Engineering Plagiarism Resistant Assignments

Stopping cut-and-paste scholarship before it starts with strategic assignment design
Lines on Plagiarism Blur for Students in the Digital Age

- Digital content is changing the perception and definition of “authorship”
- In surveys from the past few years 40% of students admit to copying and pasting content
- “Because you’re not walking into a library, you’re not physically holding the article, which takes you closer to ‘this doesn’t belong to me.’ Online, everything can belong to you really easily.”
- “(It’s)...an activity largely unreflected on.” – Zack McCune

How Students See Their World

- Less concerned with shaping a unique identity
- Sharing is social definition (facebook “like”), collaboration is normal, encouraged, and desired (mashups, remixes, sampling, etc.)
- “There’s no such thing as originality anyway, just authenticity.” – Helene Hegemann

Digital Natives

“Digital Natives have grown up in the digital world, categorized by lowered barriers to creativity, sharing and civic engagement. Young people pull, share, appropriate, and reconstruct resources they find as they navigate the digital environment, using and transforming this content for purposes of expression, creativity and commerce. The ease of duplication and transmission of information in the digital realm raises important questions about changing attitudes and understandings of ownership and theft.”

http://www.digitalnative.org/#projects
In this landscape, how can we structure assignments so that students are still researching, but can’t cut-and-paste?
Redefine the “research paper”

- Require students to give an oral presentation with an open Q&A section
- Add annotated bibliographies, research questions, outlines, and abstracts to the process for larger papers/projects
- Have students compare and contrast several kinds of sources on their topic, then choose the “best” one and defend their choice
- Ask students to compare and contrast a primary source with a secondary source on the same topic
Follow-the-Citation. Trace a topic back through 3 or 4 citations. Then follow a different track from the original study.

- What do we learn from the two different paths?
- How has the topic evolved from the oldest study to the most recent?

- Annotate a chapter in a novel.
- Require a Research Journal.
Elevator Speech. Have students “pitch” a topic as if they were launching a business, running for office, or selling a product or service, then back their content with a follow-up memo or press release.

Fact Checking. Check the facts in a newspaper item, claims from a political speech, or the content of a Wikipedia article.

Media Watch. Choose a current event that relates to course content and have students compare news coverage from various sources – web, TV, newspapers, newsweeklies, op-eds, blogs, etc.
If you can’t beat them...

- Have students create a podcast, poster, slideshow, or other multimedia presentation
- Require students to create a blog as a research journal, or for course writings
- Create a course wiki – have students populate it with content, and review their peers’ contributions
Best Practices

- Use process-based assignments: sequenced, structured, and progressive
- Assign multiple, shorter activities that emphasize learning before longer assignments requiring assessment and critical thinking
- Emphasize revision and the recursive nature of academic inquiry
- Require a short in-class writing sample at the start of the course as a baseline
- Be specific about the types of sources you expect students to use
Your best assignments?