Plagiarism in Higher Education

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Abstract

This article explores the increase in plagiarism commensurate with the accessibility of academic sources via technology in the 21st century. The author addresses the responsibility of higher education in implementing academic integrity policies and programmes to create cohesive and informative practices.

Plagiarism may be defined as the appropriation of one's own work or the work of others without citing or acknowledging the source (Chen & Chou, 2017; Ocholla & Ocholla, 2016). The scope of plagiarised work, which was traditionally confined to print media, has now expanded to include online sources. Smart technology aids this environment by allowing for the quick online search for answers and the transfer of information via email, telephone, chat, and the Internet with little detection. Chen and Chou (2017) speak to the rapid advances in information and communication technology with the Internet offering a myriad of information that can be accessed anytime in students' learning and daily life.

Reasons why university students plagiarise may be connected with inexperience with using information sources, peer pressure, pressure to succeed, and lack of resources. Some students have never learned evidence-based writing skills or have low reading competency levels (Baird & Dooey, 2014). Eret and Ok (2014) state major reasons for Internet plagiarism: time constraints, overload course requirements, difficulty of assignments or projects, and the desire to get higher grades from the courses. These authors stated that length of computer use was also found to be among the significant factors for plagiarism. Students using computers for 6-10 years showed a significantly greater tendency towards Internet plagiarism.

Plagiarism has become pervasive and institutions struggle with controlling it. Many universities are not so forthcoming about the numbers of plagiarism cases they encounter each year due to marring their reputations and effects of this knowledge should it be made public (Devlin, 2003b). Singh and Remenyi (2016) assert that plagiarism has been documented as far back as the birth of the university itself, 800 years ago.

It is an immense task for institutions to monitor the diversified ways in which plagiarism can occur. Students can borrow a friend's computer and have access to their profile, papers can be purchased online for a fee, papers can be reused from a previous class, or another student's paper may be recycled. Singh and Remenyi (2016), credit essay mills or paper mills as a thriving industry. Essay mills create a form of 'ghostwriting', which in the past was typically reserved for biographers, otherwise understood as a 'permissible misrepresentation'. Now, ghostwriting is being used to manufacture papers by request. Singh and Remenyi (2016) state, "A recent Google search produced 4.6 million references to these services" (p. 3). Such accessibility presents a greater challenge for stakeholders to be cognisant of academic misconduct on their college campuses.

Often there is a misconception about *who* is responsible for teaching academic integrity at the university level. After analysing the academic integrity policies of 39 Australian universities in 2011, Bretag, Mahmud, Wallace, Walker, James, Green, & Partridge noted that students were mentioned in 95% of policies as being responsible for academic integrity. Staff were mentioned in only 80% of the policies. Further to this, it was found that only one university explicitly stated that 'everyone' is responsible (2011a). Martin (2016) breaks down the three types of integrity shortcomings as plagiarism, misrepresentation, and exploitation which overlap. A solid plan of action

in which all parties can be accountable to impart and practise academic integrity, can be developed to address and reduce instances of plagiarism.

Preventing Plagiarism

Ensuring that students understand what plagiarism is and the many forms it can take is an important starting point in combating this problem. Ocholla and Ocholla (2016) posit that the absence or invisibility of a plagiarism policy can be a major drawback in the fight against plagiarism in universities. Therefore, proactive approaches to preventing plagiarism must focus on providing information to students in orientation programmes, in Student handbooks that specify plagiarism policies and procedures, and through library courses and classroom teaching across subject areas.

Bermuda College actively pursues avenues to assist students with plagiarism. The Student Handbook (2016-2017) outlines the rules, regulations, and penalties for plagiarism. Librarians also offer their services to lecturers by having workshops to assist students on the importance of correctly documenting sources to avoid plagiarism.

Additionally, plagiarism prevention software can bring institutions some relief; however, because of the myriad of forms plagiarism can take, plagiarism detecting software, like Turnitin.com, only covers a small demographic of infractions. *Turnitin* only pulls from a pool of papers within its own system, so when a student purchases a paper online, it appears valid to faculty and passes the plagiarism screening. This, of course, gives lecturers a false sense of security. Other similar types of tools include *Turnitin Suite, GradeMark,* and *PeerMark (*Meo, & Talha, *Saudi Journal of Anesthesia, 2019). Writecheck,* on the other hand, is software that students can use to check the percentage of 'terms used' and may be helpful for students to regulate their work. *Writecheck* can also be used to aid in the scrambling of components of papers with intent to deception (Bradley, 2015). Singh and Remenyi (2016) indicate that plagiarism may further be prevented by instructors ensuring that they are familiar with a student's own work so that they can detect inauthentic written submissions.

Promoting academic integrity

Staff should provide much of the assistance and support needed to promote academic integrity, but many colleges do not place the burden on faculty to teach proper citation methods. Baird and Dooey (2014) suggest that often when there are blatant instances of plagiarism and cheating at low levels in their classrooms, faculty tend to turn a blind-eye to it.

Ahmed and Sheikh (2016) explain that the Faculty perception of finding the complaint process too cumbersome, finding penalties inappropriate and fear of lack of institutional support for cases brought forward, is what hinders the disciplinary process. Hensley (2013) affirms that faculty who provide inadequate assistance can inadvertently create learners who are not aware of, or effectively practice academic integrity. Plus, it is difficult to know how to gauge infractions. The author notes that many Australian universities have set the bar high in making this a strategic goal of their institutions by making academic policy both clear and accessible to students. Curtain University in 2014, for example, set a standard of three levels of seriousness of plagiarism for 'disciplinary purposes'. Level 1 is regarded as a minor, first time, or unintentional offense, and Level II and III are viewed as more serious and subject to penalties. Further to this, Curtain University provides clear guidelines on how not to plagiarise for its students, in the form of online materials and library resources.

Policies and Penalties

Student penalties for academic infractions in general can range from failing an assignment, failing a class, to being expelled but, in reality, many institutes of higher learning bypass the punitive action due to entanglements with process ("*Plagiarism 2.0: Information ethics in the digital age",* 2011). In many cases, plagiarism is viewed as simple academic misconduct, when in the long-term it is damaging (Singh & Remenyi, 2016). Additionally, other

universities, that choose to penalise, take legal action against students who plagiarise, as the repercussions for not educating or enforcing such measures are disruptive to the social structure. The practice of plagiarism among persons who reach high standing as Ph.D holding doctors, prime ministers, politicians, and judges is disconcerting and costly to their communities. The resignation of the German Prime minister, Karl-Theodor zu Guttenburg in 2011 was because he was suspected to have plagiarised his doctoral thesis and for this reason chose to resign (Ruiperez, & Garcia-Cabrero 2016). In the United States, Senator Edward Kennedy, in the 1960s, during his university days, paid someone to sit his Spanish exam which is now public record (Singh & Remenyi, 2016). Most recently, Melania Trump, wife of the Republican Presidential Candidate of the United States, Donald Trump was outed for lifting almost duplicate wording from First Lady, Michelle Obama's 2009 speech (Associate Press, 2016, July 9).

Conclusion

Approaches to how academic integrity is handled by each institution vary. Mills-Senn (2015) believes that most regard the penalisation of students as a counterproductive method, when a teaching moment clearly presenting itself can be more effective. In Australia, the University of Swinebourne has adopted a four-part strategy which should encompass all Australian Universities. In brief, this strategy does the following:

- Recognise and counter plagiarism at every facet of the university.

- Properly educate all students about proper materials usage.

- Design effective assessment which counters plagiarism.

- Make known procedures for monitoring and detecting cheating, including discipline and re-education. (Devlin, 2006)

An assessment of need should accompany policy-making decisions to ensure that students are given the right level of help with tasks, therefore, lowering the risks of plagiarism (Baird & Dooey, 2014). Honour codes have served the purpose of creating an environment of responsibility and is one of the ways that students have been tasked to make positive choices when considering cheating and instilling levels of self-efficacy in the student population (Hensley, 2013). College policy should provide a sense of completeness in which students understand the role of the institution and the role *they* play throughout their education.

Hensley (2013) also understands the value of using the proper language which identifies with its audience and in creating academic policies which reflect student roles. They should also reflect 'reader-centered' language void of 'alienating legalese' which may be difficult for students to grasp, alongside a policy which is geared to 'differentiated audiences', inclusive of administrators, faculty, staff and students. Further to this, the value of using plagiarism missteps as a teaching moment without penalisation is the model that many colleges are making an educative mandate.

Hensley (2013) also believes in the effective use of promoting and practising academic integrity, which should be spoken about and demonstrated on all facets of college life. Orientations must establish an environment of pride in which students value all aspects of their college and their output under that brand. Likewise, webcasts, education platforms, like Moodle, should provide online content and other resources targeting different groups, like the commuter populations, and should be made visible and instilled in classrooms, within student governments and clubs, permeating the institutional community. Effective classroom management can also alleviate plagiarism and cheating by making adjustments to assessments, exams times like allowing small breaks, smaller class sizes and implementing mini-exams. These are some methods to avoid putting undue pressure on students to succeed. Faculty should reiterate the importance of using academic integrity in the classrooms, focus on citation exercises, and instill the benefits and long term advantages of such practices. With these foundational keystones, Hensley (2013) asserts that an 'ethos of integrity' should be established anywhere where students have a duty to make positive choices.

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