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The Internet: A Catalyst for Plagiarism

In 2003, Blair Hornstine became a sensation. After accepting her admission, Harvard University withdrew her acceptance because it was discovered that she had plagiarized. Blair Hornstine attended Moorestown High School in New Jersey and wrote for the Courier Post, a local paper. It came to light that “in five stories she wrote for the paper [she] had lifted extensive material directly from speeches and papers published on the Internet” (Green and Russell 2003). Dictionary.com defines plagiarism as “an act or instance of using or closely imitating the language and thoughts of another author without authorization and the representation of that author's work as one's own, as by not crediting the original author” (“Plagiarism”, n.d.). This topic is especially important today because the Internet is widely used and provides countless sources of information to all interested parties, including students. Some may argue that plagiarism is not just a modern-day dilemma, but that it is an age-old problem that goes back to the age of Shakespeare. Even so, using the Internet in education today has increased the tendency to plagiarize for two major reasons.

First – and most importantly – because the Internet is increasingly used as a tool for research and writing today, it is very easy to simply copy and paste. On the one hand, the Internet is used to access primary or secondary sources like journals and articles for research papers; on the other hand, it is used as a supplementary tool for reference, brainstorming, or generating ideas. In the article “Plagiarism in the Internet Age,” Howard and Davies (2009) write that students are drawn to the availability of a wide selection of sources online. In

addition, in the article “How Do High School Students Justify Internet Plagiarism?” Sisti (2007) explains that although at times random, the relative ease of searching for information online is actually useful and suitable. In other words, the Internet is much easier to use (from the cozy confines of one's home) for accessing different sources of information than physically sifting through stacks of dusty printed material in the library. In today's fast-paced world, this is practical, even if the search online is sometimes at random. Students therefore use the internet to maximize their chances of finding the right sources using clever search engines online, while also saving themselves time in the process. Once the information sought is found, students can simply copy and paste it in a matter of seconds. This leads to the next point; the perception of right and wrong today.

In addition to the temptation to copy and paste, it can be argued that the concept of right and wrong in today's accelerated world has eroded. In the past, morality was strictly defined as white or black. Today, many shades of grey exist between the two extremes; it is growing increasingly hard to define right and wrong. Sisti (2007) notes that high school students do not view cheating as a matter of grave import. This point is supported by Stevens, Young and Calabrese in their 2007 article “Does Moral Judgment Go Offline When Students Are Online? A Comparative Analysis of Undergraduates' Beliefs and Behaviors Related to Conventional and Digital Cheating”, they found that of those who admitted to copy and pasting from the internet, “77% of students did not believe such plagiarism was very serious” (p. 235). In other words, the students that do engage in plagiarism and/or cheating do not feel that they are committing a grievous offense. Wood and Warnken (2004) illustrate this issue perfectly in their article “Managing Technology Academic Original Sin: Plagiarism, the Internet and Librarians.” They explain, “students accused of academic dishonesty...believe firmly that they are moral, honest, and ethical people and would never do something as dishonest as to steal. They do not see plagiarism as stealing.” Thus, in today's world, the

parameters that separate right from wrong are not as easily defined to students. They are blurry, and in many cases, they overlap, leading to an increase in plagiarism.

A final cause for plagiarism is a consequence of not insisting students improve their writing skills and self-confidence by writing their own papers. Instead, some professors do not strictly enforce the rules governing plagiarism. In “Student Online Plagiarism: How Do We Respond?” Scanlon (2003), a professor of Communications, asserts that academics are partly to blame for their laxness in emphasizing the importance of original work. In other words, many teachers do not stress the value of original, independently-thought work to students while also fostering confidence in them to do their own work. In fact, a study conducted by Newman (2009) shows that 13.2% “cut and paste” from the internet because they do not have strong writing abilities. These students do not feel that their writing is good enough despite the fact that they have been taught what plagiarism means. Consequently, they often plagiarize. When their instructors do not penalize the plagiarizers, other students – who would have taken the time and effort to write their own papers – begin to plagiarize as well.

In summary, plagiarism has always existed, but integrating Internet usage with education today has served as a catalyst for plagiarism. This is because technology in education today makes it extremely easy to “copy and paste” from internet sources. Moreover, because of the wide availability of all sorts of information available online, the media and social networks to name a few, today's students fail to see plagiarism as wrong. They also lack the confidence in their own skills, which makes them more likely to take the easy way out, or plagiarize. As it stands, plagiarism, despite being an age old problem, has a huge impact on education today. If Blair Hornstine had cited her sources when she wrote for her local paper, the *Courier Post*, she might have graduated from Harvard by now.

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