



Why do students plagiarise?



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Plagiarism is a hot topic in educational institutions today and it is causing a lot of concern in academia. According to the Merriam Webster online dictionary, the formal definition of plagiarism is: to steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one's own; to use (another's production) without crediting the source; to commit literary theft; to present as new and original an idea or product derived from an existing source.¹

Of course there are many other definitions of plagiarism. Basically, it is 'passing off' or taking someone else's works, including their ideas, thoughts and written expressions and presenting them as if they were one's own, without acknowledging the original author. It is the theft of someone else's intellectual property.

In academia, plagiarism has to be addressed in the context of academic integrity. However, it is necessary to look at ethics and moral codes as they exist today and to question why plagiarism has become such a common offence within educational institutions. Plagiarism has been around for centuries but the digital age has made it a lot easier for plagiarists to achieve their dishonest objectives.

In the context of the global village and the digital age, there is no doubt that information is available at the 'click of a mouse' and that the wealth of digital information out there is quite overwhelming for anyone searching for information of any kind. The ease with which users of information can cut and paste, transfer, modify, translate and create derivative works is incredible. This gives people the impression that they no longer have to put in any effort into their studies or work, as everything they need is out there on the Web. The notion that all or most material

on the Internet is 'free' is what seems to encourage and perpetuate the use of other people's works without proper acknowledgement.

Is this a global mindset that information is there for the taking? Is it a lack of understanding of intellectual property rights? Is the Internet and media encouraging plagiarism by 'bombarding' readers with so much information that they are no longer capable of thinking for themselves? Or, are users of information just recycling information because it is out there, instead of creating new knowledge?

Could it be a more sinister global phenomenon of lack of respect for other persons in general - a hard reality, perhaps, that one can take from others, no matter what the cost? The lack of integrity and honesty portrayed in many television shows, films and other media seems to give the impression that morality is no longer a requirement for modern society and that 'the end justifies the means'. It seems that the moral code of many people today is 'take what you can, when you can, but don't get caught!'



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¹ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/plagiarizing>

In the South African context, perhaps the problem of plagiarism is symptomatic of deeper ethical and moral problems emanating from a society emerging from a violent and shameful history, where the rights of others were totally disregarded. Although South Africa is now a democracy, lessons from the past have not yet been learnt. People continue to feed on hatred, racism, greed, anti-regulation, civil disobedience, disregard for anyone and everyone, all in the name of 'liberation', 'freedom' and 'democracy'.

The message of 'freedom for everyone' has taken on a whole new meaning. Many children are not learning discipline or a strong moral code at home or at school. They have lost respect for elders, teachers and parents. They disregard rules and regulations and in the process fail to learn proper life-skills for the future. They enter places of higher learning without a strong moral code and then engage in plagiarism,

copyright infringement, theft and other unacceptable activities in the process of obtaining university degrees. Many students become masters of deceit as they find crafty ways of cheating the system to obtain their degrees with the least amount of effort. These are our future leaders!

Are higher institutions expecting too much of their students in the above context? Should they be more lenient when plagiarism or other dishonest offences occur? No, indeed, institutions cannot expect anything less than honesty, respect and ethical behaviour from their students. If students do not have these qualities, they need to be educated to change their behaviour.

If South Africa wants law-abiding, ethical graduates, then higher educational institutions have a huge responsibility to educate students about these ethical issues. It is a hard battle but one that

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educational institutions cannot afford to lose. Students are the leaders, authors and professionals of tomorrow. Without integrity and professional ethics, these students will just perpetuate the problems into the next generation.

University students need to be educated about academic integrity, morality and respect for other's property, including intellectual property. They must realise that they are also authors and creators of intellectual property. If they want others to respect their intellectual property, they must do the same. It is a matter of mutual respect.

Plagiarism can range from extreme dishonesty to inadvertent neglect to cite another source when using someone else's intellectual property. The higher the level of dishonesty, the harsher the punishment should be to ensure that plagiarists do not repeat their negative behaviour. Tertiary institutions should have clear plagiarism policies as well as disciplinary procedures to address different levels of plagiarism, from minor or unintentional offences to blatant academic dishonesty.

Teaching staff need to find more creative ways of setting assignments and projects, so that students cannot easily cut and paste information from the Internet. Also, to be in a position to detect and punish plagiarism, they need to understand some of the reasons why students plagiarise, whether unintentionally or with full intent to cheat. These are some examples:²

- © There is often confusion between copyright and plagiarism and what intellectual property is. Students do not know that copyright does not protect ideas but that ideas can be plagiarised. They also do not know that a copyright infringement can be plagiarism and vice versa, in certain circumstances. For example, if a substantial portion of a work is cut and pasted without acknowledgement or permission from the rights-holder, this is plagiarism and a copyright infringement in terms of the South African Copyright Act No. 98 of 1978 (as amended). Also, if they do not acknowledge an author but negatively affect the author's reputation, then they will be plagiarising and infringing the moral rights of the author in terms of the Copyright Act.
- © Many students come to university without having used a library or media centre at school. They do not have any research skills and have not learnt how to find books and journals through a library catalogue. They often depend solely on Google for their research material, instead of using their libraries. They are therefore unaware of the wealth of information available in library collections and in their electronic resources. Google is quick and easy to use and provides source material for assignments, projects or research reports. They do not have to think too much about the subject, so they put in the least bit of effort into their work. They also believe that



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² <http://www.library.ualberta.ca/guides/plagiarism/why/index.cfm>

everything is free on the Internet and therefore fail to acknowledge original sources.

- Ⓢ If English is not their home language, students find it difficult to evaluate and discuss others' works in their own words, so they tend to cut and paste direct quotations, often forgetting to use quotation marks or reference correctly. They feel that they cannot express the information in adequate language and it is a lot easier just to use the same words as someone else, or just change a few words here and there and present it as their own work.
- Ⓢ Students often are not sure what is 'general knowledge' and what needs to be referenced. It is difficult, in some instances, to determine this.
- Ⓢ Sometimes students use famous quotations without acknowledging the person who said them. They do not realise that if they do not know who said the famous words, they must not use them until they have found and acknowledged the source, otherwise it is plagiarism.
- Ⓢ Many students have problems with time management and heavy workloads and look for ways to cut down their workload. Instead of researching their work properly, they use Google at the last minute and cut and paste to satisfy the requirements of the assignment or project, but in the process forget to reference and thus land up plagiarising large sections.
- Ⓢ The ease of cutting and pasting lends itself to out-of-context paragraphs and different writing styles in their work, which makes detection of plagiarism quite easy if they have not proofread their work.
- Ⓢ Many students do not know how to evaluate information on the Internet. It may be total nonsense although it is written in an academic fashion. This can impact on the whole research process and their writing skills.
- Ⓢ Students sometimes get confused with terminology, for example, they do not always know the difference between plagiarism and paraphrasing. They do not think it is plagiarism if they change words here and there, using the same sentence or paragraph structure, without acknowledging the author.
- Ⓢ Sometimes they are not sure what the requirements of the assignment or project are. They do not want to appear to be stupid so they turn to Google for the answers instead of checking with their lecturers. This can result in plagiarism.
- Ⓢ Some students plagiarise to compensate for actual or perceived academic inadequacies or because they do not want to be shown up by their fellow students. Some are under family or peer pressure to achieve. They may not be coping with their chosen courses and see plagiarism as a quick fix to get them through that year of study.
- Ⓢ Foreign students, particularly from non-Western cultures, sometimes find the concept of individual ownership over knowledge difficult to grasp. Many of them understand the concept of knowledge commons or shared knowledge and find the concept of acknowledging individuals' intellectual property foreign.
- Ⓢ There are students who try 'beating the system' for the sake of a challenge and they purposely engage in dishonest conduct to see if they can get away with it. They pride themselves in how often they plagiarise without being caught. They fail to see that they are only fooling themselves as surely one day their dishonesty will catch up with them.
- Ⓢ Some students are not aware that they need to obtain copyright clearance if they use large portions or extracts of others' copyright works, for example, long quotations, video clips, photographs, images and other works. By using these works without permission and without acknowledgement, they are guilty of copyright infringement and plagiarism.

- Ⓢ A common problem is for students to recycle old papers, or to submit the same paper for two different courses, or to get a parent or another student to write their paper for them. Some students, even postgraduates, have copied research reports, large sections of theses or dissertations, or case studies verbatim, except for a few minor changes, and have submitted them as if they did the work themselves. This is totally unethical.
- Ⓢ Paper mill services on the Internet are a great source of ready-made papers and assignments for students. Students would rather just download a whole essay or assignment from the Internet than put in the effort of researching and writing the work themselves. They do not have to think about the topic as they can find a paper to suit any course requirements. This is blatant dishonesty.
- Ⓢ One of the main problems, particularly in undergraduate years, is that students do not know how to reference for academic writing purposes. Some have only learnt how to do bibliographic lists at the end of their assignments, but have never referenced using any of the well-known referencing styles, such as Harvard, Chicago, APA, Vancouver, et cetera.

Although many educational institutions now use anti-plagiarism software, such as Turnitin.com, SafeAssign and others to detect plagiarism, these are not foolproof and double checking is usually necessary. Sometimes it is very difficult to detect plagiarism or there is insufficient evidence, so teaching staff are then reluctant to take the matter to the Plagiarism Committee. Lecturers often find that disciplinary hearings are too time-consuming or problematic if insufficient evidence is presented. This can also negatively affect the lecturer-student relationship afterwards if the matter is not handled properly. They do not always think that the time and effort spent in disciplinary hearings warrants their being away from the rest of the class for several hours, days or even months, depending on the case in question.

Institutions therefore have to ensure that adequate information and ongoing education is given to students about plagiarism and copyright infringement across their campuses. Strict disciplinary measures need to be in place so that students are strongly discouraged from engaging in such academic dishonesty.

Education is probably the strongest 'weapon' that an educational institution can use to fight plagiarism.

Sources

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