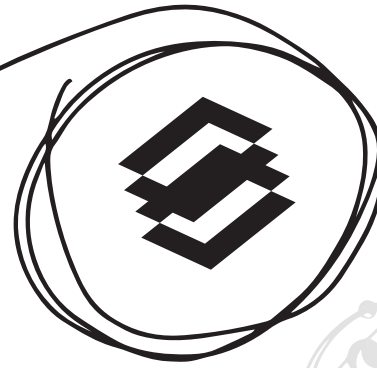


COPY, PASTE, REPEAT



A pervasive copycat culture in Thailand's high schools and universities is a blight on educational standards



Rare is the lecturer at Thai universities who has not encountered, in one form or another, a pervasive blight on Thai education: plagiarism. In fact, the situation appears to be so dire that, going by teachers' testimonies, in numerous classes and courses at several well-known higher educational institutions in Bangkok, students who do not ever plagiarise for their assignments may constitute a minority. The rest of the students seem to think nothing of simply copying and pasting texts off the Internet, after perfunctory Google searches on given subjects, and trying to pass them off as their own.

Often young plagiarists even fail to familiarise themselves with the content of purloined texts, which can lead to peculiar outcomes. In their essays Thai students may unwittingly profess to be American tourists in Chiang Mai or celebrity chefs from France — as happened at a recent university class on media studies where participants were tasked with writing essays about their most memorable experiences. Several of them simply copied and pasted seemingly random texts that popped up on Google and appeared to them to be related to their favourite pastimes such as travel and dining.

Other times they may copy and paste entries off online encyclopaedias and educational websites, such as Wikipedia, without bothering to remove textual formatting for references, chapter headings, hyperlinks and the like, which then seem out of place in their essays and so easily give them away. In other words, they appear to have not only few qualms about cheating but also few concerns about getting caught out. After all, a quick Google search will allow any lecturer to cotton onto what the students have been up to. Although the Internet makes it easy to copy and paste, the Net also makes it equally easy to track down the originals of plagiarised documents.

“I feel like we’re facing an uphill battle,” one lecturer at a prominent university in Bangkok, who wished to remain anonymous, confides. “Even after my repeated warnings to them some students carry on copying” — although they might take more care to try and conceal their sources by rewording some sentences or interspersing plagiarised texts with their own paragraphs, which are written in a noticeably different, less colloquial and less coherent style. “Some culprits might even be puzzled by why you’re making such a fuss about what they see as a trivial matter,” he adds. “They seem to think that if everyone else is doing it, then it must be okay.”

Therein lies the rub. By failing to adopt or enforce a zero-tolerance policy on plagiarism, many schools in effect turn a blind eye to it, thereby tacitly encouraging the practice. It does not help matters that, apparently, in many high schools students can easily get away with plagiarism. “Some of my high school teachers let us copy texts from the Internet for our homework if we promised to read them,” one college student notes. Another adds: “A high school teacher I had did not mind that we copied our homework if we copied the words out by hand onto a piece of paper and did not just print the [copied and pasted] text from a computer.”





Needless to say, for students to become well-informed individuals and independent thinkers, not merely slavish scribes, such practices ought to be anathema in all schools. In students' defence, many of them may be reduced to plagiarising as a last resort. They may simply find themselves out of their depth in the international programmes of Thai universities, where they are expected to compose coherent essays in a second language, English, which they can often barely speak, and to expatiate on subjects with which they may be only vaguely familiar, if at all. In other words, they have been badly served by a notoriously inadequate educational system that has failed to equip them with essential skills.

Culturally too young Thais may be conditioned not to worry too much about appropriating other people's intellectual output for their own purposes. Despite periodic law enforcement initiatives to clamp down on the practice, endemic copyright infringement, not least in the form of readily available counterfeits, remains all too visible across Bangkok. Surely if ripping off brand-name goods and products seems to be an acceptable business model, young Thais may be led to believe by the

pervasive practice of counterfeiting, what could possibly be wrong about copying mere words off the Internet? Words, after all, may seem far more ephemeral and intangible than designer bags, watches, DVDs or shoes.

Yet simply blaming "the culture" and "the system" would be disingenuous. To be sure, both can influence general attitudes, but neither needs to be determinative of individual conduct. Not only is it in each student's power to decide whether to plagiarise, regardless of what other students might be doing, but it's also in his best interest not to do so. That is because mindless copying stifles originality and creativity even as it dulls independence and critical thinking.

Lecturers, rather than throw up their

hands in despair, should keep driving this message home to their students while simultaneously adhering to a clearly elucidated and rigorously enforced zero-tolerance policy on plagiarism. In addition to having a corrosive effect on general educational standards and practices, plagiarism, if allowed to proliferate, also disadvantages honest students, who may come to see their own work, done through genuine effort, to be of less or no real value if cheats are rewarded the same or even higher scores on their own manifestly fraudulent assignments. Inherent fairness and impartiality are twin pillars of any just and effective learning environment.

In a similar vein, students should be encouraged to take pride in their work even if their efforts may not be up to the highest standards at first. They should be reminded that learning is a continuous process of self-improvement, not a chase after better scores and grades, and that trying to take shortcuts does them disservice by preventing them from acquiring valuable new knowledge, skills and insights.

Much of a country's human capital lies in its creative vigour. A society of copycats is doomed to a status of intellectual mediocrity. If Thailand is to join the developed world's knowledge economy and become more of an intellectual force within its region, rampant cheating among students must be stamped out and creative independence among them must be promoted, developed and cultivated. Not just for their own sake but for the sake of the entire country.

