

Perspectives: The Internet Drives Plagiarism

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Plagiarism, the act of stealing the thoughts or writings of others and passing them off as your own, is an increasing problem as a result of the Internet. Because it's so easy to copy content from a Web site, a great many people believe that there must be nothing wrong with it.

The increase in plagiarism reflects a challenge to the core concepts of copyright and ownership. Rather than simply responding with greater policing and punishment for offenders, it is perhaps time to revisit these concepts, and to reevaluate how we teach people to write.

As children we are taught not to steal sweets from a shop. We are taught not to steal books from bookshops. But copying books or music, well, that's a greyer world. When Napster was all the rage, surveys indicated that a great many of those who were "swapping" songs didn't see it as stealing.

As Melanie Hazen, an American English teacher, told the Associated Press recently, "Taking something straight off the Internet and using it as their own, they don't seem to think that's stealing at all."

Is copying a book or song without permission the same as stealing that book or CD from a shop? Yes. However, copying part of that book or song may not be stealing, but may rather be described as "fair use." The principle of fair use allows someone to quote or sample small part of a work, once proper credit is given.

Plagiarism, on the other hand, is about pretending that what you copied was in fact your original ideas. It's a growing problem. A recent Rutgers University study of 4,500 students from 25 American high schools found that 2,430 (54 percent) used the Internet to plagiarize. There are Web sites that encourage plagiarism, including cheatouse.com and schoolsucks.com.

Of course, the flipside of easy stealing is that plagiarized works are also easy to track. Web sites such as turnitin.com are there to catch the cheats. A teacher can submit a paper to turnitin.com and within 24 hours, they will be able to see if any parts of that paper were directly copied from content already on the Web.

So, problem solved?

Well, not really. Plagiarism, imitation, and liberal borrowing, have been a part of the creative world since there was a creative world. There is an old saying: "Geniuses steal, beggars borrow." The whole foundation of traditional and folk music, for example, is based on swapping and adapting melodies. Rap raids the vaults for classic riffs. Shakespeare adapted many of his greatest works from plays already in existence. Innumerable writers have both borrowed and stolen plots, ideas, and styles.

While blatant plagiarism is obviously wrong, the craft of writing involves much "cut 'n' paste." What is needed is better education of students and staff with regard to literary and journalistic concepts and rules. More than ever, people need to understand what fair use allows and what it doesn't, how to properly accredit a source, how to "steal" a style without directly imitating it, how to "cut 'n' paste" so as to compare and evaluate.

Like it or not, we belong to the "cut 'n' paste" generation. Writing notes in pencil from books in libraries is dated. We now have this massive digital library, where copying is like breathing. "Cut 'n' paste" is here to stay. Let's learn how to do it right.

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