Cheating, Outsourcing, Plagiarism: A Growing Problem?

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents two points of view: that of a postgraduate programme director, and that of a teacher. As a programme director the author is bound by statute to investigate allegations of plagiarism and determine what action to take if allegations prove well-founded; he is also concerned that such practices do not persist into the writing of the dissertation or thesis. As a teacher he wants students to read widely and draw on the wisdom of others, but most of all he wants to read what the students themselves think about the assignment topic.

Keywords: Cheating, plagiarism

1.   INTRODUCTION

Cheating in tests and examinations and plagiarism in assignments have a long history in tertiary institutions around the world. More recently the Internet and wireless communications have made what some students call 'outsourcing' into a form of ecommerce and subject matter for a growing number of publications (see for example Gajadhar (1998). Some authors report on their strategies for catching "offenders" (Heron, 2001; Morrison, 2001), while others offer an alternative viewpoint (eg Hawthorn, 2001).

The author is part of an Association for Computing Machinery working group which will be producing a report on cheating as part of the ITiCSE (Innovation and Technology in Computer Science Education) conference in Denmark, June 22-26, and is currently surveying academics in many English-speaking countries. The survey asks 10 questions:

♦ Briefly describe up to three incidents where you have detected cheating in your subjects

♦ What types of cheating do you believe occur in your subjects?

♦ What steps do you take to prevent cheating in your subjects?

♦ What methods do you use to detect cheating?

♦ Do you believe the incidence of cheating has increased or decreased in the last five years?

♦ What processes does your institution use to deal with cheating?

♦ What processes does your institution use to reduce cheating?

♦ Have you used your institution's process to deal with cheating?

♦ Please rate your satisfaction with the outcome(s) of the process.

♦ How could the processes be improved?

2.   EARLY SURVEY RESPONSES

At the time of writing, 11 New Zealand survey responses had been received. Most respondents mentioned copying in assignments: from texts or the Internet (without referencing), and from other students with their knowledge (straight copy or unauthorised collaboration) or without (from disks, printouts or unattended computers). Less common were cheating in exams (by smuggling in notes, looking at other students' answers or communicating with other students) and handing in the same assignment for different courses. One respondent identified 'giving false reasons for extensions' (including false medical certificates), another complained about 'late delivery of work' and a third mentioned 'fake IELTS certificates'. In one case a student accidentally found the answers to an assessment and gave them to his friends.

Measures taken to prevent (reduce) cheating include closed book exams, disabling email in exams, explanations and warnings, group assignments, individualised assignments, open book exams, oral presentations on written work, requiring a minimum number of references, requiring signed 'own work' declarations, separating students in exams, showing how referencing should be done, and using special drives for exams. Measures taken to detect cheating include checking disk properties, commercial plagiarism detectors, looking for changes in style, putting invisible text in program code, strip marking, and web searches.

Seven respondents believe that the incidence of cheating has increased, with many of them relating that to increased numbers of international students. Other reasons offered for the increase were 'instant gratification', larger classes, family pressure, peer pressure, time pressure and declining moral values (including the alleged prevalence of cheating in business and government).

Three respondents stated that their institution had published policy on cheating and six said that cases of cheating were referred to the appropriate authority (adjudicator or mediator or programme leader or head of school or CEO). Possible penalties included warnings, having to complete another assignment (and an essay on plagiarism in one case), reduced marks, failing the course, and expulsion from the programme or institution. One respondent (in jest) wanted corporal punishment reinstated.

3.   PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

When the author taught programming to beginners, he stressed the importance of students' learning how to write their own programs and fix the bugs themselves. Nevertheless he often detected plagiarised programs and was usually able to get the culprits to confess and the reinforced the importance of 'doing it yourself'. Now that he is teaching a master's course involving written assignments, the author emphasises the importance of students' learning to analyse and critique what others have written before synthesising their own ides with the clearly acknowledged ideas of others. He uses plagiarism detection software (turnitin.com) and is able to show the students (in glorious technicolour) the evidence of any failures to acknowledge other writers. Only one student has ever argued with visual evidence, claiming that he could have produced by chance the same two sequences of 40 to 60 words as the article he had referenced a few lines earlier!

As programme leader for the bachelor's degree the author took part in a disciplinary hearing involving three students who had obviously worked together over two semesters, handing in minor variations on a programming assignment for one course, a written assignment for a second course and another written assignment for a third course. Initially they all denied cheating, then one admitted they had completed the assignments together and introduced minor variations to make them look different. The second took longer to own up, but the third insisted (despite the other two having confessed in his presence) that they had only ever 'talked about the assignments'. The evidence was clear to the disciplinary committee who suspended all three for twelve months. Not long afterwards the author and office staff began to receive obscene emails that obviously related to the case. They stopped after the author asked the IT support staff to contact the ISP and explain what that account was being used for, and the office staff asked the emailer to lay off.

4.   CONCLUSIONS

At the NACCQ conference the author hopes to share some of the conclusions reached by the ACM working group. In the interim, he will continue to explain the rights and wrongs to new students, show them how to reference properly, put assignments

through the plagiarism detector and give zero marks to those found to have stolen other people's intellectual property.

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