Debate

Understanding Plagiarism

Issue: Do some claims of plagiarism go too far?

Plagiarism, or copying somebody else's written work and passing it off as one's own, can spell academic doom for students and reputational damage for professionals. Most everyone would agree that plagiarizing somebody's work and passing it off as one's own is clearly wrong and should be punished. However, not everyone is clear about the definition of plagiarism. Copying large amounts of somebody else's work without citing him or her may be plagiarism, but what about using their research questions to develop your own study? Is it plagiarism if two papers have nearly identical sources—even if they do not use identical language?

A BBC News report cited a study estimating that 1 percent of papers published in academic journals closely resemble work that has already been published, suggesting the possibility of plagiarism. Much of the ambiguity surrounding this topic comes from the fact that plagiarism is complicated. Passing someone else's work off as one's own, improperly citing another's work, or using information from your past work without citing it can all qualify as plagiarism.

Today many academic institutions and journals use software such as Turnitin to try and detect plagiarism. Turnitin is designed to detect cases of overlap or similar word usage among academic works. However, someone experienced with the subject matter needs to be able to interpret the results of a Turnitin report. For example, a theoretical article attempting to make an additional contribution to knowledge might have as much as a 30 percent overlap, but that overlap should be referenced and documented. Sometimes Turnitin picks up phrases that are in common usage and may not constitute plagiarism. On the other hand, as little as a 10 percent overlap may indicate that a person copied material directly from another source.

Even paraphrasing from a source such as Wikipedia can be problematic without citation. While most people believe that information on Wikipedia is acceptable to use because it is public domain, public domain sources on the Internet must still be cited. Perhaps it is not surprising that 1 percent of papers published in academic journals are strikingly similar to those published previously.

This leads to the question of whether the definition of plagiarism goes too far. Many will argue that while there should certainly be consequences for overt cases of plagiarism, academic work tends to be based on or inspired by the work of others. Additionally, it is common for academics in a certain field to cite works from experts in their field; therefore, it is not surprising when academic works have similar sources and ideas.

Others take issue with the concept of auto-plagiarism, or plagiarizing one's own work. If they wrote the original work, then why should they not have the ability to use information or text from it as they please? There are also different degrees and types of plagiarism. Some plagiarism, for instance, occurs accidentally. Should these be punished as harshly as those who deliberately pass others' works off as their own?

Another challenge is sufficiently teaching students about what constitutes plagiarism. Most students are not aware of the nuances of the definition. Instead, they think plagiarism is simply copying something verbatim without

appropriate citation. All of these complexities can lead to even the most well-known people falling into the plagiarism trap. For instance, in the early nineties a committee found that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had used concepts, sentences, and passages in his doctoral dissertation that were not cited correctly. If such a well-respected figure was unable to avoid claims of plagiarism, is the wide-ranging definition of plagiarism so encompassing that it makes it nearly impossible not to plagiarize when writing?

On the other hand, others believe that a wide-scale definition of plagiarism is necessary to assure the authenticity of original works. They believe anything less would infringe on the original author's intellectual property and creative contribution. According to this view, even auto-plagiarism can be damaging because you are misrepresenting the fact that your ideas are totally original.

Additionally, most cases of plagiarism that draw scrutiny are those who plagiarize overtly, such as copying something verbatim and passing it off as your own. This type of plagiarism is what professors are especially concerned over and is quite common in academic settings among students. Therefore, accidental plagiarism or incorrectly citing a source will likely not be criticized or penalized as much as overt plagiarism. Finally, supporters believe that it is the student's responsibility to know what constitutes plagiarism, and schools should spend more time educating both students and faculty about what is and is not acceptable practice when developing their works.

There are two sides to every issue:

1. The definition of plagiarism is so encompassing that it makes it nearly impossible not to plagiarize in some form.

2. The definition of plagiarism is necessarily broad to ensure author authenticity and to protect the original works of others.

Sources

Colby College, Bates College, and Bowdoin College, "Plagiarism Resource Site," http://abacus.bates.edu/cbb/quiz/intro/types.html (accessed September 3, 2015).

Robert Creutz, "Self-Plagiarism: Is It Really Plagiarism?" *iThenticate,* December 1, 2010, http://www.ithenticate.com/plagiarism-detection-blog/bid/52948/Self-Plagiarism-Is-it-Really-Plagiarism#.VeibPvlVhBd (accessed September 3, 2015).

Kate Dailey, "Fareed Zakaria and the Plagiarism Debate," *BBC News Magazine,* August 14, 2012, http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-19249057 (accessed September 3, 2015).

Anthony De Palma, "Plagiarism Seen by Scholars in King's Ph.D. Dissertation," *The New York Times,* November 10, 1990, http://www.nytimes.com/1990/11/10/us/plagiarism-seen-by-scholars-in-king-s-phd-dissertation.html (accessed September 3, 2015).

Grand Canyon University, "Turnitin FAQ's," http://www.gcu.edu/Academics/Academic-Integrity/About-Turnitin/Turnitin-FAQs.php (accessed September 3, 2015).

Philip J. Hilts, "When Does Duplication of Words Become Theft?" *The New York Times,* March 29, 1993, http://www.nytimes.com/1993/03/29/us/when-does-duplication-of-words-become-theft.html (accessed September 3, 2015).

Brian Martin, "Plagiarism: A Misplaced Emphasis," *Journal of Information Ethic* 3, 2 (Fall 1994): 36-47.

Steve Myers, "Experts Look for the Line Between Unconscious and Deliberate Plagiarism," *Poynter,* January 10, 2012, http://www.poynter.org/news/mediawire/158898/experts-look-for-the-line-between-unconscious-and-deliberate-plagiarism/ (accessed September 3, 2015).

Turnitin, "Aiming for Integrity: How well do you know plagiarism?" http://turnitin.com/assets/en_us/media/plagiarism-quiz/ (accessed September 3, 2015).