Contract Cheating: A New Phenomenon in Cyber-Plagiarism

ZAIGHAM MAHMOOD
School of Computing, University of Derby,
Kedleston Road, Derby, DE22 1GB, UK
z.mahmood@derby.ac.uk

Abstract
Contract Cheating is a new phenomenon, which is becoming an issue of concern at educational institutions in the UK, USA and Western Europe. Contract cheating is a form of academic dishonesty in which a student would pay someone (a contractor) to complete a given piece of coursework and then submit it as his or her own. It is much more serious than plagiarism as it is often difficult to detect. This paper discusses what contract cheating is and how it is done. It also suggests strategies for the lecturing staff to detect this form of plagiarism. The aim is to inform the colleagues in educational establishments of the existence of this phenomenon so that they are better able to deal with it.

Keyeords: - Contract Cheating, Plagiarism, Cyber Plagiarism.

1. Introduction

Educational institutions in the UK, USA and Western Europe are witnessing a new phenomenon, called Contract Cheating. It is a different type of plagiarism but much more serious. This is in the context of lecturers setting projects or assignments and students paying someone else to do the work and submit projects or assignments as their own effort. Although, a minority of students are involved in this unlawful activity, the evidence suggests that it is on the increase. The academic community in the UK are getting together to understand the extent of this activity and trying to establish strategies to respond to it.

The term *contract cheating* was coined and first used in 2006, by Thomas Lancaster and Robert Clarke [1-3] from the Birmingham City University, UK. They have published a number of papers and reports on this topic and organised conferences so that the academic community are aware of this mal practice. They define contract cheating as *submission of work by students for academic credit, which the students have paid contractors to write for them* [1]. Technically, if the contractors are friends or family and do not accept payment, the work so submitted may not be called cyber cheating, it is still contract cheating.

Contract cheating has many implications. Those engaged in the activity are being dishonest and immoral. It can result in students achieving a good grade, without having put in the required effort. It compromises academic integrity and is unfair to those who work had for a good credit. Although, the contract cheaters will loose in the long run, it appears that they are perfectly happy with the short-term gain. Luckily, the phenomenon is not wide spread at the moment. The danger is that if it remains unchecked, it may become a much serious concern.

In this paper, contract cheating is discussed in some detail. Section 2 defines the problem and provides different scenarios for contract cheating. Section 3 presents ideas for the academic staff to help them to detect the malpractice. Section 4 mentions the implications for students, and section 5 explores the mechanism to deal with the problem. The last section presents the conclusion.

2. Contract Cheating: What and How

Contract cheating is a form of *academic dishonesty in which students get others to complete their coursework for them putting it out to tender* [4]. It is a type of cyber-cheating but different from plagiarism, in the sense that:

- Whereas, plagiarism is presenting someone else's work, without due acknowledgement, as one's own work, contract cheating is hiring someone to do the work and submitting as one's own.
- Whereas, plagiarism can be often detected and investigated, detection for contract cheating is far more difficult and, in most cases, impossible to prove.

Clarke and Lancaster [2, 11] have surveyed the situation. They collected 912 cases of contract cheating, over a 30-month period from March 2004 to October 2006, and noted that:

- 50% of these originated in the USA and 26% were from 46 higher education institutions in the UK [5].
- An 'average' student posted requests for between 4-7 assignment work.
- The majority of these requests were for programming and database solutions or for projects (including BSc final year and MSc projects).

Although, the phenomenon is worldwide, it is more prevalent in the USA and Western Europe where the use of the Internet is much higher.

The way the contract cheating process operates is discussed in the following paragraphs. In the following scenarios, students (who need some work to be done) are referred to as *clients* and the persons, companies or websites (who produce deliverables for students) are referred to as *contractors*.

Scenario 1: Using friends and family
In this case, the contractor is someone who knows the subject well and can produce the product (e.g. a computer program, a database system, a report, or an essay). S/he is someone close to the client and, therefore, may or may not accept the payment.

Scenario 2: Using discussion forums
In this scenario, the client posts a note on a discussion forum and asks for help. The help may be in the form of an answer to a question or in the form of a small product e.g. a very small computer program. The help is voluntary and, therefore, the person extending the help will not spend too much time on the question or the client's requirement. However, the client may well be pointed to other sources, which may become potential sources for plagiarism or contract cheating.

Scenario 3: Using tutorial sites
These sites provide freely downloadable tutorial help. It is not possible to detect plagiarism if someone copies information from these tutorials, and submits without due acknowledgement, unless a software tool such as TurnItIn [9] is used.

Scenario 4: Using bespoke essay sites
A number of *essay banks*, also known as *essay mills* or *paper mills* are available on the Internet e.g. Coursework4U.co.uk, CourseWorkBank.co.uk and UKEssays.com. These sites provide, what is known as *ghostwriting* service and specialise in the sale of essays. They would also be happy to do *assignment work* for students. Such businesses are totally legal and they are simply selling goods, in this case essays and reports.

Scenario 5: Using auction sites
A number of auction sites are available on the Internet. These sites act as brokers between clients and contractors. The clients post requests for work to be done and contractors (specialists in the area) place bids to win the contracts. The contractors also post the prices, they would charge for the work. If a contractor is selected, the client would pay the agreed price (which is, initially, kept by the auction site) and the contractor will begin working on the project. When the work is complete and delivered,

the auction site will release the money to the contractor. If the work is not delivered, the money is refunded to the client. These are very well managed out-sourcing websites, operating legally and providing a legitimate service offering freelance project work (reports, essays, program code, database design, website design, etc) to individuals and industry. Well-established sites such as RentACoder, BizReef and GetACoder [6-8], have even ratings for their members for prompt payments (in case of clients) and for quality of service (in case of contractors). Such sites work in a manner similar to eBay [10] except that eBay sells goods to customers and these sites accept requests from customers for services to be offered.

3. Contract Cheating: Detection

Contact cheating is different from plagiarism in the sense that it is possible to detect plagiarism in several different ways:

- If some of the work submitted is copied from another source then the careful reader will be able to notice two (or more) different styles of writing.
- If an automated plagiarism detection tool such as TurnItIn [9] is employed then the software will search on the Internet to compare the given text with other available sources and produce a report showing how much of this is copied and from where.

Also, once the plagiarism is detected, it can be investigated further and appropriate penalties applied. In the case of contract cheating, however, detection is far more difficult – and in a majority of cases, impossible to prove, although the intension to cheat may well be proved.

In scenario 1, above, it is almost impossible to detect contract cheating. However, in scenarios 2, 3 and 4, information collected through the use of Internet may leave an email trail. If the university's email system has been used, then it may also be possible to trace the suspected emails. In scenarios 2 and 3, lecturers can monitor the popular forums and tutorial sites and, perhaps, notice any suspect discussion or help. In scenario 4, cheating may remain undetected, unless the marking tutor knows the students' writing style. Consider, for example, an excellent essay submitted by a student whose command of English is not very good. In this case, questions may be asked of the student to explain his or her submission.

Essay writing companies are a booming industry. Searching for words such as *essays* or *essay mills* will bring up dozens of such sites. Although, in 2007, the Google search engine has banned the

advertisements for essay-writing services, it has not made much difference to this trade.

In the case of scenario 5, often the names of clients, together with their 'work requirement' or 'project proposal' appear on the auction sites with their history to show how 'reliable' (or otherwise) the clients have been in the past. Lecturers should monitor such sites on a regular basis to notice anything suspect. It is possible that students do not use their real names but the 'work description' will often match too closely to the assignment set by the lecturers. It should be noted that asking for help or support or asking someone to do the work is not an offence so action cannot be taken at this point. However, the intension to cheat is definitely there which, again, is not an offence, unless such intent is defined to be illegal in the university regulations.

Clarke and Lancaster [2, 11] have suggested a 6-stage process for detecting plagiarism and contract cheating. They suggest that institutions get together and work as one entity to help each other to detect intentions of possible cheating by their students. The stages are described as follows:

- Publication of the assignments by the lecturers in a central database of assignments and issuing it to the students.
- Scanning of known auction/other sites to notice any postings by students.
- Filtering the information (using search words such as 'assignment', 'coursework', 'homework', etc) to identify 'likely' assignments.
- Determining the origin of assignments (i.e. the institution who set the assignment).
- Contacting the originating institution to inform them of possible cheating from their students.
- Getting the originating institution to investigate further and take actions as appropriate.

4. Implications for Students

Students engaged in plagiarism or cyber cheating may think they are fooling their peers or lecturing staff. In fact, they are fooling themselves. They need to be made aware of the following:

- They may get a pass in a module but they may not have achieved the learning outcomes.
- They may gain in the short term but, in the long term, they will not be able to progress satisfactorily.
- What they are doing is unethical, unlawful and unfair.

- If they are caught, penalties may be severe ranging from getting a zero mark in the assignment to failing the entire module.
- If contractors do not deliver products of sufficiently high quality, the guarantees given by the relevant websites may not be worth anything. The contract is often between the clients and contractors then the only course of action to sort out issues will be through the courts of law, which may become highly expensive for students.
- Although, students would get the report or essay with the understanding that it will not be available for resale, they need to be aware that there is often no such guarantee, in practice.

5. Recommendations for Academics

Although it is difficult to detect this form of plagiarism and it takes a huge amount of time to monitor websites and compare students' work with their previous submissions for consistency of style of writing (in case of essays/reports) or style of programming (in case of programme code), the lecturing staff need to take action to reduce the effect of this malpractice. Here are some suggestions.

Prepare new assignments each time:
This is a preventative measure. In some modules, same assignments are issued repeatedly. In that case, students would collect the previous session's assignment work, modify a little and submit as theirs. Also, *ghostwriting* sites are keen to collect such repeat assignments and make solutions available to the next set of students. If new assignments cannot be created easily, it would be sensible to subtly modify the existing ones and use a different assessment strategy.

Design assignments that are set and delivered in stages:
This is another preventative measure. In this case, the assignments are issued in parts and students are required to submit deliverables on a regular basis and frequently. Hopefully, this will reduce the lead-time for external advisors to respond to the demands of the assignments.

Create personalised assignments:
This is also a preventative measure. It will allow easier detection. Although, time consuming (and perhaps not always possible), it is not too difficult to ask some students to write an essay on x and others to write on y or z if all three topics are covered in a module. For a large class, a number of groups can be identified and each group can be given a different assignment.

Use class tests:

This is another preventative measure and will save the hassle of detection and imposing penalties. Also, students will need to prepare for the tests, as the external help will not be forthcoming. This may require a change of assessment strategy for various modules, however, it is a much cleaner solution.

Use viva voce:

This is especially useful in case of projects at the BSC final year and MSc levels. Since, a project is a substantial piece of research, viva voce should form part of the assessment strategy. The written report (submitted on a CD as well as in printed form) should also be checked through plagiarism software such as TurnItIn [9]. Most universities in the UK follow this approach as a matter of course and it is worth the additional effort. As highlighted by Clarke and Lancaster [2], contract cheating with respect to final year projects is becoming 'popular'.

Use verification and detection tools:

This is a detection measure. Numerous tools are available, e.g. TurnItIn [9], to detect copying from Internet sources. Although, this may not always help in case of contract cheating, it may work in the case of essays from existing essay banks supplied by essay mills.

Monitor auction and essay mill sites:

Regular monitoring will allow detection of any undesirable intensions on the part of students with respect to contract cheating. This will also allow early warning to students, if necessary. The author of this paper has already identified two BSc final year project students who have been in touch with one of the auction sites with a view to getting the projects done by contractors.

Warn students:

This is also a preventative and control measure. It is possible that some students, who may be thinking of making use of auction sites or essay mills, may decide to refrain from taking the risk. Although, some other students who are not aware of such sites, may become interested!

Change academic regulations:

This is a process improvement measure. All educational institutions in the UK have regulations with respect to plagiarism and they all regard plagiarism as an extremely serious academic offence with severe penalties. However, they need to be updated to include regulations with regards to newer approaches such as contract cheating. It is suggested that academics need to discuss to come to a conclusion whether postings to contract cheating sites should be a punishable offence, as the intent to cheat is clearly evident!

6. Conclusions

This paper discusses the phenomenon of contract cheating. In this type of cheating, when students receive an assignment or a project as part of the assessment strategy of their studies, they get someone else to do the work (and often pay them for the service) and submit 'the product' as their own work. It is much more serious than plagiarism as, often, detection is not possible.

The paper outlines the process of contract cheating, presents suggestions for the detection of this unlawful activity and discusses ways of dealing with it. The purpose of the paper is to inform the wider community, especially the lecturing staff at educational establishments, so that they are aware of the problem and can take actions as required and as necessary.

7. References

[1]   Clark R. and Lancaster T., (2006), "Eliminating the successor to plagiarism? Identifying the usage of contract cheating sites", Proc. 2nd Int. Plagiarism Conference

[2]   Clark R. and Lancaster T., (2007), "Establishing a systematic six-stage process for detecting contract cheating", 2nd Int. Conf on Pervasive Computing and Applications, Birmingham, UK, July 2007

[3]   Clark R. and Lancaster T., "Assessing contract cheating through auction sites – a computing perspective,
Available at: http://www.ics.heacademy.ac.uk/ events/8th-annual-conf/Papers/Thomas%20 Lancaster%20final.pdf

[4]   Wikipedia, (2007), "Contract cheating", Available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ Contract_cheating

[5]   Daily Mail, (2006), "Cheating students put homework to tender on Internet", Daily Mail, 24 June 2006, UK

[6]   RentACoder,
Available at: http://www.rentacoder.com/ RentACoder/default.asp

[7]   BizReef,
Available at: http://www.bizreef.co.uk/home. aspx?ReferralID=OHAYUK&RefVar1=BuyersGene ral&RefVar2=freelancerkey2home&UrlReferrer=htt p%3a%2f%2fwww.freelancer.com%2fsale%2factin g%2fplumbing%2fcourse%2ffreelance_work.htmhtt p://www.freelance.com/__C1256839007FF9C2.nsf

[8]   GetACoder.com,
Available at: http://www.getacoder.com

[9]   TunItIn,
Available at: http://turnitin.com/static/index.html

[10]   eBay, http://www.ebay.co.uk/

[11]   Higher Education Academy & Birmingham
City University, (2008), "Contract cheating
workshop", Birmingham City University, 7 March
2008, UK