

Research Integrity: Why is it so difficult to celebrate excellence instead of ‘just not stealing’?

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One of the most challenging issues for students to understand is that plagiarism should be avoided at all costs; furthermore, that the mere avoidance of plagiarising is not furthering the cause of academic enquiry. The quest needs to be to acquire the skill of referencing and synthesising arguments that would prove not only respect to the original creator of intellectual property, but also the ability to use a body of knowledge in order to create new insights. Therefore, adding any value to your argument not only means that one should not steal other people's intellectual property, but that the academic argument relies on referring and building one's own search on researching and strengthening a view with the solid foundation of expert opinion.

Although the aspect of plagiarism in academic research seems to be the first, most prominent issue surfacing when the subject of research integrity is mentioned, it also seems to be the most pressing, basic hurdle with which the most undergraduate students battle.

Why therefore, is plagiarism so prevalent? Might it be that we as current society produce an exponential amount of academic output? I suspect that the aforementioned is but one of the reasons we encounter the prominence of plagiarism not only in postgraduate work, but also in undergraduate production. The fact that digital searches makes it increasingly easier to detect the 'borrowing of ideas' and downright copying of text, sound and image, highlights the occurrence of the phenomenon.

This paper will consider the basic ground rules of academic integrity with regards to intellectual property and why undergraduate students regularly fall prey to wrong practices. In light of this background, I would then propose a

philosophical way forward: A mind shift as to the approach to celebration and acknowledging intellectual property.

Introduction: What is plagiarism and how important is it?

Evering and Moorman philosophically trace the concept of plagiarism to the inception of capitalism and ownership of property (2012). Plagiarism as phenomenon is a given in our current frames of reference. The United States Office of Science and Technology classifies plagiarism as a relatively minor subsection in the domain of research ethics where it is scheduled as a category under the broader domain of research misconduct. Their policy document defines plagiarism as the 'appropriation of another person's ideas, processes, results, or words without giving appropriate credit' (in Israel & Hay 2006:128). Countries such as Australia, China, Denmark, Finland, Germany, India and the UK agree on their definition of misconduct (Israel & Hay 2006). Current thinking, however, aims towards a more flexible approach; to shift the emphasis towards originality instead of plagiarism (Hannabuss 2001).

Alan Kelly contextualises the issue of plagiarism as being regarded, together with fabrication and falsification, as one of the three most prominent and serious forms of unethical misconduct found in the academic environment (in Junker-Kenny, M., Hogan, L., & Russell, C. (Eds.) 2012). The three aspects are generally referred to as FF&P (Judson in Macfarlane 2010).

Students plagiarise for various reasons

Researchers looking into the direct reasons why students do not grasp the context and seriousness of plagiarism are related to the fact that the subject might be pitched inaccurately.

The very basic practices of plagiarism can sometimes be directly traced back to poor instruction by the educator, sincere ignorance, but also in some cases as part of the inherent qualities of student collaboration in projects. Such activities, combined with scant instruction, could result in diligence being everyone's responsibility, becoming no-one's task (Evering & Moorman 2012). Providing not enough instruction can be but one of the causes. Other studies

show that a too heavy emphasis on technical definitions of plagiarism can have the opposite effect.

In a study exploring students' ideas regarding ethical conduct in research and academic writing, Erika Löfström is concerned with 'the intersection of the ethics of research and the conventions of academic writing' (2011: 254). She refers to the work of Abasi and Graves who explain that if the academic environment emphasises too heavily on the avoidance of plagiarism and making the technical referencing too big an issue, it actually has a detrimental effect on the more meaningful, actual reason why one references, namely that a scholar should contribute to academic debate and knowledge production (2011). It seems that students need deep and meaningful explanations of the real reasons for referencing.

In an interpretive qualitative study with focus groups, Power found that students make light of referencing because they do not grasp the real implications of plagiarism. They perceive the discipline of referencing by professors as something quaint, an activity that is performed out of acts of eccentricity by members of the profession. Such perceptions were not held because of disrespect or unethical unruliness, but mostly because nobody has explained the deep seated reasons for these practices in terms that they can grasp (2009).

Plagiarism is a socially constructed concept. Evering and Moorman echo what most of us know: plagiarism is a complex terrain (2012) and is not everywhere regarded in the same light. They take the Amish as example. They do not acknowledge plagiarism at all. Arguing from a social constructivist perspective, the ownership of ideas and knowledge misaligns with a *public commons* (Lethem 2008 in Evering & Moorman 2012) view on ownership. According to Lethem, the idea of *commons* is associated with commodities that have no real owner per se, such as the air, sea, sun and stars. Here Evering & Moorman use language as a good example: rules of common consent apply but identity is upheld in small inflections. A language is 'owned by everyone and no one at the same time' (2012: 36).

The seemingly double standards in popular culture and social media attest to the confusion for young academics: Why can one post a meme that has gone viral on any social media platform because of its newsworthiness, but not ideas and concepts of academics and experts? Students generally do not believe that it is wrong to use words, sound and images from other sources. Perceptions between various generations also differ when thinking about referencing: Millennials do not ascribe the same value to intellectual property as might older generations (Evering & Moorman 2012).

Research also shows that students are confused and oblivious regarding distinctions between the various types and 'levels' of plagiarism because academic institutions might not distinguish between incorrect in-text referencing on the one hand, and serious cut-and-paste and unreferenced direct quotes on the other. The same disciplinary measures might count for all these offenses in many academic environments. There is a myriad of various forms of academic plagiarism in student work, in a whole spectrum of sophistication (Willhoit 1994). If an institution needs to rely on punitive measures for developmental strategies, it would need to develop a sophisticated structure of measures where the punishment would fit the crime, so to speak.

It is, however, not only students who are guilty of plagiarism. Evering & Moorman argue that our complaints about undergraduate students and their immoral or unethical plagiarising behaviour are a generational attitude bemoaning the 'youth of today'. Condemning such a biased opinion, these researchers mention several instances of academic professionals plagiarising in very public forums such as university handbooks and official documents (2012).

I argue that plagiarism is not so much a generational problem, but rather an issue of our technological time. Jenkins calls ours a 'participatory culture', defined as 'a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices' (in Evering & Moorman 2012: 36).

The implications here is that the popular world is turning into a very large haiku poem where everyone in society is at liberty to add a little bit, and borrow from another towards the seemingly greater good of creative expression. This societal approach is bound to infiltrate intellectual thought and expression. The question then emerges: do institutions really work proactively towards meaningful orientation and training to shift the paradigm?

Prevention through education

Institutions seem to be pitching the wrong message. 'The focus is on "bad" behavior rather than what we mean by being a "good" researcher' (Macfarlane 2010: 33). Therefore, if it is accurate that students are receiving inaccurate messages, does it say more about us as educators than about our students when they plagiarise increasingly? What are we teaching our students? The question therefore poses whether we are conveying the sense of respect towards our fellow scholars? Macfarlane refers to Merton who described good scholarship and therefore, acknowledging other authors, as 'humility' and 'paying homage to those who have prepared the way for one's own work' (Merton in Macfarlane 2010: 112).

While it is relatively easy to detect direct copying of text with anti-plagiarism tools such as Turnitin, it is more difficult to source the origin of an original idea (Howe & Moses 1999). Academic enquiry might need to be demystified and yet analysed to such an extent that it becomes obvious why the skill and craftsmanship should draw respect. Skilled craftspeople are in the best position to appreciate a good piece of work since such understanding emanates from personal knowledge regarding process and skill. Frank Smith (in Evering & Moorman 2012) suggests that we let students into the secrets of the craft of academic writing by explaining reasons and ways of doing better, thereby growing the pride in being part of the esteemed craft of the academic club.

Practical suggestions for exercises to educate and inform students in academic writing are legio. Stephens and Ballast suggest 'digital make-overs' for traditional lessons to create more student-centered assignments that focus

on higher-order thinking skills' (in Evering & Moorman 2012: 39). Approaches mention ways to engage students in discussions about plagiarism, copyright, and relevant issues in more regular and engaging ways. Other suggestions involve educating students in the very basics of research such as style formats and their uses. What is the difference between Harvard-, APA and lesser-known reference conventions? Students have also often not mastered proper notes taking- and proofreading skills.

Willhoit proposes ways to empower students with enough knowledge about the complexities of plagiarism, also in discipline-specific areas such as music and image creation, to discuss it often and to make use of hypothetical cases. Plagiarised work needs to be revised to analyse the process to pinpoint areas where things went wrong (1994).

Empowerment through adequate knowledge and plenty of practice are not the only strategies. Löfström reasons that it has been proven that ethical sensitivity is learnt behaviour (Fisher & Kuther 1997, Clarkeburn 2002, and Sirin 2003 in Löfström 2011). By connecting students with senior mentors (either students or professional researchers) in collaborations will provide them with practical experience within research environments to be able to grasp the context of a more scholarly approach regarding knowledge production. This would not only give them experience of ethical conduct, but the immersion in the practice would create empathy for the researcher (2011).

A question regarding the approach then arises: If educators use Turnitin as a 'development tool' to measure the existing plagiarised content or aspects, this would still only negatively gauge the negative behaviour. If an institution really aims to instill a culture of respect for academic knowledge, we should empower students by crediting acts of intelligent adding and synthesising to existing knowledge. I suggest here that assessment be approached to reward respectful accreditation and acknowledgment of existing research instead of punitive marking of mistakes. Punishment is not always conducive to development. Therefore, create assessment rubrics that give positive weight to citations and references instead of removing marks for unreferenced work.

I conclude that students need to be empowered with adequate knowledge and reasons as to the potential of positive weight that referencing and activating existing scholarly knowledge could add to a student investigation. Referencing should be regarded as an essential part of an argument instead of being regarded as safeguarding a researcher from perceptions of thievery.

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