Q: With such unprecedented access to online content, is plagiarism more of a problem than before?

There’s no doubt that the digital age has made plagiarism much easier than in the past. Finding a wide range of pre-existing content, copying it, pasting it and sharing it with others has become a quick and nearly effortless process. Detecting plagiarism by traditional manual methods is much harder.

There is ample anecdotal evidence to suggest that plagiarism is now widespread, and research appears to back this up. For example, The Josephson Institute’s 2008 Report Card on the Ethics of American Youth reports that:

… 21 percent of students say they’ve downloaded a paper or report from the web to turn and 50 percent of students have seen or heard about others doing this.

… 38 percent of students have copied text from Web sites and turned it in as their own work, while 60 percent have seen or heard this.

Moreover, a large percentage of teens surveyed did not view such behavior as a serious offense. And a large-scale study by Rutgers University Management Professor Donald McCabe concluded that “Internet plagiarism is prevalent among college and university students.”

Q: How serious is the issue of plagiarism?

Standards and policies differ from one school system and institution to the next, but plagiarism is generally considered a serious violation of academic standards and a detriment to education. Our culture puts a high value on original thinking and intellectual property, and these principles apply not only in academic but also professional and commercial settings. The degree of “seriousness” is ultimately up to individual institutions, as embodied in their stated policies and their efforts to educate students, faculty and staff on the importance of the issue.

Q: Are there different degrees of plagiarism?

Yes. Incidents range from unintentional to intentional. Many cases result from a lack of awareness on the part of students as to the nature and seriousness of plagiarism. For this reason, the problem calls not only for detection and enforcement but also education and training. We encourage educators to use a tool like Turnitin to help sensitize students to issues of academic integrity and proper citation. Turnitin can be used as an instructional support tool to show students what they are doing and how to prevent problems in the future.

Q: What are the disciplinary consequences of plagiarism? What should the consequences in education be?

These are matters of institutional policy, and those practices and policies vary widely. The Center for Academic Integrity (CAI) helps colleges and universities share and establish best practices in this area. (www.academicintegrity.org)
Q: How can educators most effectively teach students about plagiarism?

In our experience, it is not enough to simply tell students what plagiarism is. It is more effective to help students understand plagiarism in the context of their own writing. We have professional development seminars called the Turnitin Academy in which we show educators specific classroom exercises designed to help students recognize potential instances of plagiarism in their own writing. This kind of experiential learning is much more effective than mere description.

Q: Should educators design assignments that are difficult to plagiarize?

Some educators attempt to solve the copying problem by designing assignments that are “plagiarism-proof.” For example, rather than asking students to write a research report about icebergs (which is easy to cut and paste from web sources), a teacher might ask them to write an autobiography as if they were an iceberg. Such assignments can engage students in the core course concepts and challenge them to build their skills and knowledge, while making it difficult to re-use existing sources verbatim.

Instructors can also break assignments into a series of drafts and require students to turn in those drafts — avoiding the “last minute” syndrome that can lead to students copying a paper from elsewhere.

But eliminating all opportunities for plagiarized material is difficult. Traditional research papers, for example, are an essential part of many curricula and are inherently vulnerable to plagiarism.

Q: Why do students plagiarize? Is it pressure, disorganization, poor study habits/skills, ease of “cut and paste” from the web, lack of understanding about the seriousness of plagiarism, or lack of knowledge about how/what to cite or what?

All of the factors above are relevant. And as instructors have told us repeatedly: many students just don’t know what they are doing. They may know that plagiarizing is wrong but don’t realize that they are actually doing it.

Q: How can educators and parents deal with issues around plagiarism and help students avoid trouble?

It starts with articulating clear rules regarding the use and proper attribution of unoriginal content and ideas in one’s own writing. But it takes more than “do’s and don’ts”; it also requires detailed guidance in the context of actual writing assignments. Close reading and substantive feedback from instructors and peers are needed to show students where plagiarism is an issue and how to avoid it. Turnitin enables students to receive essential feedback throughout the writing process so they can express themselves originally, confidently and competently.

Q: Where can I learn more about plagiarism and Turnitin?

Visit www.plagiarism.org or www.Turnitin.com for more information, or call 510.764.7600 to speak with a Turnitin representative, or email sales@turnitin.com.