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Understanding “Internet plagiarism”

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Abstract

Current concerns about plagiarism participate in a culture-wide anxiety that mirrors the cultural climate in previous textual revolutions. In today’s revolution, the Internet is described as the cause of a perceived increase in plagiarism, and plagiarism-detecting services (PDSs) are described as the best solution. The role of the Internet should be understood, however, not just in terms of access to text but also in terms of textual relationships. Synthesizing representations of iText with literary theories of intertextuality suggests that all writers work intertextually, all readers interpret texts intertextually, and new media not only increase the number of texts through which both writers and readers work but also offer interactive information technologies in which unacknowledged appropriation from sources does not necessarily invalidate the text. Plagiarism-detecting services, in contrast, describe textual appropriation solely in terms of individual ethics. The best response to concerns about plagiarism is revised institutional plagiarism policies combined with authentic pedagogy that derives from an understanding of iText, intertextuality, and new media.

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My sense is that Internet plagiarism is becoming more dangerous than we realize.

Ellen Laird

A sense of impending doom hangs over the academy as the specter of “Internet plagiarism” threatens to undo the entire educational enterprise. Brian Kates (2003), reporting for the *New York Daily News*, articulated a widely shared concern: “In numbers growing by the thousands, students have found a quick-fix cure for their academic headaches—on the Internet. In the wonderful world of Web sites, scores of online companies are eager and able to provide slackers with whatever they need—for a price.” Similarly, an academic essay by Dànienne DeVoss and Annette C. Rosati (2002) has posited a binary in which students are either “doing critical, thoughtful, thorough research” or “searching for papers to plagiarize” (p. 201).¹ Another essay by Karla Saari Kitalong (1998) has made a primary assumption explicit: At the heart

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¹ Elsewhere they offer a wider range of causes of Internet plagiarism (p. 195), but then they conclude their article with this binary.

of the current furor over plagiarism, she said, “is the indisputable fact that the Internet’s rich repository of online texts provides an unprecedented opportunity for plagiarism” (p. 255). Thomas Atkins and Gene Nelson (2001) specified that not only are a billion pages available on the Internet but so are two hundred “cheat sites.” In addition, students can cut and paste from other students’ online papers so that teachers will not recognize stylistic or conceptual dissonance in the plagiarized paper (p. 101).

The arguments of Kates, DeVoss and Rosati, Atkins and Nelson, and Kitalong participate in the near-universal belief that the Internet is *causing* an increase in plagiarism. While worrying about whether causal sequences can be ascertained, my 1999 book on plagiarism also postulates ways in which new media are “changing authorship by providing new models of and venues for collaboration and mimesis” (Howard, 1999, pp. 131–132).

In this essay, I take these questions further, looking at the ways in which the Internet participates in our culture of authorship. My desire is to develop a more nuanced understanding of that relationship—something beyond an uncritical assumption of causality. Only then will teachers be positioned to take effective action. What is being called “Internet plagiarism” is presently understood almost exclusively in terms of access to text with expanded access itself believed to be the primary cause of the phenomenon. The history of text, however, reveals that previous revolutions in access to text, such as those precipitated by the advent of the printing press and again by mass education, also incited cultural fears. This time, the cultural fears are focused on issues of property and especially on students’ incursions on the words and ideas of others. If, however, we consider not just access to text but also textual relationships, we can gain a more tempered, critical understanding of Internet plagiarism.

Indisputably, the Internet makes texts readily available for plagiarizing. Jeffrey R. Young (2001b) named the venues: “In recent years, professors have been frustrated by the way more and more students use the Internet to cheat—by plagiarizing the work of other students, by copying material from online reference works, by buying term papers from online paper-writing companies, and by other means” (n.p.). Seth Stevenson (2001) surveyed the possibilities for procuring entire papers online, ordered a custom-written paper for a silly, impossible topic of his own device, and offered wry commentary on both the purchasing of papers and on assignments that prompt students not to write:

When the custom paper came back, it was all I’d dreamed. Representative sentence: “The novel’s diverse characters demonstrate both individually and collectively the fixations and obsessions that bind humanity to the pitfalls of reality and provide a fertile groundwork for the semiotic explanation of addictive behavior.” Tripe. The paper had no thesis and in fact had no body—not one sentence actually advanced a cogent idea. I’m guessing it would have gotten a C+ at Brown—maybe even a B—. . . . If I were a just slightly lesser person, I might be tempted by this service. One custom paper off the Web: \$71.80. Not having to dredge up pointless poppycock for some po-mo obsessed, overrated lit-crit professor: priceless. (n.p.)

And as I work on this essay, Amy E. Robillard (2003) sends me the following email:

How much would you pay for a 7-page paper called “Plagiarism is Theft”???? Oh, the irony is just TOO much for me. go to this link when you want a good laugh. . . <http://search.essaysite.com:9000/cgi-bin/query?mss=essaysite&q=%20plagiarism> If it doesn’t

work, go to schoolsucks.com and type in “plagiarism” in the key word search. Just \$68.95 for a 7-page paper. . . .

Some of the ironies of Internet plagiarism are inescapably hilarious.

But the serious questions, too, persist. Why would increased access to text cause a dramatic rise in plagiarism? Is the relationship something like a disease in which the presence of so much readily available text infects writers, lowering their moral resistance and causing them to plagiarize? Certainly plagiarism has long been likened to a disease (Howard, 2000, pp. 480–481). The comparison is grounded in a sense of writing as an inherently moral (or potentially immoral) activity and in a concomitant equation of morality and disease. The moral person is a healthy person; the immoral, diseased. With the proliferation of online texts, the cultural imposition of standards succumbs in an orgy of text.

Perhaps the relationship between the Internet and the perceived rise in plagiarism is not so much one of writers’ disease and textual promiscuity as it is of readers’ access to the plagiarized texts. It is from this logic that online plagiarism-detection programs are derived: If unethical writers have access to text online and plagiarize from it, then gatekeeping teachers can also access the plagiarized text and catch the offenders (see, for example, Young, 2001a).

Many are inclined to accomplish the gatekeeping task with automated plagiarism-detection software. In 2002, said Andrea L. Foster (2002), the Turnitin.com plagiarism-detection service claimed 400 client colleges in the U.S. In 2005, said the Canadian *CBC*, the Turnitin clients worldwide numbered 4000 (N.S. Students, 2005). Although the Internet provides readers as well as writers access to a plethora of texts, readers who wish to sort through those texts in order to gauge a writer’s originality or plagiarism are faced with a potentially time-consuming task. Hence, services like Turnitin.com offer to perform—and automate—that task. In the “Plagiarism and the Internet” link from its “What Is Plagiarism” page, Turnitin (2003) implies that it will reduce the labor of catching plagiarists and will also raise teachers’ plagiarism-catching success rate (see “Plagiarism and the Internet”). In their endorsement of the software, Atkins and Nelson, too, emphasize its labor-saving potential for teachers (2001, p. 104). However, when James P. Purdy (2005) compared two services (EduTie and EVE2) with the free searching available at Google, he recommended against his college’s purchase of these or similar services: “Because Google, a free service, generally performed on par with these fee-based services, there is no obvious advantage in purchasing them. Moreover, these fee-based services appear to cause more problems than they solve” (p. 282). Some of those problems, including the violation of students’ intellectual property rights when gatekeeping teachers are required to contribute students’ work to services such as Turnitin.com, are outlined by Foster (2002).

Regardless of whether the gatekeeper uses a proprietary service or free Internet searching, the digitized plagiarism-catching response to the proliferation of online texts simplifies and thus obscures a fundamental and more important fact: *In the online environment, both readers and writers have ready access to the same set of texts.* This fact has implications far broader—and potentially more important—than the catching of plagiarists.

If both writers and readers have ready access to the same set of texts, textual culture has suddenly become a much more shared phenomenon.² Historians of print culture have noted

² In making this statement, I am not assuming that all global populations have equal access to technology. The inequities of access as they are distributed according to class, race, nationality, and other factors are eloquently

the revolution in access to text that was occasioned first by the printing press (see, for example, Eisenstein, 1979) and then again by the spread of mass literacy (see, for example, Carey, 1992; Miller, 1998).

Samuel Johnson was a pivotal figure in that first revolution. As Mark Rose explained, his 1754 letter to Lord Chesterfield has been characterized as “the Magna Carta of the modern author” (Rose, 1993, p. 4). In that letter, Johnson rejected Chesterfield’s offer of patronage for the Dictionary. In the new print economy, the old system of patronage had become unnecessary; authors could now make their living directly from the sales of their works. Whereas in a manuscript culture copies of a work were slowly, laboriously produced, in the world of print they could be mass produced. Hence, they could be disseminated not only widely but lucratively. Twenty years later, Johnson was indeed making his living by writing. That did not mean, however, that everyone was comfortable with these new circumstances. On the contrary, the revolution was accompanied by anxiety and controversy. Lord Camden, for example, argued against copyright legislation, insisting that true authors didn’t write for money. After the noted historian, Catherine Macaulay, took him to task, his opinion became the “locus classicus for an obsolete view of authorship” (Rose, 1993, p. 107).

In the next century, the rise of mass literacy produced another revolution—and a new set of anxieties. Although today mass literacy is widely regarded as a universal social good, in the nineteenth century it was greeted with wide skepticism. John Trimbur (2000) noted that many members of the upper class regarded popular literacy with suspicion; it had the potential to fuel discontent and even revolution (p. 287). Many also feared that mass literacy would produce a market for texts that appealed to the masses’ sensibilities. Nathaniel Hawthorne fumed about the “scribbling women” whose shallow, sentimental works were gaining a larger audience than his. John Carey (1992) asserted that the intelligentsia responded by promoting the notion of “high” and “low” literacy. Works of high literacy became, in the modern period, unintelligible to the masses, as the works of E.M. Forster, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf demonstrate. In opposition to the masses’ longing for human-interest stories and “facts” were the aesthetic and the avant-garde, intended to “outrage and puzzle the masses.” Carey continued, “Though it usually purports to be progressive, the avant-garde is consequently always reactionary. That is, it seeks to take literacy and culture away from the masses, and so to counteract the progressive intentions of democratic educational reform” (1992, p. 19). Despite the modernist intelligentsia’s best efforts, however, mass literacy continued to gain ground, and the revolution in text occasioned by it has continued: A great deal of what is published today is of the intellectual weight of *People* magazine. And each new mechanism of mass-distributed text occasions a new round of anxiety and resistance—as is evident in the deluge of scholarly and media publications challenging the value and credibility of weblogs and wikis.

In all its forms, new media constitutes yet another revolution in access to text, and one of its controversies is the anxiety of authenticity. With so much text universally accessible (at least potentially), readers are suddenly detecting far more plagiarism than ever before. “Are today’s students more unethical than in years past?” asked Brian Hansen, the *Congressional*

described by Cynthia Selfe (1999). Nor am I subscribing to the reductive narrative of the global village, against which Gail E. Hawisher and Cynthia L. Selfe (2000) warn. Nor am I celebrating the expanded access enabled by the Internet. I am simply describing it and investigating its effects.

Quarterly researcher who interviewed me in 2003. My answer is, “How would we know? On what basis could comparisons be made?” The very fact that the question arises, though, indicates a cultural fear that indeed this might be the case. This fear arises from a belief in widespread plagiarism—plagiarism that, because of boundless access to text, cannot be controlled. And that belief arises from the availability of text online not just to writers but to readers. It is *readers’* access to copious text that makes them believe in writers’ plagiarism. Their fear that an absence of control over access to text means greater abuse of text leads to a sense that something must be done.

The Internet does not have the controls placed on it that traditional media, such as television and print, do. In such an open forum, traditional notions of authorship and ethos are challenged. And when there is a challenge, the temptation is to retreat into tradition, into the comfortable world of the known-and-familiar. (Enos & Borrowman, 2001, p. 95)

Something (so goes this reasoning) must be done to control the obscene proliferation of text. As Theresa Enos and Shane Borrowman (2001) have indicated, the “what must be done” is not to allow the new textual circumstances to revise the culture’s thinking about textuality but rather to redouble efforts to enforce the principles obtained prior to the revolution. That these principles themselves derive from the earlier textual revolution instigated by the printing press (see Rose, 1993) is a fact not recognized in the culture.

What would it mean to allow the new circumstances to revise our culture’s thinking about textuality? One might fear that this would necessarily mean a relaxation of standards and hence a decline in writing, culture, and thinking. Once we recognize, however, that our present print standards were developed to consolidate the acquisition of capital from the printing press, they seem less rooted in foundational morals. Plagiarism is a discourse developed with that of copyright. Although the word *plagiarism* dates back to the Rome of the poet Martial, the idea of plagiarism and its opposite, originality, as significant textual principles date from the eighteenth century and specifically from the monetary opportunities provided by the printing press. It was London booksellers who agitated for copyright, and it was their supporters who justified it on the basis of a contrast between plagiarism and originality. John Milton and his contemporaries drew on longstanding but previously insignificant cultural ideas, expanded them to a new position of importance, and deployed them to justify copyright.

The fact that a cultural valorization of intellectual property is a notion developed in the past three-hundred years does not mean that it is “modern” and therefore part of cultural “progress.” Nor does it mean that the continuation of this notion is inevitable, *pace* Thomas Mallon’s (1989) claim, “For the last several hundred years—and surely it will be so for several hundred more—the writer has worked his hardest only when he felt there was the chance that his best sentences would stand as famous—and last—words” (p. 238).

Nor does Mallon offer convincing evidence for his assertion that writers are so driven by ego that without being able to claim originality they will not be motivated to write (1989, pp. 237–238).³ Plenty of good writing took place prior to the nineteenth century when Romantic principles of original genius came to define authorship (see Stewart, 1991).

³ Mallon disputes my ideas as energetically as I do his; see his “Plagiarism Expert” (2002).

That our arguments for the morality of intellectual property were developed to justify economic interests should give us pause. Indeed, a respect for property is a widely held moral precept. But if a cultural rejection of plagiarism has been devised solely as a means of consolidating capital—if students are being punished solely as a means of preserving capital—then many teachers may find themselves less enthusiastic about expending their own labor or money in the pursuit of plagiarists. Bill Marsh's (2004) analysis of Turnitin.com as a tool of industrial managerialism in the academy adds evidence for this concern.

It is worth our collective while, therefore, to give serious consideration to the question of how this new revolution of textual access might change the very terms of textuality. So far the perception of possible change has typically been fearful—a fear that is deliberately fueled by commercial plagiarism-detection services. That fear is accompanied by efforts to protect the textual status quo, and again, the commercial plagiarism-detection services offer (for a fee) the means to assuage the fear that they peddle. Consider, for example, Turnitin's (2003) inflammatory statement:

Just as file transfer programs such as Napster make it easy to trade copyrighted music files most people would never think to steal in physical form, the Internet makes plagiarism easy for students who might have thought twice about copying from a book or published article. . . .

Turnitin.com created Resource Resources because we believe preemptive education is the most effective way to prevent plagiarism. We also know some students will plagiarize regardless. If you are an educator and have used plagiarism education preemptively in your classroom, but still suspect many of your students are plagiarizing, automated plagiarism detection can be an enormously effective deterrent. Click [here](#) if you would like to find out more about Turnitin.com's plagiarism prevention system and other online learning tools.

If we are instead to give more deliberate consideration to textual changes in the new revolution, we must find some way to understand its terms, other than the quantitative portrait painted by Turnitin.com and its supporters:

At our last count, there were about 200 “cheat sites” with names like *School Sucks* and *Evil House of Cheat*. Each month 2.6 million students access these sites. These 200 sites list tens of thousands of free and purchased papers that students with computers hooked to the Internet can download in seconds, reformat, then turn in as their own work. (Atkins & Nelson, 2001, p. 101)

Statistics such as these may help us understand the magnitude of the situation. But if we move from an understanding of the situation directly to a “solution,” we have ourselves averted the very critical thinking that we fear our plagiarizing students are depriving themselves of. Type in your credit card number, paste in a student's paper, press a button, and voila! Plagiarist caught or writer exonerated; anxiety assuaged. Catching plagiarists is just as easy and requires just as little thinking as does the plagiarizing.

We need more useful ways of gaining a critical understanding of Internet plagiarism, the larger category of textuality, and the ways in which the revolution in access to text might degrade or simply change textuality. One means of gaining that critical understanding is to explore connections between an established theory of intertextuality; the new concept of ITtext, which was proposed by Cheryl Geisler et al. in 2001 and then developed by Geisler and

colleagues in a 2004 issue of the *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*; and the phenomenon of Internet plagiarism. The thread connecting the three is the relationship between reader, writer, and text.

The notion of plagiarism gained importance in a Western textual economy in which readers, writers, and texts were pulled apart, each considered separate and inviolate. In 1759, Edward Young described what came to be, in Romantic theory and through the twentieth century, the model writer:

The mind of a man of Genius is a fertile and pleasant field, pleasant as *Elysium*, and fertile as *Tempe*; it enjoys a perpetual Spring. Of that Spring, *Originals* are the fairest Flowers: *Imitations* are of quicker growth, but fainter bloom. (Young, 1966, p. 9)

The reader then becomes a decoder, as in James Kinneavy's rhetorical triangle (1980, p. 31), one who extracts from text the meaning placed there by an originary writer. The text from which the decoding reader extracts meaning is itself fixed and stable, a notion that postmodern theory takes to task: "To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" (Barthes, 1977, pp. 128–129).

In a postmodern spirit, stylistician David Birch (1996) has offered a competing vision of text as "a surface upon which meanings can be produced—meanings created by readers, not meanings supposedly encoded in a text by a writer" (pp. 219–220). Postmodern theory has pressured the notion of stable, separable author-reader-text by a variety of means, including the assertion that all writing is relational and intertextual. Copyright historian Mark Rose has gone so far as to say that cultural production, including textual production, "is always a matter of appropriation and transformation" (1993, p. 135). James Porter brought the issue to composition and rhetoric, asserting that writers work from their own "unaccountable collections of incompatible ideas, beliefs, and sources" (1986, p. 35). Thus, from an intertextual point of view, all writers are always collaborating with text. The proliferation of online texts would, from this point of view, present much less of a cultural problem because intertextual theory asserts the appropriation of text as an inescapable component of writing. Considered from an intertextual point of view, the question, "Are students plagiarizing more today?" might generate the answer, "How could they be?"

In intertextual theory, it is the reader, not the writer or the text, who instigates meaning (see Hutcheon, 1986, pp. 232–234). It would thus be the reader who instigates the meaning that is plagiarism. Michael Riffaterre's definition of *intertextuality* as a reader's awareness of "the text's variations on the intertext" (1987, p. 2) attributes the construction of meaning to the reader. Similarly, I would define *plagiarism* as the reader's awareness of unacknowledged but significant intertexts.

The difficulty, of course, is in drawing a line between the intertextuality that the vanguard reader always (and should) detect if the text is to be fully appreciated, and the transgressive intertextuality for which the gatekeeping reader must initiate punitive measures. The work of T.S. Eliot marks one place in which intertextual reading is not only desirable but necessary. The poet, says Eliot,

must be aware that the mind of Europe—the mind of his own country—a mind which he learns in time to be much more important than his own private mind—is a mind which changes, and that this change is a development which abandons nothing *en route*, which does not superan-

nuate either Shakespeare, or Homer, or the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsmen. (1960, p. 75)

Hence, the poet must work as a part of his tradition—and the reader must appreciate that context of any work. Kevin J.H. Dettmar (1999) observed in another essay, “The Metaphysical Poets,” Eliot demanding that the poet be “more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning” (qtd. in Dettmar, 1999, p. 99). When an allusion is recognized by a majority of readers, the “circle of Tradition” is closed (Dettmar, 1999, p. 100).

Whereas Eliot’s modernist notion of intertextuality is all about authorial intention and control, the later theories of Linda Hutcheon (1986) and Michael Riffaterre (1987) put intertextuality beyond the control of authors and users of text; intertextuality is connective, relational, and inescapable. IText makes this principle visible to both producers and users of texts.

Connectivity and relationality are integral to the very recent phenomenon of IText. Geisler et al. (2001) named PDAs, email, and hypertext as examples of IText, which they define as “information technologies with texts at their core” (p. 270). As they use IText documents, people may “us[e] tools that are built on prior activities and activity systems but transform. . . them in their new electronic contexts” (p. 273).

Established theories of intertextuality resonate with this portrait of IText but are also transformed by it. The intertextual theories of Hutcheon and Riffaterre challenge Eliot’s assumption of authorial control. Authorial autonomy and control are impossible given that meaning derives from readers’ activities and experiences and given the connections that readers make between text and intertexts of which the author may be unaware. The phenomenon of IText, in turn, offers visibly interactive information technologies in which a rapidly increasing number of the world’s population participates.

Not everything on the Internet is an IText. The seven-page, ready-made paper available for purchase at EssaySite is a text available electronically (see “Plagiarism Is Theft,” 2003), not an IText. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* web site on the president’s decision to make only minor changes in Title IX guidelines, on the other hand (see “Status Quo,” 2003), is. The “Status Quo” web site provides links to relevant stories—stable texts published online by the *Chronicle*—but it also offers opportunity for readers’ conversation on the topic. Visible in this technology is the interaction of reader, writer, and text; the construction of meaning by the reader; and the inability of the author to control meaning once the text is circulated.

Some stand-alone texts are still posted on the Web, but increasingly we see texts like Howard Kurtz’s (2003) “Bush Gets Battered,” which the *Washington Post* does not list as a weblog but which sprinkles links to other sources throughout the text. And increasingly, readers’ work with seemingly stand-alone texts is deliberately interactive as we turn to Google for further information on the topic, source, or author. Nowhere is the interaction of reader, writer, and text more evident than in IText. “To separate ITexts from our current static notion of text, we need to understand users as active and, perhaps more fundamentally, ITexts as interactive,” said Geisler et al. as they explained the concept of IText (2001, p. 279). What IText makes obvious is that the separation is impossible. IText, in other words, functions as a powerfully visible extension of intertextual theory. It is no longer possible to control access to text, and

it is no longer possible to imagine that writers do not draw copiously on other texts, both consciously and unconsciously.

Nor is it possible to pretend that unacknowledged appropriation of sources invalidates a text, as the “dodgy dossier” eloquently demonstrates. Employees of Alastair Campbell, Tony Blair’s Director of Communications, plagiarized from online academic sources to construct what they described as an “intelligence dossier” on Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction. That dossier was published on the [10 Downing Street web site on February 3, 2003](#) (10 Downing). On February 4, email exchanges among some antiwar readers of the document established that its sources were plagiarized from the Internet (see [Hinsliff, Bright, Beaumont, & Vulliamy, 2003](#)). On February 5, Colin Powell appeared before the U.N. Security Council and cited what is now known in Britain as the “dodgy dossier,” describing it as a “fine paper that . . . describes in exquisite detail Iraqi deception activities” ([Powell, 2003](#)). When word that the dossier had not only been plagiarized but wasn’t even an intelligence document became public, the governments of both the U.S. and the U.K. stood behind its accuracy (see, for example, [Frankel, 2003](#); “[U.K. Accused,](#)” 2003), and many commentators continued to endorse Powell’s evidence before the U.N. (see, for example, “[U.N. Should Heed,](#)” 2003). By June 10, 2003, Alastair Campbell had apologized for the dodgy dossier ([Wintour, 2003](#)), and as [Kevin Maguire and Ewen MacAskill \(2003\)](#) reported the possibility that Campbell would resign his post, they mentioned the dossier as one of his travails in office. Meanwhile, however, the U.K. and U.S. had invaded Iraq, basing their case for war in large measure on forged and plagiarized documents and exaggerated claims (see, for example, [Pincus, 2003](#)).

An incident like the dodgy dossier does not justify students’ appropriation of online texts. It does, however, offer just one demonstration of how IText is deployed intertextually by both readers and writers, and it suggests, too, that in many important venues, plagiaristic composition does not invalidate a text.

As I have suggested elsewhere,⁴ plagiarism in the academy matters so dearly because writing assignments are intended to help students learn course materials and gain communication and thinking skills. If those assignments are undermined through plagiarism, none of that learning takes place, and the academic enterprise is itself endangered. For this reason, we must treat Internet plagiarism as a very serious issue.

We cannot, said [Geisler et al.](#), “[just sit back and watch the IText revolution happen. We should get involved](#)” (2001, p. 268). The visibility of intertextuality in IText can help educators understand that plagiarism-detecting software does not protect the learning experience; only pedagogy does. The “preemptive education” that Turnitin.com promises on its “Plagiarism and the Internet” site can help students understand intellectual property and the rules of the academy, and it can help teachers save labor in that endeavor. But it also helps teachers *avoid* asking the hard questions about what the new revolution in access to text teaches us—that both reading and writing are collaborative, appropriative activities, and that social leaders are not above plagiarism and are not necessarily punished for it. Plagiarism-detecting software

⁴ Howard, “[Forget about Policing Plagiarism: Just Teach](#)” (2001). Significantly, this is not the title I gave the piece; Mine was “Plagiarism, Policing, Pedagogy.” The *Chronicle of Higher Education* changed the title on their own accord, creating a bigger attention-getter but distorting the argument of my text. It is no surprise that some readers objected to and misunderstood my argument; see, for example, [Carlson \(2002\)](#).

also helps teachers describe the issue solely in terms of individual students' ethics, thereby avoiding the difficult task of constructing pedagogy that engages students in the topic and the learning process and that persuades them not just that they will be punished for plagiarizing but that they will be able to and glad to do their own writing. In place of the pedagogy that joins teachers and students in the educational enterprise, plagiarism-detecting software offers a machine that will separate them. Bill Marsh (2004) has described this separation eloquently, pointing out that the operation of Turnitin is an operation of remediation, one that reforms students' texts—all students' texts—in the terms of its mechanized "originality checks."

Turnitin.com promises to protect students' ethics. That a mechanized detection system could teach ethics—much less that our culture *needs* such means of ethical instruction—is, *prima facie*, an outrageous proposition. And we cannot ignore the fact, pointed out by students at Mount Saint Vincent University who protested the institutional use of the service (N.S. Students, 2005), that a wholesale use of the service implicitly brands *all* of our students as potential cheaters, as remedial subjects who must prove their worth.

When I was being interviewed for the *Congressional Quarterly*, the researcher asked for my opinion on the prospect of a federal law against online term-paper sites. After I had recovered from my surprise, I said that I would, indeed, like to see the term-paper sites shut down, not to mention the profiteering plagiarism-detection services. The possibility of federal intervention, however, is an alarming one. Online term paper sites do not violate federal law, and the specter of legislative incursions on their right of free speech is an alarming one, especially in a time when changes in copyright law place authors' rights in far greater dominance over fair use than ever before and when homeland security and the Patriot Act raise widespread alarm about other incursions on Constitutional rights.

The biggest threat posed by Internet plagiarism is the widespread hysteria that it precipitates. With an uncritical, oversimplified understanding of intertextuality, teachers subscribe to plagiarism-detection services instead of connecting with their students through authentic pedagogy. That not only the mechanized services of plagiarism-detection programs but also federal efforts might intrude into the relations of teachers, students, and texts will, I hope, prompt scholars and educators to adopt a role of leadership rather than victimization in this issue.

In 1999, I argued that this leadership must take as its first agendum the rewriting of institutional plagiarism policies. This is no small undertaking. The task is large, complex, and not easy for an individual to initiate. But since 1999, the possibilities for policy reformation have grown. With all the attention now lavished on the figure of the student plagiarist, faculty and administrators are more easily moved to reconsider previous pedagogy and policy. At my own institution this reconsideration is underway, and I am working, as a member of the Vice Provost's Committee on Academic Integrity, to urge that the university adopt a plagiarism policy that differentiates plagiarism from misuse of sources. The national Council of Writing Program Administrators offers invaluable guidance in its statement on Best Policies:

Ethical writers make every effort to acknowledge sources fully and appropriately in accordance with the contexts and genres of their writing. A student who attempts (even if clumsily) to identify and credit his or her source, but who misuses a specific citation format or incorrectly uses quotation marks or other forms of identifying material taken from other sources, has not

plagiarized. Instead, such a student should be considered to have failed to cite and document sources appropriately. (2003, p. 2)

The danger, of course, is that institutions will have the opposite reaction: that instead of acknowledging the great variation in textual activities that have traditionally all been lumped together under the label *plagiarism*, they may instead be even more inclusive and simplistic with that label. Combining conceptual oversimplification with the mechanized applications offered by plagiarism-checking services may indeed make some reduction in the incidence of readily detectable plagiarism. Even more likely, though, is that it will close off possibilities for actually teaching students how to read, synthesize, and write about sources.

Hence, the importance of working on institutional policies. As these are revised to acknowledge the categorical differences between bungling citations and downloading term papers, teachers are better positioned to enact pedagogies such as those described by Kelly Ritter (2005) and Robillard (2006), pedagogies from which students derive a heightened sense of academic values and a heightened sense of their own possibilities as writers.

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