

TO: All MUNFA Members
FROM: The MUNFA Executive Committee
DATE: September 24, 2015
SUBJECT: Commercial Course Content Web Sites

Over the past several years, course content aggregators such as OneClass and Course Hero have emerged. These companies collect and sell material related to university and college courses, including class notes and recordings, exams, tests, lab reports, slides, assignments, and other similar material. The target group is students who are able to purchase these materials. There are a number of concerns related to the existence of course content aggregators including potential breach of copyright and self-censorship if Academic Staff Members (ASMs) become concerned about being misquoted or quoted out of context. Note that Clause 26.26 of the MUNFA Collective Agreement states “No lectures or classes shall be recorded without the written permission of the ASM in charge of the class.” Attached is a Fact Sheet prepared by CAUT to address this issue.



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Fact Sheet

Commercial Course Content Web Sites

What is a Commercial Course Content Web Site?

It is a web site created by a company whose business consists largely of gathering and selling material related to specific university and college courses. The market for this material is students enrolled in post-secondary education institutions. OneClass and Course Hero are two such companies.

What kind of material are these companies offering for sale?

Class notes, exams, tests, lab reports, slides and other similar material. The documents are assembled in large databases that are searchable by, for example, institution, course name, professor and subject.

How do the companies acquire the material?

The material is collected by students who supply it to the companies in exchange for payment including gift cards (from Starbucks, Amazon, etc.).

How is the material sold?

Individuals who wish to buy the material purchase a subscription to the site.

Doesn't this raise copyright concerns?

Yes. In the case of original works created by academic staff, these companies do not obtain the permission of, or provide payment to, the academic staff member responsible for the material. In some circumstances, this could constitute copyright infringement. Other material, such as student notes summarizing lecture presentations, is less likely to infringe copyright.

Are there other potential harms?

Yes. The first is self-censorship. While student notes that misquote or misrepresent the content of a lecture are not new, the knowledge that such errors could be compounded by being posted on a web site may have a chilling effect on classroom speech, undermining academic freedom. The distribution of tests and lab material may also harm the approach to learning adopted by a teacher in a particular class by, for example, the premature or unanticipated distribution of course material.

Inducements to students to post material to OneClass may also undermine collective agreement rights governing classroom conduct — such as prohibitions on the recording of lectures. More generally, at a time when the crucial connection between academic staff and their courses is being undermined by casualization, commercialization and the move to online education, the presence of these companies further commodifies teaching material. In response, employers acting under the guise of defending institutional integrity may seek greater control of course material, further stripping academic staff of intellectual property rights and workplace autonomy.

What can I do?

Discuss this issue with your colleagues.

Visit the web sites of course content aggregators such as OneClass and Course Hero and ascertain if material from your courses is present. If it is, request that the material be removed from the web site.

You can also review your institutional policies and collective agreements language on classroom recording, and raise the enforcement of such language with the employer and students.