Writing and pseudo-writing from internet-based sources
- Implications for learning and assessment

Håvard Skaar

Oslo and Akershus University College

Abstract

In recent years plagiarism has been on the increase across the western world. This article identifies internet access as a contributory cause of this trend and addresses the implications of readily-available internet sources for the teaching and assessment of writing in schools. The basis for the article is a previous study showing a wide incidence of plagiarism in the internet-based writing of students in three classes at upper secondary school level in Norway. We relate the students' choices to writing as a cognitive process and as a cultural practice. Our basic assumption is that the students' writing is work. It is this work we have in mind when we relate writing to learning and when we assess students' skills on the basis of their written texts. Access to the internet changes the premises for this work because writing can be replaced by "pseudo-writing". "Pseudo-writing" is a work reducing writing practice which neither excludes nor coincides with what we traditionally associate with plagiarism in schools. The main point in this article is that when students have access to the internet during essay-writing the result is unavoidably a product of both writing and pseudo-writing. Internet access thus leads to greater uncertainty about the role writing plays in student learning and makes it more difficult to take written assignments into account in assessing students' school results and effort.

Introduction

How, realistically, do we expect students to use the internet during their essay-writing? In what follows, a basic point is that when educational researchers, teachers or students attempt to answer such questions, they bring to bear a traditional concept of writing, and internet-based writing is accordingly assessed in this light. At the same time, it is generally acknowledged that writing with access to online resources is essentially different from writing without such access. In this article the implications of this difference in terms of learning and assessment will be discussed drawing on an empirical study the author has made of Norwegian upper secondary school students' use of internet-based sources during an essay-writing assignment (see NN, 2013).

The study showed that the vast majority of the students elected to paste text into their essays in a way regarded as plagiarism. After a brief account of the study findings, the students' plagiarism in this particular case will form the point of departure for conceptualizing the way in which writing drawing on internet sources differs from traditional writing and what consequences this has for learning and assessment.

By common definition, in Norway and elsewhere, "Plagiarism means submitting work as your own that is someone else's. For example, copying material from a book or other source without acknowledging that the words or ideas are someone else's and not your own is plagiarism." (Davis cited in Cizek, 2003, p. 53). In our view, the increase of plagiarism from the Internet obliges us to ask what Christina Haas calls "technological questions". Writing and technology hang together and according to Haas «little (…) can be learned about larger questions of knowledge and writing, or thinking and culture, without a research agenda that centers on technological questions» (Haas, 2009, p. 229).

Broadly, when plagiarism is discussed in educational settings and research two positions can be outlined: one that keeps to the common definition of "plagiarism-as-stealing" or "plagiarism as deceiving"(Roy,1999, p. 59) and another that dismisses this ethical stance as less important in an educational context than the pedagogical potential inherent in the "remediation" or reuse of the texts of others in so-called "patchwriting" (Blum, 2009; Howard, 1999; Johnson-Eilola and Selber,2007). Holders of the first position expect students to choose traditional writing methods as a matter of preference even when they have access to internet-based resources. Training in the use and evaluation of sources is encouraged as a means of achieving this. The essay is to be written in the same way as before, regardless of any novel short-cuts in the use of internet based sources (see e.g. Carroll, 2007). Holders of

the second position think that it is better to renounce traditional expectations of students' writing practices and instead acknowledge modern methods of writing as being on a par with the conventional. Advocates of this approach argue that even though cutting and pasting differs in nature from traditional writing, this alternative writing practice affords both learning for the student and a basis for assessment for the teacher. (see e.g. Johnson-Eilola and Selber, 2007; Marsh, 2007).

We are not quite in accord with either of the two positions. In our view the increase in plagiarism is attributable to the access to digital technology and the internet: students find they can save themselves even more work than before by plagiarizing while at the same time their choice to do so carries less of an ethical burden.

Our argument in the first instance will take as its point of departure a cognitive model of the writing process. In the second, we build on students' experience of internet-resourced writing as cultural practice. Both in our view lend credence to the contention that writing is no longer so clearly distinguishable from plagiarism as in the past. With access to the internet, many students no longer regard it as particularly problematic to plagiarize instead of doing all the writing themselves, not least because a corresponding method of writing in many other contexts seems both rational and expedient. This form of writing, which is applied then in different Internet-based writing situations, we have here chosen to call pseudo-writing.

The problem highlighted in this article is that pseudo-writing not only out-do conventional writing but rather spring into being and live its own life parallel to the traditional writing, which are sustained. With access to the internet, students therefore tackle an essay assignment in different ways and in many cases it is impossible in practice to know what method they will adopt and hence also how their text has been produced. This creates uncertainty both in terms of what role writing plays in students' learning and whether this written product represents a fair and reliable basis on which to assess students' work and effort, which is also one of the school's responsibilities.

The study

The abovementioned study of plagiarism among Norwegian upper secondary students is extensively reported in NN & NN (2013). Here the result will only be briefly summarized. In the study 67 students in three school classes were free to use internet-based sources while composing an analysis of a poem or a short story as part of their Norwegian studies. In a mixed methods design the frequency and extent of plagiarism in the essays was measured and related to individual differences between the students.

75 percent of the students plagiarized from online sources and plagiarism accounted for 25 percent of the total amount of text. Students with a higher grade in written Norwegian plagiarized less than those with a lower grade level. Further, students more familiar with the correct use of sources did not plagiarize as much as students with less awareness.

The study also compared the degree of plagiarism in the students' essays with their views on plagiarism and writing with internet access. 29 of the 67 students expressed their views in individual interviews. In general, the students wanted to spend as little time and effort as possible on the task and a substantial majority of them wanted internet access whether they judged this an obstacle to their learning or not. They also preferred to have free access to internet content regardless of its relevance to their essay writing and whether or not they acknowledged availability of this resource as encouraging plagiarism.

The study revealed the connection between internet access and plagiarism in this particular case, and at the same time its findings invite us to reflect on more general questions as to how the internet may change writing as a tool for learning and assessment.

In the study, the students made use of model answers they found on so-called essay hubs. Their interpretation of how these could be used without resulting in plagiarism coincided in many cases with the website's own guidelines as to how the model answers they sell can be used in a way compatible with the requirement not to plagiarize.

In the next sections a cognitive and cultural explanation of how writing drawing on internet sources differs in practice from traditional writing will be followed by a discussion of what consequences this has for learning and assessment.
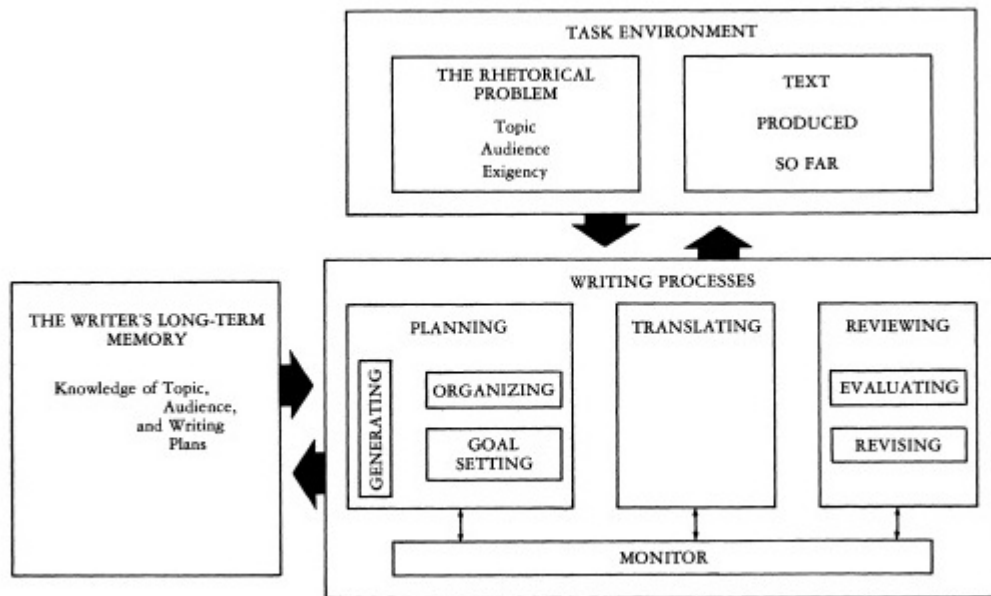
Pseudo-writing and cognitive workload

Figure 1. Flower and Hayes' writing process model

Here we will use Flower and Hayes' "writing process model" to explain how internet access affects the *work* students choose to put into their essay writing. We will also supplement this static version of writing and cognition with a social perspective on this work. The model dates back to 1980 and although Flower and Hayes write that the writer's long-term memory "can exist in the mind as well as in outside resources such as books"(Flower & Hayes, p. 371), this is a model in which writing is understood as a process based on the individual writer's internal cognitive resources. Hence, we can see how the boxes in the model relate to one and other, but not so clearly what they actually contain or how they relate to the world surrounding the individual.

In regard to how the boxes relate, Galbraith (2009:24) claims that the model of Flower and Hayes, along with those proposed by Bereiter and Scardamaila (1984,1987) "overemphasize the importance of explicit thinking processes in writing and hence treat production processes as a relatively passive component of the writing process." Therefore, Galbraith proposes a "Dual-process model of writing" in which the "knowledge-retrieval system (…) incorporates the main features of the planning components of Hayes and Flower, and Bereiter and Scardamalia's models"(2009, p. 21). To this component Galbraith adds

"the knowledge-constituting system" because "The knowledge implicit in the connections between units is only realized as explicit content once it has been formulated as potential text" which is "intrinsically a process of discovery"(2009, p. 22).

In regard to how the individual cognitive process relates to the surrounding world Flower has acknowledged the shortcomings and suggested a reworked model which integrates cognitive and social processes (1990a; 1990b). Also, this problem has been approached in the research field Distributed Cognition (Hutchins, 1995, Hollan Hutchins and Kirsh, 2000). In a cultural or socio-cultural perspective, in which writing is seen as practice, the boxes in Flower and Hayes' model are nevertheless a simplified presentation of a process that is much more complex and ambiguous. More than 40 years ago, Roland Barthes killed off the author by asserting that "The writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them." (Barthes,1977:146). In the same vein Bakthin and Kristeva have pointed out that all texts have already been written and that all writing is accordingly based on voices, polyphony or intertext. (Bakthin,1986; Kristeva,1980). On the other hand, these linguo-philosophical positions are not so easy to discern in the descriptions our interviewed students gave of their own writing processes during their work with the set task. If we apply the Flower and Hayes model here, it is because it illustrates clearly the factor the students personally accorded greatest weight in their choice of writing strategy, namely how access to the internet changes the *material* basis for what kind of *work* must be invested in the writing process.

In Flower and Hayes' model writing is described as a process involving planning, translating and reviewing. In Figure 1 each part of the process is depicted as a rectangular box within the larger "writing process"- box. The box in the middle, between planning and reviewing, is termed "translating " and deliberately distinguished from the other parts of the process because:

"This is essentially the process of putting ideas into visible language. We have chosen the term **translate** for this process over other terms such as "transcribe" or "write" in order to emphasize the peculiar qualities of the task.(…) Even when the planning process represents one's thought in words, that representation is unlikely to be in the elaborate syntax of written English. So the writer's task is to translate a meaning, which may be embodied in key words (…) and organized in a complex network of relationships, into a linear piece of written English."(Flower and Hayes, 1981, p.373)

The "translating" part of the writing process is omitted when one or more completed assignments are fully or partly copied and pasted to become material for the essay the student is about to write. Instead of translating, students select from one or more texts which are then made into the students' written texts in a process of reviewing, evaluating and revising. Notably, the other parts of the writing process are engaged. The students generate ideas by finding the relevant texts, planning and organizing the use of them and successively setting goals for completing the assignment. The fact that this is a less extensive writing process in which the part Flower and Hayes describe as the most demanding, namely translation, is missing, gives reason to conceptualize how the one process differs from the other. Therefore we suggest a distinction between writing and pseudo-writing.
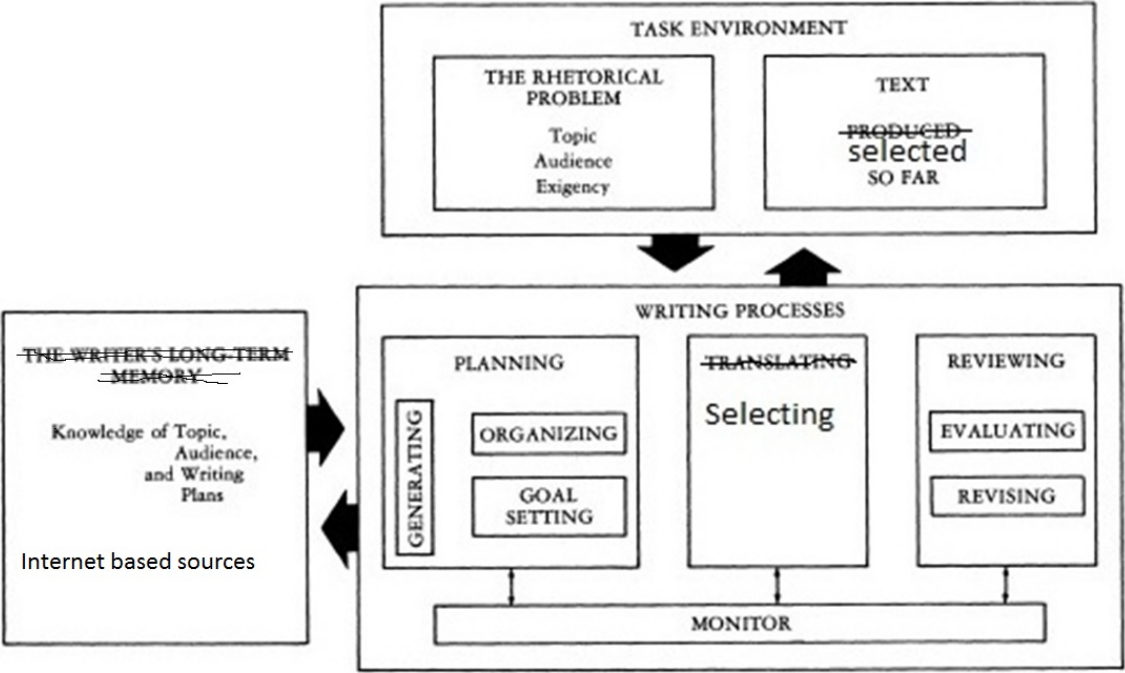

Figure 2. Pseudo-writing

Pseudo-writing is textual work in which translation is made superfluous. The work of writing is restricted to rhetorically adapting the ideas to the requirement of the genre, and the writer misses out on the string of associations produced while working with the idea and thereby fails to experience the discoveries originating from this part of the writing process. One might

say that "the knowledge-constituting system" is not necessarily engaged when writers select from prefabricated ideas, since this short-circuits discovery.
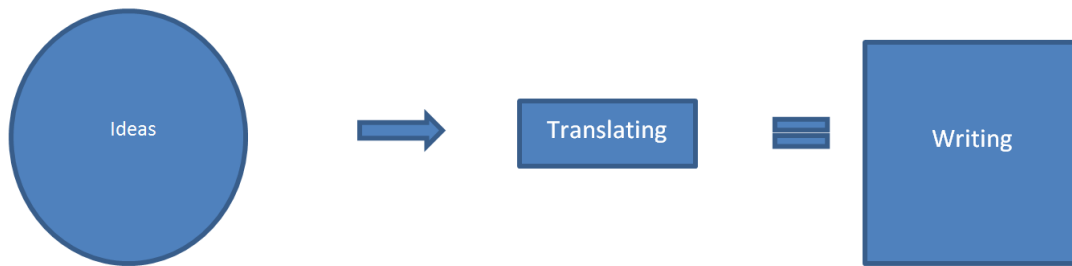
We can therefore distinguish writing from pseudo-writing depending on whether the student actually translates the idea into text as opposed to selecting texts, or stretches of text, in which the idea is already expressed. In school the process of translating an idea into a textual genre is supported by students being taught genre knowledge and presented with model texts (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1984;Håland, 2010;Purcell-Gate, Duke and Martineau, 2007).

The distance between idea and text is shortened through genre knowledge and made even shorter by model texts showing how certain ideas have been translated into texts within a specific genre. However, one problem is left for the students to solve. Despite genre knowledge and good examples, they must still translate their own ideas into text.

Generally, pseudo-writing reduces the investment of time and effort in the writing process. If students are to take inspiration from internet texts in their writing, one option is to make reference to others' ideas openly and correctly and then build a different idea, or string of ideas, on this basis. The other option is that by reading other people's ideas students get inspiration to express ideas themselves. Notably these ideas must be different from the ones they have just read, or else they must acknowledge their source. If not, the number of ideas the students can choose from is more restricted because the most obvious and perhaps also the best ideas have already been used in the texts they have accessed and downloaded (see Figure 3).Consequently, students may experience the writing process as more demanding under these circumstances. In the interview one student told us that "you read assignments (of other students) on the net and then you run out of (proper)ideas."

Completed assignments NOT available from the internet:

```
  ┌─────────┐        ┌──────────┐          ┌──────────┐
  │         │   →    │Translating│   ═      │          │
  │  Ideas  │        └──────────┘          │ Writing  │
  │         │                              │          │
  └─────────┘                              └──────────┘
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Completed assignment available from the internet:

```
  ┌─────────┐        ┌──────────┐          ┌──────────┐
  │(Fewer)  │   →    │Translating│   ═      │ Writing  │
  │ ideas   │        │ and/or    │          │    ↕     │
  │┌───────┐│        │ selecting │          │Pseudo-   │
  ││Ideas  ││        └──────────┘          │ writing  │
  ││already││                              └──────────┘
  ││transl.││
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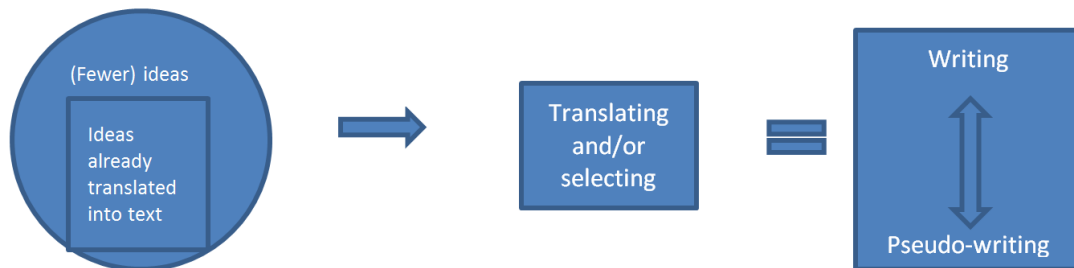
Figure 3. The relationship between writing and pseudo-writing

Flower and Hayes' model has therefore been applied to emphasize a simple point: when you have access to the internet during the writing process, part of the work of writing is either greatly simplified or already done. All that remains is to select, and if you don't opt for wholesale plagiarism the selected text must be incorporated in your own text.

Considering the writing process in terms of time and work we might say that access to completed assignments on the internet at the same time makes *pseudo-writing* easier and *writing* more difficult. In the initial phase of the writing process, depicted as the first of the three larger boxes within the writing process box in the Flower and Hayes model, labeled "Planning", the internet makes it extremely easy and time saving to generate already translated ideas from completed essays or other texts. While internet sources make this pseudo-writing much easier, writing up the sources with correct reference, integrating them in the text and relating them to the ideas the student chose to put into words, might demand considerably more work and handling of a textual complexity.

Writing as a social practice in and out of school

Internet access not only determines students' experience of writing's cognitive workload: our interviews with the students showed that internet access also changed their perception of the value of the writing process: "Essay writing with internet access is not serious. When you discover that the assignment is done already you lose the inspiration to do it yourself." When this perceived value is diminished, it is more difficult to retain a sense of ethical obligation towards the correct use of sources. Some of the students in our study adapted the "moral imperative" to the material basis of the writing. One of the students described a strategy which might be labeled "provoked cryptomnesia" (Marsh, Landau & Hicks, 1997) to legitimate his use of sources from the internet in his own texts without making any reference or using quotation marks:

> First I look around me and I notice the stuff I find reasonable (relevant to the assignment) and then I forget the source and write based on the feelings I got (when I was reading the source) and the sense I was making while reading from the source.

Naturally, education in the use of sources relates to the part of students' textual practices that belong to the school domain. Therefore the form of internet use encouraged in school reflects school-related expectations e.g. with respect to essay writing. But the practices students exercise in their essay writing are developed on a much broader basis than the internet use taught in school (see e.g. NN, 2012).

When the students were set the assignment in our study their school education in use of sources influenced their strategies along with practices from their everyday internet use. Some studies have established a correlation between "proficient internet use" and plagiarism (Underwood, 2006;Underwood and Szabo, 2003, 2004), while Selwyn only found a correlation between plagiarism and what he labeled "informal procurement practices (e.g. downloading music and films, buying goods and services online and so on)"(2008, p. 476). Students are torn between two strategies: one based on their school education in use of sources, the other on their use of internet resources in their everyday life.

Understandably, in their everyday use of the internet students seek for the fastest and easiest solution to the task or problem at hand. This makes pseudo-writing a common strategy in a range of situations and schools should take this reality into consideration in the making of writing assignments. Ideally, the assignments should be designed and formulated in a way which excludes the possibility of pseudo-writing, but realistically neither education in source

use nor the formulation or design of the assignment can effectively prevent students being swayed by the very fact of internet access to choose pseudo-writing as their dominant writing strategy.

In our study the choice of writing strategy did not depend solely on internet access but formed part of a dynamic in which the nature of the assignment, the students' interest and proficiency in writing and the texts accessible online were all included (see Figure 4). In this case the two first-mentioned elements were hard put to it to prevail against the pseudo-writing made possible by internet access. We discovered that education in use of sources, ethical standards or interest in writing did not make a particularly strong counterforce to the widespread tactical choice of pseudo-writing among students with internet access in the writing process.

That said: regardless of writing proficiency many students expressed a wish to create something through writing rather than pseudo-writing. The written assignment was still perceived as a chance to show creativity and to fulfil an urge to make something based on personal ideas, engagement and effort and generally the students preferred to learn something by following the rules instead of violating them. This indicates that education in use of sources and ethical rules in regard to plagiarism remain important tasks in educational institutions.
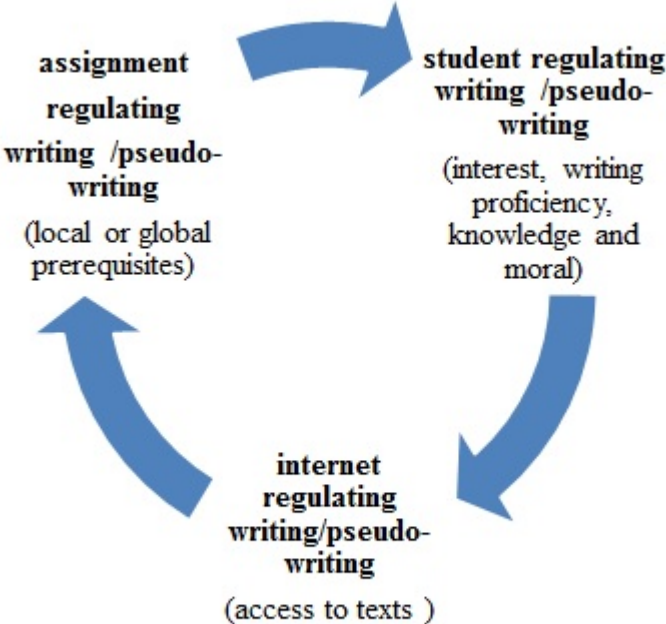

Figure 4. The dynamic of writing and pseudo-writing

Pseudo-writing and plagiarism

In some contexts pseudo-writing is tantamount to plagiarism, first and foremost if the textual production is linked to assessment and grading. In other situations, in and out of school, pseudo-writing is not understood as plagiarism but as an appropriate and efficient writing strategy.

Hence, the term pseudo-writing encompasses more than plagiarism because re-use and rearrangement of copied text in itself neither excludes nor coincides with what is traditionally associated with plagiarism. However, when plagiarism is discussed in the research literature it is either assumed that a clear line can be drawn between writing and pseudo-writing, or that the one writing strategy can be as good as the other. For example, Howard describes "patch writing" as a preliminary step on the way to writing proficiency (Howard, 2001). We are not so sure. Therefore we call for closer attention to the fact that internet access also makes it more uncertain what role writing plays with regard to students' learning, and more difficult to assess and grade students' work on the basis of their written assignments.

Although researchers can follow the writing process closely (see e.g. Bhatt and de Roock, 2014) teachers are by no means in position to do the same kind of meticulous investigation of students' writing in their day to day practices. The holders of the "plagiarism as stealing" position do not relate to this when they assume that, given proper education in use of sources, writing in the traditional sense can be sustained. With the internet accessible there is always a chance that pseudo-writing will form part of a given writing practice. The possibility of determining whether this is the case or not is generally restricted and often not feasible in the assessment of school assignments. Concurrently, the holders of the "remediation" position often fail to acknowledge the problems created by the difference between writing and pseudo-writing in regard to learning and assessment. One can teach "techniques of textual remediation" and refrain from "policing" plagiarism, but in a situation where writing is not practically distinguishable from pseudo-writing the writing of an essay in itself takes on a different role in regard to learning and assessment. Educators should address this problem. Holders of the "plagiarism as stealing" position imagine a situation where writing can be sustained as an unchallenged practice despite the enhanced internet based possibilities for pseudo-writing. For example Johnson-Eilola and Selber (2007, p. 400) suggest that:

"…while a writing pedagogy might focus on the production of original text in some instances, it might also focus just as productively on assemblage, remix, or collage in the same way. At a broad level, admitting such forms to our pedagogy requires we avoid automatically slotting them into a hierarchy that limits their value in specific situations."

Here new possibilities for writing pedagogy are pointed out, but the authors do not address the increased uncertainty in regard to learning outcome and fair assessment also deriving from the creation of writing situations which make it impossible to tell writing from pseudo-writing.

Pseudo-writing, learning and assessment

In her functional approach to young people's use of writing in "Always on", Baron points out that what the digital media primarily give access to is "volume control"(2008: 32). These young people gain greater mastery of the communicative situation by being able to choose whether to turn the communication medium on or off, respond or keep silent, participate or not participate. When students are asked to write, access to digital intertext correspondingly gives them the opportunity to choose how much they want to work with the text they are writing. In analogy with Baron's conceptual terminology we can say that internet access allows students "workload control", because the internet enables them to choose how work-heavy a writing process they want. The question is how the teacher of writing can get students to engage in writing activities when the internet affords them such good opportunities to avoid doing so?

Regardless of what teachers choose to do, the internet influences students' relationship to text in the same way as the mini-calculator influences their relationship to computation. It is possible to make students calculate without the help of calculators but it is not possible to get them to relate to calculation unless they are also aware that calculators exist. The technological aids tell them something about the relative importance of their own computational operations. Correspondingly, students experience texts in themselves, including their own essays, as less important when they can search for the completed text before even embarking on the writing process.

The question is how writing can contribute to learning in a situation where students can chose to select from texts on the internet instead of doing the work of translating ideas themselves. If teachers succeed in setting locally-based assignments which are not already out on the internet, with education in use of sources and with control, students may have fewer

opportunities to choose pseudo-writing instead of writing. But since pseudo-writing in any case will often be practically untraceable we can no longer expect that the product, the completed assignment, will to the same extent as before reflect the writing process the students have been through.

In other words, internet access sets the terms for writing processes which are less predictable and more difficult to follow. It is accordingly more difficult than before to make assumptions about the learning outcomes students obtain through essay writing. There is also greater uncertainty concerning the written assignment as the basis for assessing students' knowledge and skills.

In general, the use of the internet can result in greater social acceptance of plagiarism, because both lawful and unlawful copying and re-use of other people's texts form part of very many students' regular internet practice (Selwyn, 2008). If the gap between what it costs to compose one's own texts and copying from sources is too big, it is reasonable to suppose that plagiarism as a writing strategy will increasingly extend its reach in many classrooms. The frequency and scope measured in the study described in this article may suggest that this was already prevalent in the participating classes.

The internet reinforces strategies implying pseudo-writing, but if the school compensates for this with closer follow-up of attitudes, the type of tasks set and use of the internet in general, this pressure can perhaps be counter-balanced. Notably, this entails the risk of greater differences between schools that practice close follow-up of students' writing and those that do not. When the text alone no longer provides guarantees for a particular writing process, the context, in the sense of the social and cultural framework for the writing process, is conversely more important. This may make a greater difference in students' learning outcome from writing in learning environments according to whether these environments are rich or deficient in resources.

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