



Plagiarism: More than Meets the Eye

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Abstract

Plagiarism is the euphemism for ‘academic theft’, ‘academic dishonesty’ and ‘academic misconduct in academia’; and is the taboo word among academics in academia. This paper discusses the issue of plagiarism in terms of what constitutes plagiarism, who are normally ‘the practitioners’ of plagiarism, be it un-intentionally or otherwise, factors contributing to the practise of plagiarism, effects and implications of plagiarism on the ‘practitioners’, and offers suggestions on how to reduce (if not eliminate) any involvement in plagiarism. Knowledge and awareness about plagiarism would help academics and aspiring scholars to steer away from this act, as plagiarism would have dire and long term repercussions on their career, reputation and those who come to be associated with them.

Keywords: Plagiarism, academia, academics, integrity.

1. Introduction

One of the criteria in the KPI (Key Performance Indicator) of academics in academia is publishing in established publications such as high impact journals. Ability to publish in such journals would showcase the scholarliness of the academics, and disseminate their expertise and research findings among their counterparts and with the general public. Similarly, research students reading for a master or doctoral degree are required to submit a number of (long) written assignments and research reports, culminating with a comprehensive thesis based on research, upon the completion of their studies. Furthermore, these research students have to publish their research in established journals as a fulfilment of the criteria to obtain their degree.

Writing a text in academic context like this necessitates the writers to be skilled in literature search, be cognizance of the academic writing convention, have the ability to critique past and existing research in the field to situate their own research in the discipline, to support their ideas with references to experts and scholars in their discipline. Fulfilling these requirements can be a very challenging and daunting task for the uninitiated novice, aspiring scholars. In their zest to execute the task, especially in writing the literature review, they might be involved, in varying degrees, in plagiarism, albeit unintentionally. Thus, what is plagiarism; and why it is considered a ‘taboo’ word among scholars, especially among academics in academia?

2. What Constitutes Plagiarism?

Plagiarism is the euphemism for “academic theft” (Wilhoit, 1994), “academic dishonesty” (Scanlon and Newmann, 2002) and “academic misconduct in academia” (Park, 2003). In a nutshell, plagiarism is the act of incorporating another person’s work, ideas or words into the writer’s work in large chunks, beyond what is considered to be general knowledge. The writer then claims the text to be his / hers without attributing the text to its original source (Deckert, 1993; MED, 2002; Park, 2003; Pecorari, 2008; Wilhoit 1994).

The most common type of plagiarism is the lifting of information or ideas from a source text without acknowledging the source cited (Wilhoit, 1994; Park, 2003). Three types of plagiarism are 1) verbal plagiarism in which the speaker uses lines from a text without acknowledging the source (Park, 2003) 2) plagiarism in writing (Auer & Krupar, 2001).and 3) internet or digital plagiarism (Scanlon & Neumann, 2002; Park, 2003; Sutherland-Smith, 2008).

However, researchers of plagiarism (Pennycook, 1996; Pecorari, 2008; Sutherland-Smith, 2008) and academics are still undecided regarding what actually constitutes plagiarism due to the subjectivity of the issue. The degree of severity of plagiarism could be determined by whether the plagiarism is undertaken intentionally or un-intentionally (Park, 2003; Pennington, 2010); and the percentage of ideas or information from the source being incorporated into the writer’s work (Sutherland-Smith, 2008) without appropriate attribution to the original source.

Un-intentional plagiarism happens among novice and aspiring scholars who may overlook to quote or cite their sources appropriately due to ignorance or carelessness (Park, 2003; Pennington, 2010) and thus, to a certain extent is 'forgivable'. Conversely, intentional plagiarism is a more serious offense as the plagiarist would knowingly "be guilty of deception" or even worse, trying to "cover an authorial theft" (Pennington, 2010: 150). An example of this is when a professor knowingly lifted ideas or data from his research students' assignments or reports without their knowledge, and claiming the ideas as his own, obscuring the original authors' contribution.

3. Factors Contributing to Plagiarism

It is difficult to eradicate plagiarism because in some Eastern cultures, copying the 'guru' (master) is a sign of respecting the authority (Park, 2003), and lecturers are reluctant to expose their students' engagement in plagiarism (Park, 2003; Pecorari, 2008; Currie, 1998) for fear of litigation and not being familiar with the procedure to report (Auer & Krupan, 2001) and the belief that it would reflect negatively on themselves (Puka, 2005 in Pennington, 2010).

Instead of joining the 'blaming culture' of accusing students for their involvement in plagiarism (Currie, 1998; Wilhoit, 1994) and threatening and warning them to steer away from plagiarism (Pennycook, 1994), academics should try to understand students' rationale for plagiarising, intentionally or un-intentionally. Research students plagiarise for the following reasons: 1) they have not been taught explicitly about plagiarism, 2) they have not received any formal training to cope with academic writing at advanced level, and 3) mismatch of their language proficiency with scholarliness of the text.

Research students have not been educated explicitly on plagiarism. In fact, they received conflicting signals regarding plagiarism. For instance, during their secondary schooling, they could incorporate ideas from various sources into their assignments and not being charged with plagiarism. Yet at university level, incorporating texts into their assignments and reports without acknowledging the source is plagiarism. At university level too, so much has been said about plagiarism yet these students are not guided in how to cite, quote and paraphrase appropriately from sources (Wilhoit, 1994). Their lack of knowledge and awareness of what plagiarism is all about would lead these students to fall back on their previous experience (Pennycook, 1996; Sutherland-Smith, 2008) at secondary school level and commit plagiarism!

Without formal training, these research students would be lacking or have no skills in critiquing research articles, synthesizing ideas, writing research reports substantiated with multiple sources (Pennington, 2010), referencing style, and not being well-verse in academic writing convention. However, assignments they have to submit to supervisors have to fulfil the criteria set by the university (Currie, 1998). In this context, these students have no choice but to utilise whatever little knowledge they have to complete the assignment, and they might inadvertently be involved in plagiarising works they refer to in doing the assignment.

Research students whose first language is not English but are pursuing their degree in an ESL (English as a Second language) or EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context are required to do their written tasks (assignments, reports and thesis) in English. Their lack of proficiency in the English language may hinder their understanding of content of source materials, making them feel intimidated and in awe of the work of the established scholars (authors of the materials) leading to a reluctant to critique the source. They might feel diffident even to formulate their own sentences. If this is the case, they might have the tendency to quote excerpts verbatim from the source. However, too many verbatim quotations in the text might render the student's text to be considered plagiarized work!

4. Effects and Implications of Plagiarism

For those who assume that plagiarism is just an 'ethical' issue involving few individuals in isolated cases, consider these 1) headline and 2) newspaper report:

1. "*Time* suspends columnist over plagiarism"

(AFP, New Sunday Times, August 12: 41)

2. "...Pal Schmitt [President of Hungary] who resigned last month after Hungary's Semmelweis University stripped him of his doctoral degree over charges that he had plagiarized his 1992 thesis."

(Alex Kuli, Associated Press, May 2, 2012)

In 1), Fareed Zakaria, a *Time Magazine* prolific columnist and *CNN* broadcaster was suspended by both his employers after he admitted that a paragraph in his report on gun control was plagiarised from a *New Yorker* article on the same issue (AFP, 2012). Although *Time Magazine* had re-instated him in September 2012 after a one month's suspension (Dzof Azmi, 2012), we doubt that Fareed Zakaria would command again the same respect and esteem he had before the incident. He lost his outstanding sterling reputation just for a paragraph! In 2), [Dr.] Pal Schmitt had to vacate his post as the president of Hungary in April 2012 over exposure by his alma mater (Semmelweis University) that his doctoral thesis in 1992 (twenty years ago) was a plagiarized manuscript (Kuli, 2012). David Robinson had to resign from his post as the Vice Chancellor of Monash University, Australia in the early 2000s over charges of plagiarism (Baty, 2002) in Park (2003). More recently, the work of a versatile and intellectual journalist [he was a Rhode scholar at Oxford University, United Kingdom and had written for *The New Yorker*, *Wired*, the *Washington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal*], Jonah Lehrer, was found to contain texts recycled from his earlier articles, making him guilty of self-plagiarism (Dzof Azmi, 2012).

The fall from grace of these high profile personalities indicate that plagiarism is not in the domain of the uninitiated, and novice, aspiring scholars per se, but could provide a pitfall even for those who are already established in their fields. Furthermore, the treatment dealt to these 'plagiarists' illustrates how society views plagiarism. Regardless of their position in society (a president of a country, a vice chancellor of a university, world-class journalist and columnist) with regard to plagiarism, nobody is above the law. On a personal level, where are they to go after the 'fall'? Their ego and reputation are in shreds, the whole world knows about it since the 'sin' was broadcasted in the media. Obviously, plagiarism is more than just an ethical issue.

This is a hypothetical example to drive home the devastating effects of plagiarism on those who come in contact with it. A lecturer who obtained his doctoral degree more than fifteen years ago from a prestigious university is now a full-pledged professor who had graduated a number of doctoral and master (by research) students. He is well-known in his discipline. Then, it was found out that there are substantive elements of plagiarism in his doctoral thesis, research reports and publications. With enough evidences to implicate him, his professorship was withdrawn, with even his doctorate might be considered invalid. Whether he is expelled from the university does not concern us. But think of the implications of his long ago, forgotten 'sin' on he himself, the prestigious university that awarded him the degree, the university he is currently affiliated to, the academics who cited his works in their publications, and the students graduating under his supervision.

To elaborate, the professor must be in the prime of his career. Would he be able to cope with the sudden loss of profession (translated as income, power, authority), respect and trust from the academic fraternity and society at large, and friendship (his colleagues and friends would steer clear of him). Will he survive the humiliation that's going to plague his life now? Where is he to go, what is he to do, as no other universities will hire him now. In other words, he is in limbo! The reputation of his alma mater university and the university he is affiliated to would be tarnished too, due to their oversight regarding his academic standing. Additionally, the academics who had cited his works in their publications would have wished that they had not done so, as this could jeopardise their reputation as well.

The effect of the 'fake' professor's plagiarism would be inflicted the most on those who graduated under his supervision. If their degrees were rendered invalid, what is going to happen to those who are holding posts based on these 'invalid' degrees? All the time invested in getting the degree has come to no avail. The initial jubilant of getting such an 'august' professor for a supervisor could turn into a nightmare when the truth is made public. Would these graduates be happy to tell the world that he was their supervisor? We do not think so.

Research students who are 'exposed' for their involvement in plagiarism may be reprimanded or meted out with severe punishment such as expulsion from study (Currie, 1998). The form of punishment depends on the extent of plagiarism involved in the work (Currie, 1998; Pennington, 2010). Students who have been expelled from an institution/university due to plagiarism would have very slim chance to be accepted into another institution of higher learning due to the tarnished reputation. If they are government scholars, how are they going to pay back the scholarship when they have not even completed their study, and thus have no paper qualifications to apply for jobs. Furthermore, they have no prospect of starting anew at another university with their tarnished reputation. In this context, they are indeed in "between a rock and a hard place" situation and it all due to committing plagiarism. So, is it worth it?

The examples provided in this section have already indicated the ills and 'ripple effect' brought about by plagiarism on its practitioners: not only the person who commits the offense is punished, and justly so, we might say, but those innocent people who are associated with the culprit would be brought down and be shamed and humiliated as well.

The implications delineated in this section also demonstrate that plagiarism is an irreversible act. Once a person is ensnared in it, there is no way for him or her to amend and reverse the effect. Obviously, there is more to plagiarism than 'meets the eye': plagiarism is more complex and cuts deeper than we anticipated it would be, the reason we should steer clear of any involvement in plagiarism at all course!

5. Suggestions

Knowing the three major issues that cause research students to plagiarise i.e. not knowing what plagiarism is, English language proficiency, and academic writing skills for study at advanced level, we would like to recommend the following measures to rectify the situation.

For research students, the university where they study should right from the outset conduct a *Needs Analysis* to gauge their knowledge (Sutherland-Smith, 2008) and awareness of plagiarism, and their level and performance in the English language, and their academic writing skills. Based on the outcome of the *Needs Analysis*, the respective university should take the necessary measures to fill in the gap in their students' knowledge. For instance, if they do not know much about plagiarism, then organise a talk or a workshop for these students in which the concept, consequences and implications of plagiarism on their lives; and some hands-on practice can be provided for them, to make plagiarism become 'real' for them. They should also be provided with guidelines pertaining to plagiarism (Pecorari, 2008; Wilhoit, 1994; Auer & Krupar, 2001)

Research students with poor English language proficiency which could interfere with their performance in their studies and the writing of their theses should take the initiative to improve their English by registering at a language school. On the part of the university, it should cooperate with its language centre to provide English language courses relevant to the needs of these students. Similarly, to help research students cope with their academic writing requirements, universities should provide an academic writing course, taught by a lecturer in the discipline, in order for students to really get the essence of what academic writing is all about.

To counter the issue of student plagiarism, those who have scrutinised the issue (Wilhoit, 1994; Auer & Krupar, 2001, Pennington, 2010) propose that plagiarism should be made difficult for students to jolt them to face the challenge. One of the ways is for lecturers to assign their research students with assignments that are different from common topics (Auer & Krupar, 2001; Pennington, 2010) thus minimizing the possibility for the content of the assignment to be surfed from the internet. Similarly, topics related to personal life and experiences (Auer & Krupar, 2001) would reduce the instance of plagiarising for students. Moreover, making students submit drafts of an essay over a period of time, and submit copies of documented materials used in the essay (Wilhoit, 1994; Auer & Krupar, 2001), guiding students on how to make in-text citations and referencing will make students become 'involved' in their project, get hands-on experience in the process and reduce the tendency to plagiarise, due to having to submit progress report on the project (Auer & Krupar, 2001).

Since we cannot discard the academic culture (in higher education) of supporting ideas in our text with sources, lecturers should guide students on how to choose source materials in order for the information from the source to be really relevant to the context and needs of the text. For instance, lecturers should make students be aware of the inferior quality of papers in the internet (Auer & Krupar, 2001) as the validity of the paper cannot be verified. Since academic writing is also an issue with research students, it is imperative for lecturers to teach and guide their students on the complex skills they have to acquire in writing from sources and "the practices involved in making use other peoples' words and ideas" (Pennington, 2010: 153). To counter plagiarism, we need to educate our students on how to use information ethically and legally (Auer & Krupar, 2001), for, in the final analysis, research students, aspiring scholars and academics who have a strong sense of ethics and morality will not plagiarise.

6. Conclusion

Plagiarism is a very complex issue. It is a major obstacle to academic integrity among aspiring scholars and academics in academia. Any involvement in plagiarism would have irreversible long term repercussions on the plagiarists' career, reputation and lives, and those who are associated with them. Knowledge and awareness of what is involved in plagiarism, and its implications, would help them to steer clear from plagiarism, and guide them to be professionals who uphold high moral integrity, adhere to code of ethics and be highly principled in their execution of their profession.

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