Plagiarism Outside the Classroom

by M. E. Kabay, PhD, CISSP-ISSMP
Associate Professor, Information Assurance
Norwich University, Northfield VT

Most readers know from personal experience in school that plagiarism – the use of someone else’s words or ideas without attribution or without indicating that an exact copy the material is being quoted – is a definitely a Bad Thing. Teachers emphasize the importance of distinguishing one’s own work from that of others; an entire industry has grown up to help academics screen the work of their students (see for example <http://tinyurl.com/yd5vge>). But does plagiarism actually matter in the real world – for example, the world of work, politics, government and the arts?

Oh yes it does!

In early 2006, a 19-year-old sophomore from Harvard University was in the news when her first novel, “How Opal Mehta Got Kissed, Got Wild, and Got a Life,” was withdrawn from bookstores by the publisher, Little, Brown after she admitted that she had unconsciously and unintentionally plagiarized material from novels by Megan McCafferty.<http://tinyurl.com/ycsxdq> Talk about an embarrassing start to a promising career….

More recently here in Vermont, a 29-year-old political writer had to resign from one of the campaigns here for using text from other politicians on behalf of his candidate without quotation marks and without attribution. <http://tinyurl.com/vmxvox> He called a local columnist, who reported that he said, “I am deeply sorry and embarrassed for my actions…. I, and I alone, take full responsibility for any plagiarized material used by the campaign. I was stupid and I was wrong.” <http://tinyurl.com/ymhcee> In that case, plagiarism cost the enthusiast his job.

In a thoughtful essay entitled “Purloined Letters: Are we too quick to denounce plagiarism?” published in _The New Yorker_ magazine in 1997 and mirrored at <http://tinyurl.com/vfgr4h>, James Kincaid summarizes the story of poet Neal Bowers, who discovered that someone calling himself “David Sumner” (or sometimes “Daine Compton”) was not only plagiarizing his poems: he was even plagiarizing the plagiarized poems by submitting them to multiple magazines. Mr Kincaid continues with an analysis of newspaper writers’ use (or abuse) or wire-service copy, arguing that “Such word-by[-]word agreement certainly isn’t culpable where a wire service is involved, and, in any event, seems little more than a signal of brisk workmanship.” In another section of his essay, Kincaid points out that in literary works, it can be difficult to distinguish between what one has learned from others and what one has created for oneself: “But how do I distinguish what I have ‘learned from others. from what I am ‘personally contributing’? If I subtract everything I have learned from others (including Mother?), what is left?” He quotes Helen Keller, upon being accused of plagiarism, as saying, “It is certain that I cannot always distinguish my own thoughts from those I read, because what I read becomes the very substance and text of my mind.”

Philosophical reflections apart, I recommend that readers support policies explicitly banning plagiarism in all corporate publications, including Web sites. Security awareness newsletters should occasionally include warnings about intentional or unintentional plagiarism as part of the
annual cycle of useful topics. Anyone wanting more material about plagiarism, perhaps to use in a newsletter, can read the section entitled “Why We Cite Sources” in my paper “On Writing” available at <http://tinyurl.com/yajn2p> or in the PDF at <http://tinyurl.com/yaul5d>.

And by the way, you don’t have to plagiarize my articles to use them: everyone is welcome to point to the _Network World_ archives <http://tinyurl.com/yemld9> and to my Web site or even to use the materials verbatim for non-commercial purposes (e.g., for internal newsletters or in materials for educational institutions) provided the source is indicated. Just don’t post them on a public Web site, please.

* * *


M. E. Kabay, PhD, CISSP-ISSMP is Program Director of the Master of Science in Information Assurance <http://www.msia.norwich.edu> at Norwich University in Northfield, VT. Mich can be reached by e-mail at <mailto:mekabay@gmail.com>; Web site at <http://www.mekabay.com/index.htm>.

Copyright © 2006 M. E. Kabay. All rights reserved.

Permission is hereby granted to Network World to distribute this article at will, to post it without limit on any Web site, and to republish it in any way they see fit.