

Internet use for students going from research to cheating

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Kevin Padden said lifting work directly off the Internet helped him get through classes in high school.

"Yeah, I plagiarized," the Lunenburg resident, 20, said. "It's pretty much the reason I graduated."

He found information by going deep into the list of links that came up in an online search and looking at more obscure Web sites.

And he says he never got in trouble for it.

"Unless the teacher did a search on one of your sentences and found it that way, they never knew," he said while watching a hockey game at the Wallace Civic Center Wednesday. "They told us how to do it right. I just never did."

Ellen Mack uses the Internet to help with homework or projects at least twice a week, she said.

Sometimes her teachers will show her which Web sites to use for research, but other times she'll just explore sites that come up on search engines, the Lunenburg High School sophomore, 15, said.

"Usually I'll just go to Google and go to links from there," she said. "It's pretty easy to tell what's good information."

But Mack said some students use the Internet as a tool for plagiarizing school projects, and guessed teachers may not know how to detect if work has been stolen online.

"I think it could be hard if they don't know what sites kids are using (to plagiarize work)," she said. "It's definitely easy to copy and paste someone else's essay and just change some things around. It definitely happens."

Geraldine Ashe, the technology director for the Leominster Public Schools, said

Thursday the policy of the district is to forbid the violation of copyright laws.

A technological liability

Punishment for plagiarizing depends on the individual teacher and the nature of the offense, she said.

"I think teachers encourage Internet research when it's done properly," Ashe said. "It's one of the advantages of having high-speed Internet access in the schools ... But we all know that (plagiarism) is a liability of having all that information available."

Teachers can recognize when items have been copied and pasted into students' work, and when they suspect a student has copied information, they usually have to re-write it and suffer a grade penalty, Ashe said.

"There's a style piece there," she said. "To me, it almost seems like more work to piece together different authors and make it a smooth read."

Matt Dauphinais, 16, a FHS junior, said he's heard of some teachers checking students' passed-in work with Web sites, but thinks a lot of students get away with plagiarizing from the Internet.

"I would say a lot of kids do it," he said Wednesday at the Wallace Civic Center. "(Teachers) think they know, but we get away with it anyway."

Dauphinais said he thinks students are web-savvy enough to find legitimate sources online to help with homework and research.

"You go into Google and search for your topic," he said. "I think people know how to find the information they really want."

FHS sophomore Brittany Mello, 15, said she will sometimes copy and paste something from the Internet, but change it with her own information.

"Sometimes I'll take out words and put it in my own words," she said.

Mello said she has heard of other students stealing entire articles or papers online, but said they run the risk of harsh punishment from the school if they are caught.

Internet savvy?

"It's a serious, serious deal," she said.

Leominster Superintendent Nadine Binkley said Monday most teachers have the

Internet experience to investigate projects and papers they find suspicious.

"Many school systems are now even subscribing to services where they have everything turned in electronically, where papers are screened to make sure they aren't copied," she said. "But all teachers can do that by going into Google and just typing in a sentence from the students' paper."

Matthew Dee of Shirley, a Mount Wachusett Community College freshman, said teachers and professors will help students find valuable Web sites if they ask for help.

"I'll go to the library or something and ask for help if I need it," Dee, 18, said. "I can honestly say I've never plagiarized. But I would say it's fairly easy to do."

New system

Charlie Maner, the Chief Information Officer for Fitchburg State College, said Thursday FSC will introduce a new system of plagiarism monitoring from Turnitin.com within the next year.

"Once fully implemented it will scan a document and match it with others," he said. "It will return with a plagiarism index that can say, for instance, 'This document is 20 percent plagiarized.'"

The software will be sophisticated enough to ignore information students have quoted and cited properly, and students can use it prior to handing assignments in to check their own work, Maner said.

FSC's punishments for plagiarism range from having to do additional course-work, receiving failing grades on the assignment or in the class, or having to appear before the college's judicial body and being referred to the dean of students, Maner said.

"FSC has a good system in place now," he said. "What Turnitin will do is act as a tool to assist the faculty in thoroughly detecting plagiarism. But I would never discount our faculty members' ability to catch plagiarism themselves."

Binkley said library and media specialists in the district work with students to show them how to decipher which sites have valuable information, as well as how to avoid plagiarism.

"They all work with students to give them the characteristics of a good site," she said. "They teach them how you discern a site that's helpful, that's got good content."

Web sites from questionable sources have been a problem for both students and

adults, said Binkley, adding that some sites with false information can look professional and legitimate.

"It's an ongoing issue, even adults have trouble deciphering what's out there," she said.

The Internet also offers an easy way out for students who have forgotten they have a paper due the next day, or have not finished a book for a book report.

Searchers can find posted research papers and published studies on the Internet.

They can also subscribe to services that sell "customized" term papers at a cost per page - ranging from \$10 to about \$30, depending on delivery time - from sites that ask users to submit topics and promise original works from a staff of writers within days or hours.

One such site, TermPaperRelief.com, promises their products can be run through an "plagiarism-detection software" undetected because the works are made-to-order.

Customer service representatives for the site did not return an e-mail asking for comment.

Maner said he can't think of a faculty member or teacher that would approve of a purchased assignment.

"Doing that probably explicitly violates every plagiarism policy at virtually every college or university," he said.

Kathy Schrock, who runs a Web site with Internet teaching tools through Discovery.com, said Wednesday teachers are pretty adept at recognizing when a student turns in something they did not write.

"Sometimes you'll see a sentence or a phrase and say, 'That seventh-grader did not write that,'" said Schrock, who is also the administrator for technology at the Nauset Public Schools on Cape Cod.

Schrock called the sites selling term papers "paper mills," and noted many school systems and universities use software from monitoring Web sites to determine if a student used their services.

If a teacher suspects a student has copied something from a Web site, Schrock said they can check phrases or sentences in the student's work easily using mainstream search engines, like Google.

"Teachers should try to do it more as a preventative measure rather than a punitive measure," she said.

"It's more about educating the student about what's right. Intellectual property is very, very important."