The Case of the Purloined Paper

Teachers may not like their students cheating - the Internet copy-and-paste method is one popular scheme - but some students don't know what all the fuss is about. Can you spell plagiarism?

By BRIDID SCHULTE, Washington Post
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WASHINGTON -- Nancy Abeshouse is excited about teaching her Advanced Placement literature class at Springbrook High School in Montgomery County, Md. These are her best students, the class is rigorous enough to count for college credit, and the activity she has planned is one of the intellectual highlights of the year: She's had the class read Henry James' The Turn of the Screw. They've had to write a paper on whether the main character, the governess, really saw ghosts or was just imagining things.

But it turns out not to be such a highlight. The discussion falls flat. Everyone in the class has the same opinion -- that James didn't believe in ghosts and was parodying sexually repressed Victorian society. And most of the papers include variations on the same sentence: "Unable to express her desires, she imagines that she sees the ghosts of luckier souls who did express their desires."

After the students file out Abeshouse is more than suspicious. She goes to her computer, logs on to the Internet and types bits of the telltale sentence into the search engine Google. Up it comes on SparkNotes.com, a hipper, online version of Cliffs Notes. "I wanted them to go through an intellectual exercise. And they just wanted the answer," Abeshouse says later. "By our standards, it's cheating. By theirs, it's efficiency."

A teacher for 22 years, Abeshouse has battled the run-of-the-mill copiers and cheaters, and in recent years even the ones who merely change the typeface and turn in their friend's homework. Usually she gives students zeros or sends them to the principal's office for a lecture on plagiarism. This time, since these students are among the best, she wants to teach them a lesson. She downloads the SparkNotes summary of The Turn of the Screw -- which, she says, has an "anti-intellectual, cynical, what's-the-bottom-line tone." Then she prints copies of an analysis from a top journal, using letters James wrote to his publisher about the book and historical references to the era. She gives them both to her students and hopes they notice the difference. Or care.

Lately, Abeshouse has become nearly obsessed with how easy the Internet makes it for students to cheat and get away with it. "I've just found a Web site that posts International Baccalaureate-style essays. In different languages," she says, sadly triumphant. But what she may not realize is that the Turn of the Screw incident is just one skirmish in the ongoing cold war of high-tech cheating. "It's like an arms race," says Joe Howley, a student in an elite Montgomery County magnet program who says he watched widespread cheating from the sidelines. "And teachers are always playing catch-up."

Donald McCabe is the founding president of the Center for Academic Integrity at Rutgers University, and his research shows that "academic integrity" is fast becoming an oxymoron. And not just in colleges, where cheating is rampant, he says.

McCabe is finding that cheating is starting younger -- in elementary school, in fact. And by the time students hit middle and high school, cheating is, for many, like gym class and lunch period, just part of the fabric of how things are. It isn't that students have become moral reprobates. What has changed, says McCabe, is technology. It has made cheating so easy. The vast realms of information on the Web are so readily available. Who could resist?
Not many do. In McCabe's 2001 survey of 4,500 high school students from 25 high schools around the country, 74 percent said they had cheated at least once on a big test. Seventy-two percent reported serious cheating on a written work. And 97 percent reported at least one questionable activity, such as copying someone else's homework or peeking at someone else's test. More than one-third admitted to repetitive, serious cheating.

And few appeared to feel shame. "You do what it takes to succeed in life," wrote one student. "Cheating is part of high school," said another. Fifteen percent had turned in a paper bought or copied from Internet sources. More than half said they had copied portions of a paper from the Web without citing the source. And 90 percent were indiscriminate copiers, plagiarizing from the Net, from books, magazines, even the old low-tech standard, the World Book encyclopedia.

"Students were certainly cheating before the Internet became available. But now it's easier. Quicker. More anonymous," McCabe says. "I can't tell you how many high school students say they cheat because others do and it goes unpunished. Being honest disadvantages them."

Besides, most people get away with it. It's easy for students to stay at least one step ahead of their teachers. When teachers began noticing that students would copy from the Internet or from one another and simply change the typeface, students quickly moved on. They discovered the wonders of Microsoft Word's AutoSummarize feature, which can take an entire page and shorten it to highlight the key points.

They think "that we don't know as much about technology as they do," says Carol Wansong, who just retired from teaching high school. "And, of course, we don't. They were born with it."

Even if students are caught, the consequences can be negligible. At some colleges, students who plagiarize are expelled. But a high school student caught plagiarizing may just get a zero for that particular assignment. Often, he or she will be given a chance to make it up for at least partial credit. And there's no mention of it on the all-important transcript that gets sent to colleges. At Bardstown High School in Kentucky last year, 118 seniors were caught copying and pasting from the Internet. Sometimes entire short stories were lifted. The punishment? One essay on the evils of plagiarism. No National Honor Society memberships were pulled, and one of those caught cheating remained the class valedictorian.

Plagiarism -- a derivative of the Latin word for kidnapping -- literally means to steal someone else's words or ideas and take credit for them. According to the rules of scholarship, if you borrow someone else's words, you put them in quotation marks. If you use someone else's idea, you acknowledge it in your essay or in a footnote.

All this cheating raises an uncomfortable question: Are successful, educated parents putting too much pressure on their children in the belief that going to an elite school buys entry into the good life and attending a lesser school will leave you at a disadvantage?

At Walt Whitman High School in Bethesda, Md., students answered the question for themselves after a low-tech cheating scandal -- the student government president was caught with 150 answers to a final exam hidden in his baseball cap -- raised the issue. A junior who wasn't involved in the scandal told the school newspaper that some parents "are under the impression that if you don't do well and your grades aren't top, you'll be lying in a gutter somewhere for the rest of your life."

To Wansong, who taught rigorous International Baccalaureate classes, it's not just that parents put pressure on their children to achieve, it's the attitude that the end justifies whatever means necessary. In the past, she says, she would find one or two students plagiarizing their research project. But in recent years, with the advent of the Internet, it's been more like 12 or 14. "They showed no remorse when they were caught," she says. "I had students look me right in the eye and say, 'I don't see what the big deal is.' And their parents didn't, either."
That attitude echoed loudly in Kansas last year. When teacher Christine Pelton failed more than two dozen students for plagiarizing from the Internet, their parents complained. The students were given credit for the work. And Pelton quit. (The superintendent who had told Pelton to restore the grades, however, recently resigned.)

One Washington area high school magnet program student who plagiarized multiple sources for an essay on Macbeth said he knew what he did was wrong but that he didn't feel bad about it. "Remorse," he said, "just slows you down."

John Barrie, a Berkeley biophysics graduate student, wrote software he intended to help students peer-review each other's work. Instead, they were selling each other's papers on the quad. So he rewrote the program to catch plagiarism. And now, that program has become a booming business, with some of the toniest names in public and private schools paying for its services. Turnitin.com scans 10,000 papers a day, half of them from middle and high school students. One-third are plagiarized from the Web. And most, Barrie says, come from high-achieving kids in top-performing schools.

Students responded by shifting tactics. They began taking a sentence here, a paragraph there, in what Barrie calls "mosaic" plagiarism. The students in Abeshouse's class need not have relied solely on SparkNotes. A quick Net search on Henry James and The Turn of the Screw yields obscure essays such as A Ghost Story or a Delve Into a Neurotic Mind?

Barrie says Turnitin.com's software can detect anything copied from the Net down to an eight-word string. What it won't catch is students who crib the ideas, not the words.

One Maryland high school student was stuck on the Hamlet paper due in her AP lit class. So she went to the Internet and found the perfect essay from a site that offered them for free. "I took a good idea that wasn't given much effort in the online paper and put it into my paper with correct grammar and clear sentence structure. Added a little quote. Touched up the final thought. And took credit for it," she wrote in an e-mail. "Is that wrong?"

Well, yes. "If all a student has done is taken big quotes or paraphrased and more or less pasted together others' opinions, by academic standards, that's plagiarism," Abeshouse says.

For teachers like Abeshouse, the next tactical move in the cheating war is to change the way they teach. Abeshouse has students write more during class. She asks for rough drafts of term papers, annotated bibliographies, summaries of contents, evaluation of sources. "We don't ask them to summarize a book anymore. Now we ask for comparisons, personal responses, evidence of themes," she says. "Any teacher that says, 'The term paper is due four weeks from now' is asking for the kiss of death."

But who will win the wider conflict in the cheating game is anyone's guess. "It's naive to think that once a student has a high school or a Harvard diploma that all of a sudden they become an ethical person," Barrie says. "Where that leads you to is a very ugly society in the future."

His stolen Macbeth paper long forgotten, the magnet student eagerly packs to go off to a top university. He had applied to six universities, and, with his high grades, had been accepted at all six. With scholarships. "It's highly conceivable I'll cheat," he says matter-of-factly. He has no qualms that he will do whatever it takes to succeed.