Cut-and-paste cheating
Web makes student plagiarism easy, but teachers fighting back

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Kathy Witcher knew her student's paper on Huckleberry Finn sounded too mature for an 11th-grader.

"The light was society," the student wrote. "And Huck lived on the lampshade."

The Plano English teacher put her suspicions to the test and searched for the phrase on the Internet. The idea behind the metaphor popped up.

"When they write for us, it's like a fingerprint," said Ms. Witcher, who gave the Plano East Senior High School student a zero. "They don't change from mediocre writers to great writers overnight."

Score one for the teachers in an intensifying war on plagiarism.

Cheating is as old as homework, but educators say plagiarism appears to be more rampant than ever in high schools and colleges. They blame the Internet. Students among the first generation to grow up online are writing term papers with unlimited resources at their fingertips, rather than combing the shelves at the library.

But these young people, educators say, often don't understand that surfing Web sites and lifting passages for their assignments is stealing ideas and words from others.

"Students use it like an 8-billion-page, cut-and-pasteable encyclopedia," said John Barrie, who created a Web site, Turnitin.com, which exposes plagiarized work.

Educators are employing various tactics to fight the problem. Some schools sign on to the Internet themselves to catch cheaters. Others are writing honor codes packed with clear rules about plagiarism and a menu of penalties.
National student surveys run by the Center for Academic Integrity reveal the trend. In 1999, 10 percent of college students admitted anonymously to plagiarizing sources from the Internet, according to the center, which surveyed 50,000 undergraduates at 60 institutions. Last year, 40 percent admitted doing so.

In a nationwide survey of 18,000 high school students from 61 campuses, 60 percent admitted to some form of plagiarism, according to the center.

"There are more means available to cheat," said Tim Dodd, executive director of the Center for Academic Integrity at Duke University's Kenan Institute for Ethics. "But an ethical person, regardless of the variety of means, is not going to use them."

'A little lazier'

High school and college educators say they don't need surveys to prove the point.

"Every year the kids are a little lazier than the kids before," said Diane Hamilton, an English teacher at Martin High School in Arlington. "Is it all the Internet? No, but that's part of it. Within 15 minutes, they get all they need, and their work ethic just isn't that good anymore."

Kimberly Harris, a college music professor, said she sees plagiarized work every year.

"To find plagiarism every semester to me means it's prevalent," said Dr. Harris, a Collin County Community College instructor.

Dr. Harris, who has been teaching for 11 years, reported four cases to the dean's office last year, the most she's ever had in one term. After three students in her online course were challenged, they dropped the class.

"That's what happens a lot of times as soon as the dean's office calls them on it," she said.

The fourth denied cheating but lost his case in a hearing with administrators, she said. He flunked the course.

"If I give someone an F, is it going to ruin his life? No," Dr. Harris said. "But I want them to know that in life there are consequences."

Some who plagiarize buy papers online, though more students copy and paste information into reports and pass it off as their own.

"Many of the students have a philosophy that as long as they're not hurting anyone else, then it's fine, but we have to explain to them that there are rules on that," said Stacey Raymer, who teaches English at Rowlett High School.

Some think it's OK

Some students believe gathering information online and using it as their own without citing sources is legitimate.
Other students think paraphrasing without a citation is OK, too. But it's not.

"They think if they don't state the same thing exactly the way an author states it, change a few words here and there, that it's not plagiarism," said Barbara Lusk, faculty association president at Collin County Community College.

High school instructors go over the rules with students, but they often go misunderstood.

Michelle Lee, a Frisco High School senior, said she's careful about checking her sources in papers, but she knows many students don't understand the importance.

"When it comes to plagiarism," she said, "it's not black and white."

**Pressure to succeed**

Some students know full well that they're breaking the rules, educators say.

Students give in to temptations to cheat under pressures to succeed, said Mr. Dodd, of the Center for Academic Integrity. High school students aiming for college are expected to participate in various extracurricular activities while maintaining good grades. College students headed for graduate schools face the same pressures. Scholarships are won and lost based in part on grade-point averages.

"There is extraordinary societal pressure to do well," Mr. Dodd said. "The gentleman's C is not part of the discourse anymore. Everybody has to be an A and B student."

"In many institutions, students are busier than they've ever been," Mr. Dodd said. "They're working, they've got school and extracurricular activities. Most of the time they're in a time crunch."

Some simply can't keep up in the tough courses.

"In high school, I saw people doing stuff to survive," said Bradford Johnson, a junior at the University of Texas at Dallas.

**Honor codes**

Educators refuse to give up the fight.

High schools and colleges have long had rules against cheating, but now some have written honor codes and convened committees of students and administrators who spread the word about consequences. Some institutions subscribe to Web sites designed to detect copied work, while others employ Internet search engines for the same purpose.

Few high schools severely punish students, teachers say, but getting caught is often enough. Students generally get no credit for the assignment, and teachers often refuse to write college recommendation letters. Students can also get kicked out of the National Honor Society.
Punishment at colleges and universities ranges from an "F" on a paper or in a course to suspension or expulsion. Chronic offenders and graduate students face the stiffest penalties.

Top administrators at local colleges and universities say they're not setting out to simply catch and punish cheaters. It's more important, they say, to guide those who aren't sure of the rules and to deter others who might be tempted.

Instructors at Collin County Community College, for instance, made academic integrity their top priority last semester. Administrators enacted an honor code system this school year after pleas from instructors, said Barbara Money, the college's dean of students.

The college enlisted the help of Turnitin.com, the Web site and database that scans papers to detect copied work. Several local high schools and universities also subscribe to the California-based Web site that charges 75 cents per student per year.

Southern Methodist University upholds an honor code and last summer added an academic honesty tutorial to the school's freshman and transfer student orientation, said Dee Siscoe, vice president for student affairs.

"We really try to front-load a student when they come on campus," Dr. Siscoe said.

A student caught plagiarizing at SMU could land in front of the Honor Council, a board of students that hears cases involving cheating. The council has handled roughly 12 to 15 cases each semester, said Kathleen Tarbox, an SMU senior and president of the group.

The excuses are often the same.

"A lot of students tell us that in their high school they didn't have to cite their sources," Ms. Tarbox said. "Generally they say they ran out of time and started the paper the night before. They didn't think they would get caught."

Administrators with the University of Texas at Dallas have been running seminars on plagiarism at the beginning of each semester.

"We get students here who get caught and tell us that this is how they've always done it," said Donna Rogers, UTD's dean of students. "This is what they did in high school."

But by college, the stakes are higher, the environment less forgiving, she said.

"They say, 'We will catch you,' " said UTD senior Ben Vaughan. "It's not worth it."

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