Plagiarism in higher education environment: causes and solutions

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Abstract

In the academic arena, plagiarism is on the rise. As a consequence, Higher Learning Institutions are putting in place severe punitive measures. Most of these measures are more reactive than preventive because they focus on plagiarism detection and the kinds of punishments to administer to students who plagiarize. In fact, these measures fail to address particular or primary reasons for plagiarism in students' works. This may be one of the reasons why such measures have done little to reduce the incidents of plagiarism. Using a desktop research pathway, this paper discusses the concept and practices of plagiarism and raises a number of issues which need to be considered in framing measures to address it. Among other workable strategies proposed in this paper include the (i) strengthening of reading and academic writing skills, (ii) institutionalization and dissemination of anti-plagiarism policy and (iii) using technology in detecting plagiarism among students' work.

Keywords: *Plagiarism, anti-plagiarism policies, academic, research skills development, higher education*

Introduction

Research has proven that 'plagiarism' is on the rise in higher education (Gullifer & Tyson, 2010; Obeid&Hill, 2017), which raises serious concerns about students' and staff's academic and research skill development. Bethany (2016) explains that plagiarism affects students' success, ability to develop academic writing skills and incurs penalties the moment it is discovered. Therefore, Higher Learning Institutions have adopted various strategies to curb this issue. These include teaching their students about plagiarism and how to avoid it as well as setting up anti-plagiarism policies and measures. However, as stated by Breen and Maassen (2005), "the development of academic misconduct policies has done little to reduce the incidence of plagiarism." As Breen and Maassen go on to explain, many plagiarism incidents result from ignorance and poor skills rather than intentional misconduct. Indeed, many universities focus on tools to detect plagiarism and on punitive measures without considering the reasons behind plagiarism.

Higher learning institutions in Rwanda and their students are no different regarding plagiarism incidents. For instance in the year 2015, five students in one university in Rwanda were under investigation by a disciplinary committee for having copied other people's works in their research reports (Rugira, 2015). However, the plagiarism incidents reported in Rwandan higher learning institutions may be far below the actual number because this issue appears not to have been taken seriously in teaching and learning processes, practices or in academic policies. Students appear not to be equipped enough not to plagiarize: they are hardly taught how to avoid plagiarism in academic research. This may be happening because teaching/learning activities and assessment tasks may not be empowering them with skills and abilities to avoid plagiarism in their writing (Spiller & Ferguson, 2011). Indeed, higher learning institutions in Rwanda appear not to develop critical thinkers (Sibomana, 2010). In similar vein, Rugira (2015) argues that for the most part, students are expected to memorize and reproduce the notes and handouts from lecturers on test and/or exam day, "after which the students must flush all this material out of their brain in order to make enough memory room for the next exam." The only work which seems to require the students to read published and unpublished materials critically and

use these to frame and/or inform their own work is the research project which most higher learning institutions require at the end of degree course. Hence, plagiarism seems inevitable in these projects, given a high level of academic writing required in a research work from students who have not been trained and/or required to write academic essays during their studies. It then seems that, as Rugira (2015) argues, students who are punished for plagiarizing may actually be victims of plagiarism.

The purpose

This paper aims to exhibit the causes of plagiarism and their implications for teaching, learning and research in academic environment.

Objectives

(i)   Enlighten the concept and practice of plagiarism in the academic environment

(ii)   To explore the reasons leading the students to practice plagiarism in the academic environment

(iii)   To analyze the appropriateness of mechanisms that higher institutions of learning use to address plagiarism in academic writing.

A critical review of related literature and discussion

In this section we briefly discuss what plagiarism is commonly taken to mean, which seems ambiguous, the reasons why students plagiarize and what needs to be done in order to help students get out of confusion about, and avoid, plagiarism.

Plagiarism: ambiguous definitions

The concept of plagiarism can be defined in various ways and includes various notions. Plagiarism is a noun derived from the verb "to plagiarize". The Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2010) conceptualizes "to plagiarize" as "to use another person's idea or part of their work and pretend that it is your own." Harris (2004) says that Plagiarism is using another person's words or ideas without giving credit to the other person while the Collins English Dictionary (2015) says that to plagiarize" is "to appropriate (ideas, passages, etc.) from another work or author. According to Louch (2016), in academia, "to plagiarize" is to utilize another person's words or ideas without proper credit. From all the above definitions, it is not clear whether plagiarism applies to printed works only or if it also applies to speech. Neither is it clear whether plagiarism takes place in academic settings only or can also be found in daily life. Plagiarism is mostly understood as "intention to deceive" which seems to spare non-intended plagiarism. But the issue here is how to know which plagiarism was intended and which was not. That is why the American Historical Association (AHA) has recently revised its definition of plagiarism and taken out all references to "intention to deceive" (Mooney, 2006). In a definition given by Standler (2000) there is no reference to intention to deceive. This author states that plagiarism is a "deliberate use of any outside source without proper acknowledgment" (p.43). 'Outside source' means any work, published or unpublished, by any person other than the student." Standler substantiates the understanding of this definition by mentioning the issue of self-plagiarization where a work (or part of it) presented for one class or event is presented in a second and different one by the same author. All the above explanations show that plagiarism is understood differently and acted upon as such. This is why Angelil-Carter (2000, p. 154) argues that "plagiarism needs to be

understood differently: it occurs at the intersection between a real difficulty of definition of the concept of plagiarism itself and the development of the student writer." Given the complex nature of the concept of plagiarism, it is largely contested. In fact, "definitions of plagiarism vary somewhat across the disciplines in accordance with differences in knowledge, authorship conventions and traditions"[1].Since plagiarism is viewed as a criminal offense, and its meaning is not straightforward, some students (or scholars) can be victimized wrongfully. That is why Angelil-Carter (2000) mentions some points worth reflecting on, in understanding real plagiarism and contesting some current trends about it.

The analysis of the above definitions and understandings of plagiarism leads to realizing that though plagiarism is criminal, in some instances students may be penalized while they are really innocent. After all, people tend to do things the way their predecessors did them. The current technology is also another element to consider when reflecting on "plagiarism" in its different paradigms. This is because the exchange of information is now possible on electronic networks and through global conference networks. Indeed, plagiarism in higher education seems to have been amplified by the usage of different kinds of electronic devices and the volume of content on the Web (Zrnec & Lavbic, 2017). However, such an exchange of information is not dealt with by old laws of copyright because they are not adequate to do so.

Another aspect that is worth considering while discussing plagiarism is the use of what is considered as common knowledge, which is not viewed as a case of plagiarism. In this regard, Angelil-Carter (2000, p. 157) notes that "the dividing line between what is common knowledge and what are the ideas attributable to first sources is difficult to discern". The situation is worse for students who are not familiar with the field and have limited knowledge of what they are writing about. In addition, what is considered as plagiarism in one context might constitute a proper use of sources in some other contexts. In such cases, plagiarism may not be an objective term (referring to a single precise concept irrespective of contexts), but something that can be interpreted depending on people's understanding.

Again, as noted by Jameson (1993), in Angelil-Carter (2000, p. 158), "there are genres which neither require nor permit citations, end notes, bibliographies, or other textual indicators". Speech itself does not give much opportunity for acknowledgement. Can we then say that plagiarism does not exist in these genres? If it exists, how can we detect it? Does plagiarism in these genres mean the same thing as in others? For instance, let us consider the following definitions: "in minor cases, it (plagiarism) can be the quotation of a sentence or two, without quotation marks and without a citation (for example footnote) to the true author" (Standler, 2000, p.5). "Plagiarism is taking of somebody's intellectual thoughts and putting them in your own work where you have not acknowledged them at all as coming from somewhere else and passing them off as yours" (Breen & Maassen, 2005). Ennam (2017) emphasizes the acknowledgement of sources of ideas used to support one's arguments even if these are paraphrased. The common element in these definitions (and in many others) is the absence of reference which serves as a gauging tool of plagiarism. Therefore, it is not clear how plagiarism will be understood in the abovementioned genres in light of these definitions. The situation becomes worse when

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[1]Retrieved from www.bioassess.edu.au on 15 July 2017.

genres differ within a discipline, regarding sourcing. For instance, the academic textbook needs to be in the author's words, but it is not documented as thorough as a scholarly journal article (Angelil-Carter, 2000).

Why do students plagiarize?

It has been mentioned above that plagiarism is an intellectual crime. Thus, there are penalties against people who commit it, and even some cases have been taken to court[2]. However, as stated by Angelil-Carter (2000), in spite of these penalties being stressed repeatedly, students continue to 'plagiarize' in their assignments. Nevertheless, Angelil-Carter goes on to say, this kind of plagiarism where there is real intention to deceive, though it occurs, is rare. Then, this calls the question why students plagiarize, if they do not usually intend to deceive.

In view of Cleary (2012), there are ten major reasons why students plagiarize. These are laziness, panic, lack of confidence, static knowledge, inability to integrate source materials into their own arguments, the failure to understand why sources are important, sloppiness, failure to understand how to deal with citations, novelty and familiarity to a collaborative work model. This theoretical explanation from Cleary (2012) pushes to understand that some students plagiarize unconsciously and unwillingly while others do it consciously and willingly. In this respect, Harris (2004) notes that many students plagiarize as a shortcut especially when they already feel overloaded with work. Such students, despite knowing that plagiarizing is bad, do it as a result of laziness or poor time management and planning skills. When given an assignment, they immediately run to the internet or library, copy and paste some works and submit. Others will not do the assignment until they have run out of time and cannot do it unless they copy other people's work. However, other students plagiarize due to genuine reasons such as the academic tradition, poor coaching/training and the absence of policies (Park, 2003).

It is commonly known that learning is a process and the academic discourse is not acquired overnight. Therefore, some students who are not familiar with the academic discourse, which is often in a foreign language, tend to write using the words of others. The distance between such students and the discourse might make their voices fall silent, leading to voiceless texts. In such cases, they end up reproducing other people's discourse and style, but unwillingly (Park, 2003).

Plagiarism can also occur as a result of the process of getting familiar with the new discourse. We can compare such a case to the errors that second language learners make in the target language, which errors are not taken as a sign of weaknesses, but as a sign of learning taking place (Lightbown & Spada, 1996). Thus, using other people's discourse should not always be seen as plagiarism that deserves punishment. In human development for example, some child's behaviors are tolerated and viewed as normal at a certain age. As the child matures, such behaviors disappear and if they remain, they are no longer tolerated (Carter, Briggs-Gowan & Davis, 2004). In the same way, such students need to be initiated into the academic discourse so as to be able to develop their original discourse. It is only when plagiarism becomes consistent after such initiation and mastery of scholarly skills that students should be punished. However, even this initiation will not start from

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[2]Retrieved from http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb, on 10 July 2017.

nothing; it will use other people's discourse as examples to reflect on. By the same token, many students need to borrow the style of authors to produce an academic paper as a result of the aforementioned imitation. Indeed, people have a tendency to imitate what best achievers have done in the process of learning from them (Cleveland & Jacobs, 1999). Again, this is not a case of deliberate plagiarism, but a result of the learning process.

Moreover, some students recall reading something whose author they do not remember and put it in their work without referencing it. Though this is identified as a case of plagiarism, there is no intention to deceive as Angelil-Carter (2000) notes. The argument is that if the idea can contribute to the work and benefit readers, there should be no harm putting it in the work albeit the lack of reference. Unfortunately, people do not consider such contexts in tracking plagiarism. Thus, as Standler (2000, p.7) notes, "the intent of a plagiarist is irrelevant. The act of quoting a material without including the indicia of a quotation is sufficient to convict someone of plagiarism." In other words, plagiarism is plagiarism, whether intended or not.

It should be noted that the authority of some lecturers and key theorists at universities constrain students by requiring them to write the way they (lecturers) want (Mary & Brian, 1998).This therefore does not encourage students to interpret academic discourses, but replicate them due to the fear of producing something unacceptable. Thus, while the academic discourse extends, it seems fixed and rigid for new students (Hebb, 2002). In such a case, students think that they have to write in conformity with this discourse and when they think they can change and own it, they are unable to do it because it (discourse) is distant from them. Others avoid putting the author's ideas in their own words, lest they distort them.

One other important element worth mentioning is that human beings are social products and bring their social backgrounds into the classroom (Heath, 1983; Bandura, 2001). Therefore, our previous discourses influence the way we deal with new (academic) discourses. For instance, the religious discourse hardly tolerates interpretation of scriptures (Lirong& Siyu, 2016). Thus, a student who is very religious might reproduce the ideas of the author because for him/her, interpreting is something unusual or even forbidden. In some other cultures, memorization is seen as a mark of an educated person. Students from such cultures might apply these beliefs to the academic discourse. Again, students understand knowledge as facts before joining university, thus not seeing any reason to compare, contrast, rephrase or synthesize it (Cuseo, 2003). How can you rephrase a fact unless you contradict it? The solutions to such problems include an intensive teaching to these students to overcome these previous understandings that conflict with the new ways.

What should be done?

It is no doubt that plagiarism does exist; and is an intellectual crime. However, the concept needs further unpacking to clearly define the concept of plagiarism to all students, teachers and lecturers. Emphasis should also be placed on why referencing is important in an academic work, and why plagiarism is bad. Concerning the reason why plagiarism is bad especially in academic settings, Standler (2000, p.5) notes that: a fundamental goal of education is to produce students who can evaluate ideas – both analysis and synthesis – and who can produce significant original thoughts. Therefore, submitting a plagiarized paper – in addition to the wrongful conduct – does not demonstrate the level of understanding and skills that an educated person is reasonably expected to have. This means that people who

have plagiarism as a way to do things cannot contribute to knowledge, since the only thing they do is reproducing what other people have done. Plagiarism impedes creativity and originality, which are essential elements in the academic world.

We concur with Standler's (2000, p.5) view that "reputations in academia are made on the basis of creating new knowledge: discoveries of new facts, new ways of looking at previously known facts, original analysis of old ideas." Thus, students need to show that they are building on existing knowledge; there is no other way to show that, but referencing. Again, scholars are expected to increase universal knowledge, which is done based on what is already available. In addition, referencing helps students to show that they have a clear understanding of the material they have read, that they refer to their sources to support the ideas they have developed and to distinguish their analysis of what they have read from the author's analyses. When students cite a source, they are using experts' ideas as proof or evidence of a new idea that they are trying to communicate to the reader.[3]

Students who plagiarize because of laziness and poor time management and planning skills need to be encouraged to overcome these vices. They need to know that people are credited because of what they have done and that the purpose of the course is to learn and develop skills and not just "get through" (Harris, 2004). Those who might plagiarize unwillingly need to be assisted in developing academic discourse skills. They must be helped to enhance their comprehension, rephrasing, summarizing and paraphrasing abilities. Students should practice these skills sufficiently before they are assessed on the same. For instance, students can analyze each other's work and explain why they think it is the way it is in terms of referencing. Those whose texts seem plagiarized will explain why they 'plagiarized' and let their colleagues ask them questions. This peaceful climate will allow students to be openly express their views about plagiarism. Furthermore, students need to be initiated into recognizing multiple voices in texts. Lecturers must also help students to distinguish between plagiarized texts and well referenced ones. This can be done through a systematic analysis of samples of different types of texts in class. Teachers also have to teach students how to reference their work properly because, as has been previously noted, many incidents of plagiarism result from ignorance rather than intentional cheating (Breen & Maassen, 2005).

The management of higher learning institutions is also called to take the lead in (i) examining particular or primary reasons for plagiarism among their students (Devlin & Gray, 2007) and (ii) interpreting plagiarism in academic work and assessment (Yeo, 2007; Hu & Lei, 2012). In addition, there is a need for more opportunities to increase the university students' level of awareness about plagiarism (Ramzan, et al. 2012) and advising students on using anti-plagiarism software such as Turnitin to detect plagiarism in their papers before submission (Batane, 2010).

Conclusion

This paper has made a thorough discussion that has shown that plagiarism is more complex than the way it is commonly understood. While higher learning institutions have put anti-plagiarism policies in place, these have

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[3] Retrieved from http://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/plagiarism/, accessed on 13 September 2017.

achieved little in reducing plagiarism incidences especially because they are more reactive than proactive. Thus, one of the workable solutions would be borrowed from Emenalo (2016) who proposes that higher education institutions should reinforce the teaching of research method and academic discourse and related rules and regulations. In other words, there is a need to explain to students and lecturers what plagiarism really is and what it is not. Their academic writing skills also need to be improved, which will allow them refine their critical thinking skills. Students and other researchers would then know that there are many other ways of saying what other authors said, which will ease the process of putting the author's ideas in their own words and adequately cite texts borrowed from other sources. The use of technology in detecting plagiarism among students' works should also be used especially by the students themselves to check the level of plagiarism in their works. To put in a nutshell, before students are judged and punished for plagiarism, they need to be equipped with the necessary knowledge about plagiarism and how to avoid it such that any plagiarism in their texts is deliberate.

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