

Plagiarism: the internet makes it easy

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Summary

This article examines the issue of plagiarism by nursing students and academics in British universities and highlights how electronic developments such as the internet and word processing have made it easier. It describes how some websites support plagiarism and how, for a price, a qualification up to and including higher degree level may be gained without the recipient of the award having to do any coursework.

tional or unintentional use of another's work or ideas, published or unpublished, without clearly acknowledging the source of that work or idea.

This definition includes taking content from unpublished work, such as masters or doctoral dissertations, that have not been published but are readily accessible. It might also occur when a member of an audience hears a speaker say something notable and decides to use it in a presentation or paper on the basis that no one will find out and the idea will be attributed to the user.

Until recently it required some effort and skill to plagiarise, but the advent of word processors and computer networks has completely changed the environment in which plagiarism occurs and 'makes plagiarism easier to execute and harder to detect' (Martin 1994).

Huge and ever-growing mountains of material can now be obtained from around the world at the touch of a button. Cutting and pasting a few sentences, paragraphs or even whole works is comparatively easy and requires little skill or imagination. The world wide web has given students and academics the opportunity to plagiarise and to publish by allowing almost limitless journeys into cyberspace.

There has been a dramatic move away from pen and paper, and even the typewriter, to technologies such as laser copiers. This means the copy is virtually indistinguishable from the original and it is easy to insert stolen material directly into assignments or to download complete essays, dissertations or other works and submit them as your own. As McKenzie (1998) writes: 'Students now wield an electronic shovel which makes it possible to find and save huge chunks of information with little reading, effort or originality.'

PLAGIARISM IS an ancient cheating practice that was first noted in AD561. Finian was an Irish monk who lent a fellow monk, Colmcille, an illuminated religious manuscript which he had painstakingly written and illustrated. Colmcille was so impressed with the book that he had it copied surreptitiously and then returned the original to the author. However, Finian found out and was so angry at Colmcille's underhand actions that he claimed exclusive rights to the manuscript and demanded the copy. Colmcille refused and retained the copy. The argument became so heated that King Diarmait was asked to arbitrate. After listening to both arguments, the king acknowledged that as the author, Finian had exclusive rights to the copy as well as the original. He reinforced this by saying: 'To every cow its calf, to every book its copy.' This ruling recognised the primacy of the author's claim to ownership and has subsequently become famous in Irish legal circles.

The actions of Colmcille raise the issue of how to define what he was guilty of. There are a number of definitions of plagiarism, including 'using someone else's words or ideas without attribution' (Ryan 1998) and 'a range of actions from failure to use proper citation to wholesale cheating... unintentionally or with planful deliberation' (Hinchliffe 1998).

It might seem harsh to include the unintentional use of another's work in any definition, but the lack of intention does not change the act itself. Many excuses have been put forward for these unintentional actions, such as 'I didn't mean to do it' or 'I didn't know you had to reference it if you put their ideas into your own words'.

In the author's opinion plagiarism is the inten-

The extent of the problem

Nursing students have to meet the rigorous academic requirements of diploma or degree courses. At the same time they have to work in clinical areas in hospitals or in the community, where they learn the art and science of nursing and where their competence is assessed.

Many student nurses have part-time jobs to supplement their bursary or grant. Not surprisingly, the temptation to take shortcuts to save time and effort can lead to plagiarism. These abuses are

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Key words

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widespread among students. In the UK, research involving 1,000 non-nursing undergraduates found that approximately half admitted to plagiarism, inventing data and allowing others to copy work (Clare 1996). According to Newstead (1996), 70 per cent or more of American students cheated.

Franklyn-Stokes and Newstead (1995) found that 64 per cent of students questioned reported they had copied work with knowledge, while 66 per cent paraphrased without references and 54 per cent copied without using references.

In 2003, I asked 64 third-year diploma and ten degree nursing students I was teaching about plagiarism. Fifty per cent of the diploma students and 30 per cent of the degree students said they had at some stage intentionally or unintentionally paraphrased material in an assignment without referencing the source. Twenty per cent of the diploma students said they had intentionally or unintentionally copied material directly into an assignment without referencing the source, but none of the degree students said they had.

This enquiry was impromptu and not rigorous, which may account for the degree students' responses to the second question. Even so, that the students were willing to acknowledge they had plagiarised should alert us to the fact that nursing students are no different to other students when it comes to plagiarism. A proper study would be useful to gauge the extent of the problem in nursing education. Should a student who has plagiarised be awarded grades or given a professional qualification achieved partially or wholly from the work of others?

Ryan (1998) reports that reference to non-existent books or articles is commonplace in the US. In almost 30 years of teaching I have only once been aware of the inclusion in an essay of a non-existent reference source. I discovered the student's invention of the fictional author because the citation was so interesting that I tried to locate the original article. I realised, after fruitless searches, that the quotation that seemed so noteworthy had been made up and no such article existed. While this may not be plagiarism in strict terms, the false reference was included by the student with the intention to deceive.

Cheating academics

Cheating in universities is not confined to the student population. Some lecturers are also guilty of similar offences. It is important to acknowledge the lead given by medical colleagues in this area, and in particular to recognise the openness of editors of medical journals in acknowledging that fraud and misconduct in medical research and publication not only exist but are a major problem. The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) was formed in 1997 as a sounding board for edi-

tors who suspected that data had been falsified or fabricated (COPE 2001).

As a journal article and book reviewer, the author is aware of the need to be constantly vigilant for plagiarised, falsified or fabricated work. In the world of nursing publication the fraudsters are not likely to be students but academics, clinicians, researchers and managers, because they are the major contributors to journals and books.

Institutionalised plagiarism is described as a feature of systems of formal hierarchy in which credit for intellectual work is more a consequence than a cause of unequal power and position (Mitroff and Bennis 1989). In other words, it occurs when a superior, because of his or her position, gets the credit for the work of a subordinate. Martin (1994) writes that this includes ghostwriting, when the actual writing is done by someone else; 'honorary authorship', where a supervisor who has done little or no research is listed as co-author of the article; or where work done by junior workers is commonly signed by more senior academics.

Competitive plagiarism is 'found in academic and intellectual circles... claiming credit for ideas is the basis of status and advancement in a system based on autonomous and individual intellectual production. In this context plagiarism [is] gaining undue credit in a competitive intellectual endeavour' (Martin 1994). The temptation is great because the rewards are so great.

The line between institutionalised and competitive plagiarism is not always clear and there may be overlap and inconsistencies, such as seniors who demand their name on every publication, which would be institutionalised plagiarism in a competitive setting, as Martin (1994) describes it.

As one American student commented, with some justification: 'If the [university] president can use a ghostwriter, why can't I? Indeed the problem of using one standard for college students and another for public officials at the very least imposes a rather perverse situational ethics on the whole idea of literary honesty' (Hawley 1984).

The practice of putting your name to a piece of work when you have had little or no input is so extensive in academic and research communities that it is often regarded as the norm. Looking at the number of multi-authored articles published in journals, many claim to be written by more than 15 authors.

There is pressure to publish and to be cited by other authors. In Logue (1996) I refer to informal 'citation circles', where individuals agree to cite each other's work. The more frequently your name appears as co-author enhances the chances of being cited. A practice common in all hierarchies, including nursing, is the ghostwriting of conference speeches or other presentations for a superior, without any reference being made by the presenter to the true author.

Box 1. A guide to reducing plagiarism

- Academics should set a good example by giving appropriate credit for sources used in preparing their lectures and notes (Alexander 1988)
- Academics should stop claiming credit for the work of others
- Accentuate the positive and show students how proper citation strengthens their writing and shows they have researched the topic (Evans 2000)
- Make it clear to students that simply downloading a paper will not help them to develop their ability to analyse or synthesise information, to judge the credibility of sources, or to express themselves clearly and convincingly (Rocklin 1996)
- Timetable compulsory sessions on academic writing and citation skills, including the correct citation of electronic sources and teach, by means of discussion and practice, and suggest ways to avoid plagiarism
- Teach students how to recognise acceptable and unacceptable paraphrases
- Include specific instructions regarding correct in-text and end-of-text referencing and bibliographies. Ensure teaching staff give consistent guidance. To put it simply, references should be correct, complete, consistent and convincing
- When assessing student work, lecturers should give students feedback on any errors in referencing technique
- Explain what should be avoided and what is encouraged in terms of collusion and collaboration
- Ensure that students know you are aware of essay banks and cheat sites and that you monitor them
- Policies should be written clearly and include illustrations and examples (QAA 2000)
- Treat all plagiarism as unacceptable, even if it is claimed that it was unintended, and deal with it formally with penalties to fit the circumstances
- Rewrite or modify the assignment each time the module is taught
- Decrease the learning outcomes that ask for knowledge and understanding, substituting instead those that require analysis, evaluation and synthesis; consider adding information gathering to learning outcomes (Carroll and Appleton 2001)
- Refer to Carroll and Appleton (2001) for a detailed examination of the subject

Most plagiarism by university students that is discovered and with which the student is confronted by his or her lecturer is word-for-word plagiarism, which is easy to detect and prove. The source of the plagiarised text is often so well known that any recourse to available plagiarism software is hardly necessary. However, much of this type of plagiarism is inadvertent because the student often does not understand proper acknowledgement practice. It should be stressed as Babbie (1998) states: 'There is nothing wrong with presenting someone else's words and ideas... in fact, any field of thought evolves as people read each other's ideas... the key to doing this properly lies in acknowledgement and citation.'

Where does the problem start?

According to Dant (1986) and Schab (1972), the experience in the US is that students are taught in high school to copy from sources without acknowledgement, and the problem persists. From experience it is clear that a large number of college students are ignorant of proper referencing techniques when they begin their student nursing courses.

The form of student assessment in further education might also be a factor. A five-year study in the UK by Newstead (1996) found that cheating

is more common in coursework than examinations and that it appears to start in school, where coursework is an important component of GCSEs. Newstead maintains that the practice was bound to increase as universities replaced examinations with less stressful continuous assessment.

Students are encouraged to put information into their own words or paraphrase the words of someone else. However, simply rearranging the order of the views expressed, or changing some of the words, does not alter the fact that the ideas come from another source and therefore attribution should be given to the original source.

From personal experience over many years, this problem appears to have increased dramatically in nursing education as a consequence of students working together on assignments, studying together, undertaking joint seminar presentations or other group activities or even living together while undertaking the same course and being expected to present individual pieces of work for assessment. When a spouse, partner or friend is a more senior student and shares the knowledge and results of assignments he or she has previously undertaken the problem also arises.

Culwin and Naylor (1995) describe a continuum – from co-operation, which is encouraged, through collaboration, which they reluctantly accept, to

copying, which is unacceptable. They define co-operation as talking about a problem or sharing ideas, collaboration as showing or sharing material that might be included in the final version, and copying as presenting material that was written by another person. It may, however, be difficult for some to see where co-operation ends and collusion begins. Culwin and Lancaster (2001) make the point that many tutors have noted that the position on the continuum which divides acceptable from unacceptable behaviour is to some extent culturally defined and hence must be made explicit to all students at the start of their courses.

Cheat sites and essay banks

The temptation to cheat, whether as an academic or student, is increased, not only by the ease of editing, cutting and pasting or downloading complete texts and hiding the true source of the writings, but also by the emergence of websites which, for a fee, will provide an essay or dissertation or fulfil other course requirements.

Websites offering services such as access to essays or the undertaking of coursework are responding to market demand. Some sites offering access to essays state that they do not condone plagiarism and include disclaimers to that effect. However, they also argue that they cannot prevent it. Some offer a service whereby if you have a university course to complete or an assignment or a dissertation to write, they will write it all or partly for you. This work cannot be detected by anti-plagiarism project software because it is customised and written especially for each student.

Reducing plagiarism

Plagiarism is a global problem, but it must be dealt with at both national and university level in the UK. In response to the problem the National Plagiarism Advisory Service has been established by the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) and is provided by Northumbria University (JISC 2002). It provides generic advice for institutions and staff and advises students on writing essays and plagiarism. There is also a directory of information on the subject, including websites, conferences, press articles and workshops to highlight issues and provide a forum to share good practice.

In addition, the JISC (2002) has procured a national detection service, which will be fully supported in the first two years, and available to the higher and further education community. The plagiarism detection service may be used to detect the use of websites and collusion between students, but it cannot pick up straightforward copying from books or the use of online subscription material. Box 1 provides some pointers to reduce plagiarism.

Conclusion

While plagiarism is a problem, it is better to spend time preventing it, rather than concentrating on penalties and punishments. Plagiarism is not simply an issue in education; it is a feature of all specialisms and professions. The prevention and detection of plagiarism is important, because lying, cheating and stealing are no more acceptable on the university campus than they would be on a hospital ward, a community health centre or a nursing home 

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