Computing   Computer Science

11-1-2008

Internet Plagiarism: A Survey and Case Study

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Recommended Citation

Buckley, C., Picking, R. & Grout, V., "Internet Plagiarism: A Survey and Case Study", Proceedings of the Fourth Collaborative Research Symposium on Security, E-learning, Internet and Networking (SEIN 2008), 5-9 November 2008, Glyndwr University, Wrexham, UK, pp56-65.

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This paper discusses the root causes of student plagiarism, particularly in Higher Education and particularly Interned-based. It considers the motivation of students, staff and administrators with their particular perspectives. It describes a case study currently in progress at Glyndŵr University in North Wales and reports preliminary results. Some pertinent observations and suggestions are offered in conclusion.

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Abstract

This paper discusses the root causes of student plagiarism, particularly in Higher Education and particularly Interned-based. It considers the motivation of students, staff and administrators with their particular perspectives. It describes a case study currently in progress at Glyndŵr University in North Wales and reports preliminary results. Some pertinent observations and suggestions are offered in conclusion.

Keywords

Internet based student plagiarism, Plagiarism detection.

1. Introduction: 'Catch Me if You Can!'

It's a cat and mouse game – Us against them in the battle against plagiarism. Students are led to believe that plagiarism is a serious academic offence, yet for some students this path proves to be too lucrative to resist (e.g. Saltmarsh, 2004). How many are going to slip through the net, escaping punishment? Is it even possible to deter students from taking this path?

Plagiarism is an issue every student (Bailey, 2006, page 7). Fry, Ketteridge and Marshall (2003, page 290) describes how detection "*often goes undetected due to the large number involved*" Even the Internet is causing many academics to have a "*growing concern*" (Armitage et al, 2003, page 140).

N-Learning (2008, page 3) identifies existing research, such as, 97% of the 114 HE institutes questioned, felt plagiarism "*was a significant problem.*" Worryingly, N-Learning (2008, page 3) discusses research by The Association of Teachers and Lecturers (2008), which surveyed 300 sixth form tutors and found a "third estimated that more than 50% of student work contained plagiarism." Unfortunately, without detail about the original source, this claim cannot be substantiated (there is no reference to the original source within the referencing section of the document).

Just investigating plagiarism on an online newspaper websites produces a multitude of articles. Their titles are somewhat headline grapping, for example, "*Student work 'rife with plagiarism'*" (Blair, 2005), "*Plagiarism 'is fault of indulgent lecturers'*" (Frean, 2006) and "*Academics plagiarise their own work to stay ahead*" (Sugden, 2008) to name a few just from the Times Online.

Whilst it is not argued about the accuracy of these articles, stories with headline catching titles will do nothing to elevate concerns regarding plagiarism. It could also be argued that stories such as "*University cheats 'not expelled'*" (Coughlan, 2008a) or "*Overseas students 'buying essays'*" (Coughlan, 2008b) are quite harmful to the integrity of the system.

One poignant quote providing an excellent aphorism is Carroll, (2002, page 13) where she questions the importance of analysing statistical evidence before deciding if it is worth tacking plagiarism because "*By its nature, plagiarism threatens the value and integrity of what is being taught.*"

There appears to be two different types of approaches for tacking plagiarism, preventative or detection measure. Whilst it is not argued that some believe detection can be a method for deterring (Carroll, 2002, page 23), the question remains, how can we prevent it occurring?

Carroll (2002, page 61) argues that detection "*will always be a less attractive option.*" Martin (2006) research highlights further problems with allowing students to have the output report from the detection software "*not only heightens student anxiety ... reduces their confidence in the services as a reliable and effective detection method.*"

Detection of plagiarism is not the only method to help deal with plagiarism. As previously stated, another method includes designing preventative measures. Preventative measure can include a multitude of different strategies, from implementing modules designed to provide students with the study skills to designing courses and assignments designed to limit the possibility of plagiarism.

This research paper focuses on the benefits of designing an awareness program for all new students to become more confident in their ability to prevent plagiarism and increase their knowledge of plagiarism. In order to be able to design preventative measures, it is important to understand why students plagiarise.

2. Why do Students Plagiarise?

As a trainee lecturer, one hears many people discussing a range of reasons for students plagiarising. However, is it possible to substantiate these claims with clear evidence?

Whilst it is highly likely, some students plagiarise and are fully aware of their action (e.g. Saltmarsh, 2004), research such as Biggs (2003, page 130) highlight not all students fully comprehend what constitutes plagiarism, something which is confirmed in other sources such as Savin-Baden (2003, page 71).

Savin-Baden (2003, page 65) describe poor time management and not understanding assessment as causes for plagiarism, along with the other reasons. Biggs (2003, page 131-132) describes how studying students are learnt rather than being innate. Bailey, S. (2006, page 7) affirms these by describing skills such as, note-taking, paraphrasing

and summary writing are important for student to learn in order to prevent plagiarism.

There are a number of existing strategies at Glyndŵ University in North Wales. During induction, students already receive an interactive lecture on plagiarism. They are given the information on plagiarism, along with interactive exercises. These include worksheets where students have to identify if the material is plagiarised. They also have referencing examples (both poor and correct examples).

Within core modules such as Professional Skills (level 4), Professional Issues (level 5) and Project management (level 6), the process is reaffirmed. However, as the Professional Skills lecturer it is possible to strengthen this process and implement new strategies for informing students about plagiarism.

The following section describes an ongoing investigation at Glyndŵr University in North Wales.

3.   The Glyndŵr Plagiarism Awareness Project

The aim of the project is to promote students awareness of plagiarism. In addition to covering the information at an induction, students are given the opportunity to explore plagiarism through creative workshops. These workshops encourage students to become actively engage and provide a more memorable occasion.

As Carroll (2002, page 39) describes the *"relative ineffectiveness of providing information about plagiarism at induction",* is due to students only using the information when they need to and much of the information given during induction can be ignored.

Due to the timing of the project, it is impossible to perform the research during induction stages of the Professional Skills module. However, it is possible to perform one cycle of action research and be ready for the next new set students in September 2008.

3.1. Methodology

Prior to starting the creative workshop students are asked to complete a questionnaire. After participating in the workshop, students will then repeat the same questionnaire. The two questionnaires can then be analysed to compare the differences in answers.

During the universities summer school 2008, the research was completed. This occurred on the 28th July 2008, using a small group of five students from various countries. Selecting the group for the research was the decision of the English Support tutor, who kindly allowed the project to replace her normal lesson.

The conditions for the project were not ideal, for example, the number of students and the time limit of the session was just 1½ hours and not have access to the students who would normally be studying the Professional Skills module.

3.2. The Workshop

Within the workshop, students are given the task to provide a method for informing fellow students about plagiarism. The students are provided with a range of resources, such as poster equipment but are able to be creative.

The important part of the workshop is to engage students rather than "dictating" the institutional rules. In an informal manner, the students discover the information through using their creativity e.g. poster, plays, song etc.

3.3. Known Limitations

At this point, it is worth stating that there are limitations to the project. As described in Saltmarsh (2004), some students still choose to plagiarise despite knowing this is not an acceptable practice. The project cannot stop all of these students plagiarising. However, the hope is the project will limit the number of students who unintentionally plagiarise along with spreading the clear message that plagiarism is not tolerated.

3.4. Workshop Analysis

The group decided by the English support lecturer was selected because of their higher level of English. However, it was easy to underestimate their English ability. It became quickly apparent that the students were struggling to understand concepts such as "collusion" and "paraphrasing".

The group which completed the workshop came up with some excellent ways of describing plagiarism e.g. "If you plagiarise you don't learn," and "if you want to use me, acknowledge me."

During the session, it was noticed that there was confusion between copyright and plagiarism. It was believed that as long as it was not copyright then it could be used without worrying about plagiarism (and without needing to acknowledge source).

Another myth encountered was its not plagiarism if the sources are referenced at the end of the assignment. None of the students in the session had ever been required to 'flag' references in the main body of the assignment and this was an unusual practice for them. Due to the lower number of students, it is impossible to accurately predict if this is common myth with a large number of students.

The student did believe plagiarism was wrong but they also believe it is simply copying chunks of text. They were not aware that using images, diagrams, ideas, etc without acknowledgement also constituted as plagiarism.

Due to the low number of students, it was impossible to have various creative exercises. The small group decided on one large poster. The poster did not contain much detail other than simple plagiarism rules such as plagiarism is theft and "if you use me, acknowledge me" It contained little information regarding paraphrasing and information about plagiarism.

3.5. Questionnaire Analysis

Prior to discussing the questionnaire results, it is worth bearing in mind that these results only represent a small sample. The student lack of clear understanding about what constitutes plagiarism is also apparent in the questionnaire, both before and after. It becomes obvious that the students require more than just a simple "creative session"

The results of the questionnaire shows all students have a basic understanding of plagiarism, mainly defining it as copying sentences. Just two students added any additional information. The second questionnaire did not reveal any changes in these answers.

All the students understood collaboration, whereas collusion and paraphrasing has more of a mixed response. Two students understood collusion and paraphrasing. In the second questionnaire, the results show that there is a slight improvement in one student's knowledge of collusion. A different student also has a more accurate answer for paraphrasing.

The students were asked why they think students plagiarise. Their answers varied from students being lazy, easier to plagiarise, not knowing what to do, being able to complete assignments faster and students being jealously. One student explained that it is harder to think for yourself and create your own ideas.

In one question, students were given some statements and they were asked to decide is it plagiarism, not plagiarism or might be. All five students identified that it was plagiarism to copying words directly without referencing a source.

For copying someone idea without referencing source, one student said this might be plagiarism on the first questionnaire but the answer was changed to plagiarism on the second. By the second questionnaire, all students believed that copying someone's idea was plagiarism.

Using an image found of the Internet without referencing source had more of a mixed response. In the original questionnaire, three students believed that this might be plagiarism. Just one student believed it was and the remaining student thought it was not. In the second questionnaire, one student changed their answer to plagiarism. Still, two students believe it might be and one does not think it would be plagiarism.

For both questionnaires, four of the five students agreed that using common knowledge without referencing is not plagiarism. The remaining student believed that it might be plagiarism. Interestingly, the results did not change in either questionnaire.

Asking the student about quoting from their friend's assignment produces some worrying results. In the first questionnaire, two of the five believes that this was not plagiarism, two thought it might be and one believed it was plagiarism. While one student opinion changes from a might be to plagiarism, it is concerning that two students still believed this is not plagiarism.

Four of the five believed that if the students used their own unpublished research it was not plagiarism. One student believed that it might be plagiarism in the first questionnaire and in the second they changed their answer to it was plagiarism.

For copy sentences with references but without quotation marks around the sentences was an interesting question. In the second questionnaire, only one student changed their answer from not plagiarism to it was plagiarism. This means two student still believe it is not and two thinking it might be plagiarism.

Scarily, according to these students, paraphrasing without acknowledgement is not plagiarism. All five students believed that using an idea from a book and rewriting it in their own works without acknowledgement is not plagiarism. The results did not change in the second questionnaire.

4. Limiting Opportunities for Plagiarism: A Brief Discussion

Literature highlights there are plenty of opportunities for lecturers to limit the possibility of plagiarism occurring, arguably enough to be the sole focus of a paper. However, with it being interlinking with the fight against plagiarism, it would merit a quick discussion.

Carroll (2002) goes way beyond many of the other literature. Her book is streaming with practical suggestions on how to limit the opportunities of plagiarism. It has become a valuable tool in providing a fight against plagiarism. Some of the advice is obvious, e.g. (page 27) changing assignments rather than keeping them the same year after year or (page 29) "*integrated 3assessment tasks*." Other advice would not necessarily be at the forefront included (page 26) "*methods to track, observe and record effort ... authentication exercises ...* [and] *opportunities for students to practise using academic writing skills, receive feedback and improve their practice*." Carroll (2003, page 28) later describes about creating assessment tasks which have individual answers, (page 30) track students progress, e.g. "*designing in requirements for reading and recording ... staging posts and requiring students to submit work for formative assessment*," or (page 32) asking students to submit drafts.

5. Conclusions

In an idealistic world, we would be able to prevent all students plagiarising. However, we are working with people and no matter what we do, some students will still find the path of plagiarism too lucrative to avoid. Does this mean that we should avoid waste our time and efforts trying to create an anti-plagiarism culture, especially considering we are unable to eradicate it completely?

Plagiarism does not just affect a small minority of universities. It can occur regardless of the social standing of the university, educational level nor solely be blamed of the culture of the students. Whilst cultural can play an important role in the students understanding of the definition of plagiarism, this cannot account for all cases.

One of the most obvious issue, which came about during the literature research was this "Us against them" battle between lecturers and students. Most lecturers (and even some lecturers/journalists) have plenty of stories about taking students through the disciplinary channels and being mortified that the student "has got away with it".

On the other hand, we have the committees. Shockingly, according to Carroll (2002, page 72), institutions have an increasing about of students having solicitors representing them during investigation interviews, and "*Anecdotal reports of solicitors; adversarial and aggressive manner are growing.*"

For the student, no matter their reasons for plagiarism, they are missing out of valuable learning. As an education establishment, we demand students achieve a number of learning criteria. Those student who choose to take the path of plagiarism, will be unlikely to fulfil. This cause apprehension especially since the modularisation of degrees means that many modules built upon existing knowledge. Students who do not achieve could be storing up future difficulties.

The battle culture also gives this "the students know" culture. Actually, the research and talking to the students reveals that while there is they know "do not copy lines," the knowledge about the detail parts of plagiarism, especially issues such as paraphrasing appears much murkier to decipher.

An impressive feature was the university's clarity on what constitutes plagiarism, both in the handbook for students and Academic Misconduct document for lecturers. The disciplinary procedure has never been called into question. Frankly, in these situations it is never going to be a win, win situation for either party. This is why it is so important that the fight become against plagiarism occurring, rather than a responsive action. The disciplinary procedure will be always required for those who decide plagiarism is the path they choose to take. However, drilling the anti-plagiarism messages will be likely to limit the number of student who "unintentionally plagiarise."

On investigating existing practices, students are given the information about plagiarism. However, questionable is the amount of information the students retain. We have the right concept of providing students with the information at each of the different levels. The question remains, how can we further improve the current system?

The results from the second questionnaire were quite disappointing. It appears their concepts on some issues did not change, for example, some students still believed paraphrasing without acknowledgement is not plagiarism.

It became obvious that in order to truly understand plagiarism, students need more than just a "creative workshop" This is reminisce of comments made by Carroll (2002, page 23), where she discusses how changes solely to the curriculum design are not enough to combat plagiarism. The results from the first cycle of action research demonstrate that this is also the case in this situation. Students need more that just creative workshops.

What next for the Plagiarism Awareness Project? This project has only just started. From September 2008, the project will roll out into a session during the first few weeks of Professional Skills module (level 4). Many of the problems occurring during the first cycle, such as, limited number of students, limited time constraints, will be more workable. This will then be another way of reinforcing the anti-plagiarism message.

The concept of the creative workshop is to allow students to explore the issue of plagiarism in a manner they feel less intimidated in. Having them communicate their concepts of plagiarism, can highlight deficiencies in their knowledge, as well as providing a tool to aid future developments. Nor is this something, which can act in isolation to the current system methods. Let's make sure they have the correct information and let's get them informing each other though methods they feel natural with. Whether it is through drama, posters, music or any other creative method, the important thing is keeping enforcing the message.

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