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THE PHENOMENA OF CONTRACT CHEATING

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BIOGRAPHIES

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the issue of contract cheating. This is where students have work completed on their behalf which is then submitted for academic credit. A thorough background to this phenomena is presented. A list of the main contract cheating Web sites is also given. These contract cheating sites are placed into four classifications: auctions sites, discussion forums, essay mills and feed aggregators. Approaches are proposed for tutors to set assigned work that is less susceptible to contract cheating than standard assessments. The chapter concludes by arguing that urgent attention needs to be paid to contract cheating to avoid it becoming an educational problem of the same scale as plagiarism.

INTRODUCTION

The sheer volume of information that is conveniently accessible to students has grown dramatically in recent years. The Internet provides educators with new opportunities to innovate with the instruction and assessment methods they use. The Internet also offers students new opportunities to commit academic dishonesties, such as plagiarism. It appears that the educational community is starting to take the plagiarism issue seriously as it grapples with the necessity to ensure the maintainability of academic integrity for all.

BACKGROUND

The issue of students plagiarising materials from the Web is a key theme of this book. From the early reporters (Austin and Brown, 1999), to the key issue reviews (Carroll and Appleton, 2001; Culwin and Lancaster, 2001) and the advice manuals (Lathrop and Foss, 2000) it can be noted that a comprehensive set of literature exists, detailing how to prevent and detect those items that students use without acknowledgments. These sources offer a number of standard suggestions for tutors to employ. To prevent plagiarism these include requiring tutors to regularly generate new assignments for which model answers cannot be retrieved from the Web. To detect plagiarism these advocate the use of anti-plagiarism services, such as the self-professed world leader in Web database scanning software TurnItIn.com (Turnitin, n.d.). This chapter assumes that the reader has a working knowledge of the plagiarism problem and potential solutions.

The literature devoted to contract cheating is only in its infancy. The newer discipline of study, popularised by Clarke and Lancaster (2006) and covered in the media (Student cheats contract out work, 2006; Cheating students put homework to tender on Internet, 2006; Lightfoot, 2006; Morton and Tarica, 2006) specifically covers the submission of work that has been produced on behalf of a student, whether for money or not. It can be inferred that such a submission is original; however the work is not by the claimed author. This originality means that a standard plagiarism detection engine, such as TurnItIn.com will not detect this style of cheating, as a source for the work cannot be found.

CLASSIFICATIONS OF CONTRACT CHEATING SITES

Contract cheating, loosely defined as the external outsourcing of work by students for completion on their behalf, is wide ranging. The description covers the use of a multitude of different types of online services. A key observation that cannot be stressed enough is that contract cheating produces original work for students; this would not be detected by standard plagiarism detection engines.

The contract cheating sites used by students fall into four proposed categories. These are auction sites, discussion forums, essay mills and feed aggregators.

Examples of contract cheating sites within the different classifications are useful. Table 1 shows a snapshot of many of the sites in use. The number of discussion forums and essay mills on the Internet appear almost limitless and their existence can be fluid. This means that it is not possible to give a complete list of such sites for all subjects and domains of interest. The table is intended to give tutors an opportunity to reflect on their discipline by showing the wide range of contract cheating sites in the online world.

The spectrum of contract cheating sites identified is wide. This suggests that any form of direct monitoring of sites would be difficult, although smaller scale monitoring may be possible. Without complete coverage it is necessary for tutors to seriously consider methods of designing opportunities for contract cheating out of the assignment specifications that they set.

CONTRACT CHEATING SITE MONITORING AND ITS ASSOCIATED DIFFICULTIES

Monitoring sites is a labour intensive process and its success largely dependent on a tutor being in the right place at the right time. The choice of sites used by students can be subject and location specific. Here the localised subject knowledge of tutors may be sufficient to suggest to such tutors where they need to look. A search for key terminology on likely auction and forum sites may be enough to detect the most blatant cases. However there is a danger of such an approach being rather scattergun in nature. An alert cheater would quickly realise not to use the common keywords most associated with their topic. They may also learn other methods of disguising their intent. More sophisticated cheaters may start to take their business to sites less directly associated with their academic subject, hence reducing the likelihood of their being caught.

TRACEABILITY OF ASSIGNMENTS

Catching a cheat using a contract cheating site is difficult. There are often four stages to doing so. First it is necessary to identify the institution from which an assignment specification is posted. Next the tutor associated with the assignment specification has to be identified. Third it is necessary to identify which student, often not going by their real name, has put the assignment specification on the site. Finally the burden of proof is on the tutor to demonstrate that the student has submitted work that is not theirs.

ASSESSMENT REDESIGN

The plagiarism literature almost inevitably recommends a multi-directional approach to eliminating plagiarism. One direction requires the compulsory application of plagiarism detection techniques, both to find cheaters and also as a deterrent to stop those who may otherwise be tempted to indulge. Many departments announce when a student has been caught cheating. If local policies allow this it is a valid method of showing students that if they plagiarise they are taking a risk.

Redesigning assessment techniques is as vital for combating contract cheating as it was for avoiding plagiarism. Some, although not all, anti-plagiarism redesign techniques can be directly applied. The methods suggested here are all intended for the prevention of both plagiarism and contract cheating and are as follows:

- **Eliminate coursework**
- **Base an examination on the coursework**
- **Viva-voce examinations**
- **Setting original assignments**
- **Creating individualised versions of assignments**
- **Supervised coursework**
- **Log books**

CONCLUSIONS

There is no doubt that students are taking advantage of the new contracting cheating opportunities that the online world has provided them with. It is hoped that this chapter has given an overview of the current state of contract cheating research and suggested some practical steps that tutors can take to reduce the impact of this type of cheating.

Existing anti-plagiarism techniques, such as TurnItIn.com are not sufficient to ensure that original work submitted by students is their own. Tutors must continue to innovate. They also need to develop and publicise techniques to stop contract cheating and ensure that the research community continues to build.

Academics need to seriously consider a community anti-contract cheating approach. A central repository of assignment specifications should be established, so that tutors can be contacted when their work is outsourced. This would make partially automated searching of contract cheating sites for suspect postings possible. Searches would need to look at both the words of the posting and the contents of attachments where many crucial assignment details are hidden. A central service could also capture immediate evidence of potential wrongdoing. Such regular captures are crucial if a student places a bid request on an auction site and subsequently privatises it. A community of volunteers monitoring such a service could make significant headway into the contract cheating concern.

The techniques presented here can only be considered as a starting point against contract cheating, plagiarism and collusion. It is hoped that interested tutors will take the matter up in their own academic disciplines and help to publicise the need for an integrated approach. Only a community attack on cheating can make the online world an asset to tuition once again and ensure that all students get the results that they deserve.