Fighting Plagiarism
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Terril Yue Jones recently wrote a summary of the effects of widespread plagiarism on educators. "Across the country, teachers and professors are abandoning the traditional academic chore of tidy margins and meticulous footnotes because the Internet offers a searchable online smorgasbord of ready-made papers." In addition to using plagiarism-detection systems such as TurnItIn, "Teachers who still assign long papers — 10 pages or more with footnotes and bibliographies — often require students to attach companion essays that describe every step of their research and writing." Many teachers are shifting their writing assignments to in-class essays; however, "In-class writing assignments are, by necessity, much shorter exercises that can be as brief as a couple of paragraphs and rarely more than a few pages." Jones quotes Nancy Willard of the Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use as saying, "Kids these days have difficulty writing in depth about anything.... They are used to doing PowerPoint presentations, and the level of superficiality is great compared with term papers."

And this problem is related to information assurance (IA) . . . how?

In the first place, one of the fundamental properties of information that we protect in IA is authenticity — the correct labeling or attribution of information. For example, if someone sends a scurrilous e-mail message using a forged e-mail header, that's a breach of authenticity.

Second, most of the readers of this column have some interest in management. Managers must guard against plagiarism in official documents. Having plagiarized material in a press release, a product manual, a white paper, a Web site or a letter to a customer could not only be embarrassing, it could conceivably result in legal liability.

Third, I wanted readers to know about a little-known tool that can help anyone check text for plagiarism. EVE2 (Essay Verification System v2) is a small program that costs $30 for unlimited use. This product provides a list of suspect phrases and pointers to possible sources. The user must then check the highlighted text against the original to evaluate the potential plagiarism. It’s a tool to support plagiarism identification, not a substitute for human intelligence. EVE2 ignores quotation marks and cheerfully counts quoted materials as possible plagiarism. In addition, it appears to have no technical support and no one responds to requests for site licenses. Aside from that, it works fine.

Norwich University has a license for TurnItIn which is perfect for our undergraduate papers, especially considering its vast repertoire of publications and other student essays stored in a repository. However, I do not permit our MSIA faculty to use TurnItIn for plagiarism checking on our IA graduate students’ essays; even if we bar permanent storage of the essay, TurnItIn necessarily puts a copy of their work temporarily on the TurnItIn servers while the essay is being checked. In contrast, EVE2 is entirely client-based and therefore reduces the exposure of our students’ work to any other servers.
Finally, some of the readers of this column are educators. I think that every educator at every level should be aware of the degradation of education that results from cut-and-paste composition of research papers. As a professor, I assign term papers because they help students learn how to weigh information and articulate their thoughts. If you are interested in knowing more about how I see the value of writing as an intellectual discipline, read my essay “On Writing.” <http://www.mekabay.com/methodology/writing_undergrad.pdf> The essay also includes practical pointers for students on how (and why) to write simply and clearly.

Perhaps readers will use “On Writing” to convince their students (or their employees) that good writing encourages good thinking.

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