paper but not removing telltale comments, such as, “Hope this helps you get a better grade. Be sure to bring your laundry home this weekend.”
- Submitting work done as a team/group for another class as one’s own work and without permission of the team/group

Faculty responses to this increase in plagiarism can be seen to form a continuum, ranging from plausible denial to career cynicism. Many faculties who have not yet detected much plagiarism ask, “Is it really that big of a problem?” Other jaded faculty will reply, “They all do it, and you
can’t catch them, so why bother trying?” But what is the proper response to waking up during an avalanche? And more to the point, what is the unique social work educator response?

**Examples of Anti-Plagiarism Software**

Turnitin.com ([www.turnitin.com](http://www.turnitin.com)) is perhaps the most well-known brand of anti-plagiarism software and seems to have the greatest market share at this point in time.

Other companies that offer this service include Ithenticate ([www.ithenticate.com/](http://www.ithenticate.com/)) and WCopyfind ([www.plagiarism.phys.virginia.edu/Wsoftware.html](http://www.plagiarism.phys.virginia.edu/Wsoftware.html)). In most of these services, an account is created that allows a professor (and in some cases a student) to submit a paper for review. An “originality report” is generated consisting of a graphic summary of the percentage of the paper that was found in other sources from the company’s database. In the case of Turnitin.com, this database includes not only scholarly works, but also an archived record of all previously submitted student papers.

Some faculty liken using anti-plagiarism software to testing for illegal drug use. The drug testing analogy is interesting in that many testers, like many employers, find themselves surprised by the results, exclaiming, “That’s not who I expected to or meant to catch!” The advantage to using software to identify plagiarized papers is that it provides a fast technological solution to the technological aspects of plagiarism by screening for content that has been copied from the Internet or previously published papers. It quantifies how much content came from specific sites. Ideally, it allows for a reasonably objective confrontation when a student has copied and pasted from uncited sources, such as, “This report demonstrates that 75% of your paper came from the following five Internet sites.”

However, there are disadvantages to using anti-plagiarism software. For example, in these originality reports, proper citations are also highlighted, so faculty will still need to determine which quotations are valid and which are not properly cited. Anti-plagiarism software also misses a lot of territory in the literature, for instance, gray literature. For example, government produced brochures, are often not included in the database against which papers are checked. This means that material copied and pasted from a source like this will not be detected by anti-plagiarism software.

As with any new technology, there is an investment of time, a learning curve for faculty and students to use a particular product, the time involved in submitting and waiting for results,
the cost of purchasing or licensing such software, legal issues related to intellectual property, and informed consent concerns. All the issues are considerations for adoption of a particular technology. To avoid some of these issues, some faculty use lower tech methods, such as using free search engines to take a suspected piece of text and seeing if a simple Internet search detects uncited material (McCullough & Holmberg, 2005). Others use anti-plagiarism software preventatively by allowing students to submit assignments for analysis before submitting them for grading, using the software to check for missed citations or excessive quotations. Some universities are turning away from services such as Turnitin.com because of legal challenges and are now using alternative proprietary software such as SafeAssign (www.SafeAssign.com), which only adds student papers to its database if the student gives explicit permission to do so.

Another concern raised with these high-tech strategies for detection is that surveillance technology is being substituted for relationships. Rather than a professor knowing a student and his or her work, faculty rely on ever more sophisticated technologies to catch the ever increasingly sophisticated plagiarist, creating an escalating “arms race” of detection and evasion techniques (Szabo & Underwood, 2004). There are also concerns about retention of student papers and the potential violation of intellectual property rights. All of these factors combine to create a process that feels more like surveillance and policing of students, rather than a respectful academic dialogue.

What then are faculty to do with such limited and potentially problematic tools? At this point, we may need to just accept them for what they are and what they can, and cannot, do and begin dealing with the thornier aspects of this issue. Proactively, we can identify and differentiate patterns of plagiarism as well as develop effective policies and differentiated responses as well as maintain an awareness of possible unintended consequences of our use of new technologies to identify academic dishonesty. It is also important to realize that detection is only the beginning. As is often the case with whistleblowing, no good deed goes unpunished. Once plagiarism is detected, and especially when multiple cases are detected, a response is required. This can range from turning a blind eye to expulsion from the university.

**The Social Work Response**

This leaves us with the rather daunting question: What is the best response, and indeed what is the unique social work educator’s response, to this rise in academic dishonesty, specifically
plagiarism? This will surely need to include the type of reflection in all directions we ask of our students – the best contextualization that we can muster. It will include an analysis of the person in the environment. It will include systems analysis. And it will include wrestling with and adhering to the social work code of ethics. It is crucial in this evolving discussion that wide ranging discussions from the social work community inform our collective practice in this area to answer these larger questions. To what extent is cheating in general, plagiarism in particular, and our response to it, an artifact of large classroom size, generic assignments, and a loss of knowledge of our students? To what extent is this larger cultural issue, a relationship issue, an ethical issue? We will likely find that this is a much larger issue than just a few bad apples in the social work classroom.

However, there are some techniques that we have found helpful. To some extent, we need to become better at differentiating types and motivations for plagiarizing just as we would look at making such differentiations in our practice. If we start where the client/student is, we need to remember that all students who plagiarize do not consciously intend to cheat and that there are students who really do not understand that what they are doing is plagiarism. These are the relatively easy situations. We also need to examine our professional obligation in dealing with the more brazen versions of plagiarism and take the steps necessary to adequately address them. These can be far more challenging for most faculty.

**Avoiding Plagiarism: Prevention**

One step that can be taken is to teach about plagiarism before there is a problem. For this purpose, the syllabus can be used as a teaching moment. Sharing with students the definition of plagiarism and being clear about your classroom policies can head off many potential plagiarism situations. This is also an opportune time to reference college and university policies that deal with academic dishonesty generally and plagiarism specifically. This should include policy statements notifying students of the use of anti-plagiarism software usage and possibly may include an informed consent component (University of Windsor, 2005). Finally, tying in the social work code of ethics is an important aspect of teaching about expectations of professional integrity. These may go beyond university expectations for academic honesty and professional conduct and are an important element in acculturation to the profession.
Large class size can work against professors truly knowing their students. But there is only so far that relying on high tech methods of detection will carry us. We need to know our students well enough to be able to detect whether or not the work turned in belongs to the student who turned it in. A comparison of submissions with earlier writing can help detect unoriginal work. A student who writes in one style usually does not alter style drastically in subsequent sections of a paper. A student who usually writes with grammatical errors and slang generally does not abruptly change this behavior. A student who cannot organize thoughts easily usually does not suddenly produce a well-organized paper.

Some practical ways to accomplish plagiarism prevention include assigning many different kinds of written assignments, such as creative free writing assignments, journals turned in regularly, and essay exams and requiring the rationale for selecting topic, notes, outline, and annotated bibliography from which the paper developed. Generally, written assignments that do not just deal with reporting facts but take higher order thinking skills are more difficult to plagiarize. Creating a unique, more involved step-by-step process of building an assignment can also aid in prevention. This may include requiring an application or an explanatory piece that is unique to the class.

Some faculty require student/professor conferences around written work, creating a dynamic in which sharing the process of creation with a professor makes it harder to take credit for work that is not one’s own. This individualized attention allows for faculty to frame the assignment in such a way that it would be far difficult to turn in someone else’s work or a prewritten paper.

Well thought out assignment creation often also serves to thwart academic dishonesty. In general, it is advisable to avoid using the same assignments year to year. Careful explanation of the specifics of what is required in the work to be submitted and linkage back to the required content for the class for which it is to be submitted also helps discourage cheating. Generic assignments that broadly cover a topic can be an invitation to plagiarize, whereas idiosyncratic ones tend to prevent it.

Students who know that anti-plagiarism will be employed may also be less inclined to use another’s work. Again, some faculty have found great success with the creative and effective proactive use of anti-plagiarism software. In this strategy, students must be given access to the
service in order to check themselves against the originality report to evaluate how well they have done in regard to proper citation before final submission of an assignment.

**Consequences of Plagiarism: Treatment**

Clear consequences can also act as a deterrent to plagiarism. Intentional plagiarism can be considered to be a violation of the *Code of Ethics*. Potential consequences can include redoing the assignment; failing the assignment; failing the class; referral to the program, college, or university disciplinary committee; dismissal from the program; or dismissal from the university. Consequences should be consistent across situations and across faculty. The consequences of plagiarism should appear in student manuals and other program documents and should not be a surprise to any student. Student advisors can play a key role as a central person to monitor overall reports of plagiarism across courses and semesters. If a faculty member discovers that clear written policies are lacking at any of these levels, it is important to quickly initiate a process of review and policy development.

Wrestling through the consequences of a discovered plagiarism situation can be a painful experience. For this reason, faculty sometimes avoid dealing with it in a head-on straightforward manner. Remember, if the paper seems too good to be true, then it probably is not the student’s work and it is best to follow up quickly with either a low-tech check of references or a high-tech utilization of anti-plagiarism software. As in many situations in life it is helpful to have a plan and follow the plan. This should include involving academic and program advisors in the determination, evaluation, and response to the plagiarism situation (Barnes, 2004).

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, it seems prudent for social work faculty to invest in prevention. It also seems that social work faculty should be on the forefront of developing fair, consistent, and effective policies to treat the problems of academic dishonesty. It is essential for social work educators to join the discussion and work toward more effective practice in the prevention and treatment of this social problem. More discipline specific studies need to be conducted to evaluate specific strengths as well as potential vulnerabilities to plagiarism within the social work community (Marsden, Carroll & Neill, 2005; Collins & Amodeo, 2005; Lambert & Hogan, 2004; Culwin, 2006). Careful evaluation should be conducted before adoption of any high-tech solutions, such as anti-plagiarism software (Evans, 2006; Macdonald & Carroll, 2006; McKeever, 2006). We must also attempt to
develop a holistic approach that embraces the tools with which we hope to equip our students to cultivate a culture of honesty, in academia and in practice settings. (Leask, 2006). In an era that emphasizes and even glamorizes the distorted narrative of the rugged independent individual researcher going it alone, our students need the social work reframe that the process of knowledge building is really building on the work of those who came before and giving them proper acknowledgement.

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