

Plagiarism: Meeting New Challenges

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Numerous reports indicate that many students are submitting work for assessment that has been wholly or partly obtained from electronic sources and failing to acknowledge their sources (Dick, Sheard, Bareiss, Carter, Joyce, Harding, and Laxer, 2003). A variety of software is used for plagiarism detection, including internet-based search engines (eg Google), commercial “originality detectors” (eg turnitin.com), and special-purpose software developed “in-house” to detect material copied from other students (Culwin and Lancaster, 2000). Teachers tend to use search engines selectively, usually when they have reason to be suspicious (eg a sudden change in writing style).

When using originality detectors (“out-sourced” or “in-house”) it is becoming common to require all students to submit their work directly. For example, Unitec students upload their work to turnitin.com, which “compares the text of submitted documents to its database of previous submissions”, electronic books and journals, “and a wide selection of websites. If it finds a match it highlights the matching text and, in the case of websites, it will display the source if the user clicks on the highlighted text” (Joyce, 2003).

Students are becoming used to having their work checked for plagiarism and there is some concern that they are devising stratagems to avoid detection, for example:

- copying extracts from hard copies of books and journals
- having another person write the assignment
- translating material from other languages
- substituting synonyms
- changing word order.

Originality checking software is unlikely to detect these sorts of plagiarism, so teachers may have

to use some “old-fashioned” approaches, for example:

- comparing grades obtained for supervised and unsupervised work (and different items of unsupervised work)
- being alert to abrupt changes in writing quality or style (within an assignment or between different items of assessed work)
- requiring students to present seminars on their submitted work
- asking students to explain suspicious sections of text.

References

- Culwin, F. and Lancaster, T. (2000) “A Review of Electronic Services for Plagiarism Detection in Student Submissions”. Proceedings of the First Annual Conference of the Learning and Teaching Support Network for Information and Computer Sciences, 54-60.
- Dick, M., Sheard, J., Bareiss, C., Carter, J., Joyce, D., Harding, T. and Laxer, C. (2003) “Addressing Student Cheating: Definitions and Solutions”. SigCSE Bulletin 35(1) 172-184.
- Joyce, D. (2003) “Checking Originality and Preventing Plagiarism”. Proceedings of the 16th Annual Conference of the National Advisory Committee on Computing Qualifications NACCQ, 303-306.