

1. In what ways does plagiarism violate trust between students and professors?
2. Why is plagiarism unfair to the other students in a class?
3. In what ways does plagiarism harm the plagiarist?
4. How does plagiarism undermine the value of a university education and the enterprise of higher education?
5. According to Sadler, why is it important to have a strict policy regarding plagiarism and to enforce penalties for plagiarism?

Four Reasons to Be Happy about Internet Plagiarism

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Russell Hunt is a professor of English at St. Thomas University in Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada. Hunt views the issue of Internet plagiarism as an opportunity for educators to reexamine the old model of knowledge that encourages Internet plagiarism and to develop a model of knowledge that is more active, cooperative, context-bound, and problem- and project-based.

The “information technology revolution” is almost always presented as having cataclysmic consequences for education—sometimes for the better, but often, of course, for the worse. In postsecondary circles, perhaps the most commonly apprehended cataclysm is “Internet Plagiarism.” When a university subscribes to TurnItIn.com, the local media invariably pick up the story—“Students to Learn that Internet Crime Doesn’t Pay”—with the kind of alacrity usually reserved for features on political sex scandals or patronage payoffs. When the newest cheating scandal surfaces at some prestigious southern university known for its military school-style “honor code,” the headlines leap across the tabloids like stories on child molestation by alien invaders.

It’s almost never suggested that all this might be something other than a disaster for higher education. But that’s exactly what I want to argue here. I believe the challenge of easier and more convenient plagiarism is to be welcomed. This rising tide threatens to change things—for, I predict and hope, the better. Here are some specific practices which are threatened by the increasing ease with which plagiarism can be committed.

1. **The institutional rhetorical writing environment (the “research paper,” the “literary essay,” the “term paper”) is challenged by this, and that’s a good thing.** Our reliance on these forms as ways of assessing student skills and knowledge has been increasingly questioned by people who are concerned with how learning and assessment take place, and can be fostered, and particularly with how the ability to manipulate written language (“literacy”) is developed. The assumption that a student’s learning is accurately and readily tested by her ability to produce, in a completely arhetorical situation, an artificial form that she’ll never have to write again once she’s survived formal education (the essay examination, the formal

research paper), is questionable on the face of it, and is increasingly untenable. If the apprehension that it’s almost impossible to escape the mass-produced and purchased term paper leads teachers to create more imaginative, and rhetorically sound, writing situations in their classes, the advent of the easily-purchased paper from SchoolSucks.com is a salutary challenge to practices which ought to be challenged. . . . Many other equivalent arguments that assignment can be refigured to make plagiarism more difficult—and offer more authentic rhetorical contexts for student writing—have been offered in recent years.

I’m unconvinced that we can address the problem by assuring students that “they are real writers with meaningful and important things to say,” or invite them to revise their work where we can see the revisions, as long as we continue giving them more decontextualized, audienceless and purposeless writing exercises. Having something to say is—for anybody except, maybe, a Romantic poet—absolutely indistinguishable from having someone to say it to, and an authentic reason for saying it. To address this problem, I believe, we need to rethink the position of writing in students’ lives and in the curriculum. . . .

2. **The institutional structures around grades and certification are challenged by this, and that’s a good thing.** Perhaps more important is the way plagiarism challenges the overwhelming pressure for grades which our institutions have created and foster, and which has as its consequence the pressure on many good students to cut a corner here and there (there’s lots of evidence that it’s *not* mainly the marginal students in danger of failing who cheat; it’s as often those excellent students who believe, possibly with some reason, that their lives depend

on keeping their GPA up to some arbitrary scratch). An even more central consideration is the way the existence of plagiarism itself challenges the way the university structures its system of incentives and rewards, as a zero-sum game, with a limited number of winners.

University itself, as our profession has structured it, is the most effective possible situation for encouraging plagiarism and cheating. If I wanted to learn how to play the guitar, or improve my golf swing, or write HTML, "cheating" would be the last thing that would ever occur to me. It would be utterly irrelevant to the situation. On the other hand, if I wanted a *certificate* saying that I could pick a jig, play a round in under 80, or produce a slick Web page (and never expected actually to perform the activity in question), I might well consider cheating (and consider it primarily a moral problem). This is the situation we've built for our students: a system in which the only incentives or motives anyone cares about are marks, credits, and certificates. . . . When students say—as they regularly do—"Why should I do this if it's not marked?" or "Why should I do this well if it's not graded?" or even "I understand that I should do this, but you're not marking it, and my other professors are marking what I do for them," they're saying exactly what educational institutions have been highly successful at teaching them to say.

They're learning exactly the same thing, with a different spin, when we tell them that plagiarism is a moral issue. We're saying that the only reason you might choose not to do it is a moral one. But think about it: if you wanted to build a deck and were taking a class to learn how to do it, your decision not to cheat would not be based on moral considerations.

3. **The model of knowledge held by almost all students, and by many faculty—the tacit assumption that knowledge is stored information and that skills are isolated, asocial faculties—is challenged by this, and that's a good thing.** When we judge essays by what they contain and how logically it's organized (and how grammatically it's presented) we miss the most important fact about written texts, which is that they are rhetorical moves in scholarly and social enterprises. In recent years there have been periodic assaults on what Paolo Freire called "the banking model" of education. . . . Partisans of active learning, of problem- and project-based learning, of cooperative learning, and of many other "radical" educational initiatives, all contend that information and ideas are not inert masses to be shifted and copied in much the way two computers exchange packages of information, but rather need to be continuously reformatted, reconstituted, restructured, reshaped and reinvented, and exchanged in new forms—not only as learning processes but as the social basis of the intellectual enterprise. A model

of the educational enterprise which presumes that knowledge comes in packages. . . invites learners to think of what they're doing as importing prepackaged nuggets of information into their texts and their minds.

Similarly, a model which assumes that a skill like "writing the academic essay" is an ability which can be demonstrated on demand, quite apart from any authentic rhetorical situation, actual question, or expectation of effect (or definition of what the "academic essay" actually *is*), virtually prohibits students from recognizing that all writing is shaped by rhetorical context and situation, and thus renders them tone-deaf to the shifts in register and diction which make so much plagiarized undergraduate text instantly recognizable. . . .

4. But there's a reason to welcome this challenge that's far more important than any of these—more important, even, than the way the revolutionary volatility of text mediated by photocopying and electronic files have assaulted traditional assumptions of intellectual property and copyright by distributing the *power* to copy beyond those who have the *right* to copy. It's this: **by facing this challenge we will be forced to help our students learn what I believe to be the most important thing they can learn at university: just how the intellectual enterprise of scholarship and research really works.** Traditionally, when we explain to students why plagiarism is bad and what their motives should be for properly citing and crediting their sources, we present them in terms of a model of how texts work in the process of sharing ideas and information which is profoundly different from how they actually work outside of classroom-based writing, and profoundly destructive to their understanding of the assumptions and methods of scholarship. . . .

Scholars—writers generally—use citations for many things: they establish their own *bona fides* and currency, they advertise their alliances, they bring work to the attention of their reader, they assert ties of collegiality, they exemplify contending positions or define nuances of difference among competing theories or ideas. They do not use them to defend themselves against potential allegations of plagiarism.

The clearest difference between the way undergraduate students, writing essays, cite and quote and the way scholars do it in public is this: typically, the scholars are achieving something positive; the students are avoiding something negative.

The conclusion we're driven to, then, is this: offering lessons and courses and workshops on "avoiding plagiarism"—indeed, posing plagiarism as a problem at all—begins at the wrong end of the stick. It might usefully be analogized to looking for a good way to teach the infield fly rule to people who have no clear idea what baseball is.

1. How do most people in postsecondary education view the information technology revolution, and what are their assumptions regarding their concern?
2. In what ways does the issue of Internet plagiarism present a challenge to academia's current system of rewards?
3. What is the difference between the way scholars and college undergraduates use quotes and citations?
4. How do most faculty members respond to the issue of Internet plagiarism?
5. What is the old model of knowledge, and why does Internet plagiarism challenge this model?
6. Why is Hunt happy about Internet plagiarism?

Think >> AND DISCUSS

1. Critically analyze the responses of both Sadler and Hunt to the issue of Internet plagiarism. Which person presents the best argument? Support your answer.
2. Have you or someone you know ever plagiarized or been tempted to plagiarize from the Internet? Explain what motivated you or the other person. Which response to the issue of plagiarism, that of Sadler or that of Hunt, would make a student less likely to consider plagiarizing?
3. In *The Little Book of Plagiarism*, Richard Posner maintains that students who plagiarize are also victims since they derive no direct educational benefit from the assignment. On the other hand, these students receive indirect benefits in terms of better grades and improved career opportunities. Imagine a student who is considering purchasing an essay from the Internet because she has a heavy academic workload and does not have the time to research and write an essay. She also needs a good grade in the course to get into graduate school. Referring to Chapter 9, pages 289–290, discuss how a utilitarian might advise the student.
4. MasterPapers.com provides a “custom essay, term paper and dissertation writing service.” The site states:
Experience your academic career to the fullest—exactly the way you want it! ... Our company is perfectly aware that a number of tutors do not appreciate when their students resort to essay writing services for help. We strongly believe that professional and legitimate research paper writing services do not hamper students [sic] progress in any way, while the contemporary academic environment often leaves them absolutely no choice but to take advantage of our help.
Critically analyze the argument by MasterPapers.com that using a writing service is justified because (1) it does not interfere with students' progress, and (2) the current academic atmosphere sometimes leaves students no other choice. Discuss how Sadler and Hunt might each respond to the argument.
5. In the United States and most Western nations, published information is regarded as belonging to a particular person. But in some cultures, such as much of India, people regard information on the Internet as communal property that's free for the taking. Given this difference in cultural values, discuss how professors should respond if they find that a student from another cultural background has plagiarized an essay.
6. Some colleges reject plagiarism software and Web sites, such as TurnItIn.com, and instead prefer to use an honor code or lecture their students about the evils of plagiarism. Are these approaches naïve as some claim? Discuss your answer in light of your answer to question 2.
7. The advent of the Internet allows students to query specialized Web sites. Miriam Schulman, the manager of a Web site for Santa Clara University's Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, receives many requests from students seeking answers to questions that, she says, are “essentially homework assignments pasted into an e-mail.”^{***} How should these Web sites respond to these requests from students? Are these types of requests plagiarism, or are they Web-based research? Support your answer.

^{*}Richard A. Posner, *The Little Book of Plagiarism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2007), pp. 82–83.

^{***}Miriam Schulman, “I Have a Question,” *Santa Clara Magazine*, fall 2004; available from <http://www.scu.edu/scm/fall2004/research.cfm>.