

# Lead Us into Temptation: The Big Business of Cyber-Cheating

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## Abstract

Cheating in academic settings has always been a temptation practiced by some students for many reasons. With the advent of technology and the Internet, the ease and access of cheating opportunities have increased; in particular, ready-made and customized academic papers are offered for a price by an increasing number of online companies. This article presents the problem and provides advice to minimize, and ideally, eliminate cheating.

*Key words:* cyber-cheating, plagiarism

## Introduction

No surprise. The temptation to cheat or cyber-cheat is a classroom given, and acts of plagiarism are not the exception, but the expected writing strategy for a growing number of students. And what is Internet or cyber-plagiarism? It's that text-based and media-based underworld in which original author anonymity meets amorally rich resources. Too many term paper and research writing assignments are kidnapped by the students' rationale of timesaving, grade competition, poor English writing skills and everybody-else-does-it attitudes. These reasons help fuel the problem. Furthermore, nefarious online prewritten and customized academic paper businesses fan the flame. They tempt, and then assist, cheaters to cheat.

## Proliferation of cyber-cheating

To illustrate the proliferation of cyber-cheating opportunities, I Googled "term paper mills" and within 15 seconds, 14,600,000 sites were at my fingertips. ("Term paper mills." Retrieved from Google.com. 22 July 2007.) Online businesses provide a market for students to instantly buy or borrow customized or off-the-shelf papers. I found sponsored links that promote ads for "custom-written \$9.95 per page. 10% off. Guaranteed A grade. Free revision." (www.Custom-

Essays-Lab.com.) Another ad touts' free offerings "1000s of term papers, book reports and essays are ready now." (www.Papers-on.com.) Hard to resist offers for some students.

Try some investigative research yourself. Click to see what's being promoted, for example, on www.EssayGalaxy.com. You'll discover that free papers are not really free. Remember, it's big business, so someone is paying somewhere. In this case, a membership fee is required, not per paper but per month, at \$19.95. Or a student can opt for a six-month plan at \$69.95 that will give access to "over 50,000 papers that you can review, download or print ...from high school to college level." To make the process simpler, online options for payment are provided: credit card, online check, or PayPal.

Doesn't this cyber-cheating big business make you wonder: If plagiarism is defined as copying someone else's work without their permission and offering it as one's own, then how do big cyber-cheating businesses legally exist? Simple. On the business Web site, sometimes seemingly hidden in very small print or sometimes offered as direct advice, are warnings that papers should be used for reference, models, or examples only. Granted, a logical rationale, but how many papers are used and referenced rather than misused and submitted as the student's originals?

### **Cultural Complexities**

To make the problem yet more complex, "moral relativism" advocacy among students, and some educators, is gaining popularity. Moral relativism is the perspective that views academic integrity and honesty as flexible, depending upon the situation and circumstances (Gibson, 2004). In other words, students believe that cheating and plagiarizing can be, at times, acceptable behaviors.

Now add the fact that distance education commonly uses technology to connect students between cultures. However, the proliferation of plagiarism is not the fault of the advancement of communication technology itself. Unfortunately, traditional cheating and plagiarism methods are being simplified by and into the digital world of computers and high-tech devices. The Internet is a prime example: Web sites proliferate with both treasure and trash, simultaneously, opening cyber-library doors to research opportunities and closing minds to honest writing efforts.

Like any man-made machines, their valuable uses, or misuses, depend upon individuals in cultural contexts. So, while expanding educational access by crossing time zones can be easy,

crossing cultures can be more complex. Making generalized assumptions about any student's skills, knowledge, and behaviors can create problems. Remember, some global settings don't recognize plagiarism as a problem. The common concept of copyright may not be taught in other educational systems. Students are simply expected to "locate and produce answers"—not create a "piece of independent writing in any language, let alone in English" (Carroll, 2004).

But a diverse cultural educational standard alone is not responsible for plagiarism misunderstandings. Also realize that some students who are identified with special education needs, such as Dyslexia, may not be cognitively able to paraphrase, but rather need to cut and paste writing assignments (Carroll, 2004).

Then again, be alert: plagiarism practices don't fall only on special needs abilities or cultural misunderstandings. In a recent study of 145,000 college students, respondents "reported that while 60% of their peers 'sometimes' cut and pasted unidentified Internet sources, twenty-seven percent did so 'often' or 'very often'" (Kuh, 2003). Charles Gibson, the narrator of a television program entitled *Caught Cheating*, revealed the alarming number of cheating cases, including plagiarism, occurring in both high school and college settings (29 April 2004). Students, many interviewed anonymously, provided testimonials exposing common attitudes and aptitudes for cheating. In addition, students explained how traditional cheating is enhanced and expanded through high technology "gadgets" and hand-held communication devices.

One last complexity to the plagiarism plague: Still too many educators and educational school policy makers are clueless as to the cyber-signs of the times. Fortunately, however, more educators and policymakers are now realizing that they need to become more proactive, not just reactive, in minimizing Internet plagiarism. And being proactive goes beyond building awareness: it's creating the curriculum designs and policies that educate the students on plagiarism. It's making students realize that they're cheating themselves. Inquiry learning, intellectual stimulation, and creative new solutions, presentations, or interpretations of the world around them are ignored. As educators, you know that learning is an exploratory process that is recognized far beyond just correctly completing those bubbled answers on timed tests.

## **Solutions**

So, what can be done to minimize, and ideally, both eliminate Internet plagiarism and reduce the inappropriate use of cyber-cheating big business?

- First, acknowledge that Internet plagiarism does exist and that this problem is growing.
- Second, explore the term paper mills that exist and be aware of the tempting offerings. Know what many of your students already know and let them know that you know. A particularly helpful place to start is one of the Kimball Library presentations: Cheating 101: Internet Paper Mills. Over 300 paper mill sites are listed: (<http://www.coastal.edu/library/presentations/mills2.html>)
- Third, get involved. Be proactive, rather than reactive. Have an anti-plagiarism policy and set of procedures in place; however, at this point in time, there might not be one in your educational setting. So, take the initiative and help to create one. Besides colleagues, you might want to invite concerned students to join your endeavor. Remember that your committee and you will need to know not only how to identify, discover, and discourage plagiarism, but also, how to keep yourself safe from unfair accusations. Whichever approach you take, proactive or reactive, be certain to address the insidious nature of Internet plagiarism.
- Fourth, as a caveat: Remember also to be careful not to unjustly accuse a student of plagiarism. If there is no policy in place, the student might accuse you of discrimination. While “academic freedom” is a worthy decision-making stance for your own classroom, please be advised: a school approved policy and procedure is wiser. Of course, it’s next to impossible to police educational morality; but you can certainly model educational morality and enforce academic integrity guidelines, particularly in your own educational setting.
- Last, remember the essential element: learn the educator’s role and role model it. Granted, you already have too much to do in too little time, so you must use your time efficiently and effectively. Yes, there are too many Web sites to explore. But start with a few. Perhaps plan a professional development time to partner or small group research and share, with a bigger audience of colleagues, what’s been found.

## 5. Conclusions

Cyber-cheating is big business. Know what those temptations for students are. Realize that plagiarism opportunities abound from pre-written papers to cut-and-paste techniques masquerading as original work. Above all, be sure—never assume—that your students know that plagiarism is literary theft; that it’s a form of cheating commonly recognized as the use of another’s idea or text, without attribution, without giving credit to the authentic author with no resource citation or reference noted. Plagiarism is common practice copying, possibly violating copyright law. “In other words, plagiarism is an act of fraud. It involves both stealing someone else’s work and lying about it afterward” ([www.plagiarism.org](http://www.plagiarism.org)).

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