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Plagiarism avoidance in academic submissions

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The purpose of this paper is to provide undergraduate students with an introductory resource focusing on plagiarism avoidance. It sets out to identify often confusing associated nuances. From the perspective of paraphrasing, the requirements attaching to the necessary provision of proper citations are explored. The paper concludes by pondering the topic of reliability of sources.

Phil Cully

Introduction

Plagiarism, unacceptable in academic work, is defined in one dictionary (Patterson & Dougall) as: 'The act of plagiarizing; the crime of literary theft', while a plagiarist is defined as: 'One that steals or purloins the words or ideas of another and passes them off as his own; a literary thief.'

Against the ethos of education and criminal in its extremes, (Flanagan v. UCD, 1988) anecdotal evidence generally suggests that plagiarism in academia is commonplace and has been for some time. This opinion was reinforced by Carroll & Appleton, (2001, p. 6) quoting figures from research carried out in the USA by Fly et. al. in 1997:

15% of a group of US psychology students claimed that they had cheated in one way or another. 29% of a group of US medical students surveyed by Coverdale and Henning (2000) admitted falsifying references and 17% had submitted material copied from previous year's papers.

It is not the intention of this paper to investigate the levels of abuse in Irish Educational Institutions, but rather, accepting that the problem exists, to review the nature of the problem and outline how it can be avoided.

Plagiarism – what constitutes it?

While plagiarism can occur in a number of formats, with the evident level of dishonesty applying to each appearing to vary, none are acceptable. In their article 'What is plagiarism', iParadigms list six points to identify the various forms (iParadigms, 2013) which are broadly represented by the following:

- Submitting the work of another as your own.
- Using the words or ideas of another without affording credit.
- Not enclosing direct quotations in quotation marks
- Misdirection regarding the source of information being cited.
- Copying sections and changing individual words while utilizing the sentence structure and therefore the thought process associated with the original work.
- Excessive use of source wording even when providing proper citation; not enough originality.

Patchwork plagiarism

The term patchwork plagiarism refers to a practice of taking information from a number of sources and patching it together. Setting aside the legal implications, it has been suggested (Keck, 2006, p. 262; Neville, 2010) that such patchwork may be considered vaguely acceptable by some academics from the perspective of transitional development of writing styles. It is the opinion of the author however that such a view could only possibly be contemplated subject to both of the following caveats:

1. In the very early transition phase from established rote learning techniques to an ability to display depth of understanding of a topic, as is expected at tertiary level education.
2. The work is not being placed in the public domain.

It is the author's opinion that such practice could be viewed as exploitation of the fair use exception. It is therefore highly questionable and not to be cultivated long-term. Otherwise, the work of the 'patchwork plagiarist' (University of Pennsylvania) is unacceptable without exception.

Avoidance of all forms of plagiarism as listed above can be reasonably assured by proper and extensive use of paraphrasing coupled with succinct citation of reliable sources. Accepting that one is not expected to pose one's own unsupported opinions at undergraduate level, then extensive use of cited works in such a manner presents positively as scholarly work supported by extensive literature review.

Works covered

Copyright, 'the rights given to authors/creators of certain categories of work' (Irish Patents Office, 2013), applies not only to the written word, but also to such works as pictures, charts, tables and other such work. Furthermore, it does not matter whether or not the author claims copyright in the work, the work is automatically the legal property of the author or their assignee and therefore must be properly acknowledged if used.

Impact of Information Technology

In light of the current level of Information Technology use and more specifically accessibility and use of the World Wide Web, there is little doubt that the opportunity to plagiarize has never before been as effortless. In an article in the Irish Times, Connolly (1997) presented how, at the time, the potential plagiarist's scope to access existing works had increased dramatically with the increasing popularity and accessibility of the World Wide Web.

Implications

Apart from the moral issues associated with claiming the work of another as one's own, there is also the question of monetary value which may attach to such work. The scope of this issue is not always immediately apparent since much less conspicuous particulars may pertain.

Academic

The implications of plagiarism for the academic community are far reaching. The perceived worth of an academic qualification hinges on the belief that such a qualification requires a predetermined level of input on behalf of the recipient in order to be conferred with such. If plagiarism is allowed to become the norm rather than the exception among the student populace of any course, then the perceived worth of any qualification to be bestowed can be adversely affected.

Legal

Intellectual property in Ireland enjoys the protection of copyright law and currently comes under the terms of the Intellectual Property [Miscellaneous Provisions] Act (Government of Ireland, 1998) and the subsequent Copyright and Related Rights Act (Government of Ireland, 2000). As previously stated, plagiarism is stealing and as such equates in law to the theft of another's actual physical property. As with any other theft the level of exploitation involved will have a bearing on the applicable penalties.

Fair Use

Fair use is a term applying to *limited use*¹ of the work of another devoid of proper referencing. It attains only limited acceptability and then only where no potential monetary gain is involved; typically within an educational setting.

In the production of a publication of actual monetary value, breaching the 'fair use' proviso would have obvious financial implications for the owner of the intellectual property. However, in the case of a student stretching the 'fair use' qualification excessively, there are also questions applying to such personal gain as may be derived from such use of another's works, i.e. the benefits gained from the qualification conferred. The boundaries are not

¹ The term "limited use" is not clearly defined so if in doubt, cite!

clearly delineated and plagiarism in the attainment of an academic qualification can be retrospectively penalizing.

Internationally in recent years a number of high profile cases have been reported of individuals who, having achieved high levels of career success, subsequently lost both academic accolade and employment (Pidd, 2011; Guardian, 2012; Scally, 2013).

Avoidance

As previously stated, avoidance of all forms of plagiarism can be assured simply by the extensive use of paraphrasing coupled with complete and proper referencing of reliable sources.

Paraphrasing

Throughout one's academic and working life it may be necessary to present information which might be regarded as generally known fact and so such information can be found in many works. In the reiteration of such information as found in the work of another, it is of the utmost importance that copy and paste is avoided. Paraphrasing provides the most appropriate method of presenting such words and ideas of another in one's own compilation.

Paraphrasing refers to the presentation of the substance of information, as found in the work of another, in one's own words. It is not acceptable to merely copy the wording and change part or parts of it. Proper paraphrasing requires consideration of the essence of what is being said and the rewording of such in one's own words (Turabian, 2010, pp. 100-101). This requires a depth of comprehension of the minute idiosyncrasies that apply. It should be noted that paraphrased work requires the same citation as direct quotations.

Referencing

Referencing involves placing markers throughout the document text, each of which relates to a list of complete entries listed at the rear of the document. Such a list is expected to give the reader full details relating to source documents used in the formulation of ideas in the production of a manuscript.

Why Reference?

Proper referencing is important for several reasons including:

1. It provides supporting evidence that the information being presented is fact.

2. It ensures that credit for work is afforded to the actual author.
3. It provides proof of research having been carried out in the preparation of one's work.
4. It guards against plagiarism.

Referencing style

A number of different methods will be encountered when researching the work of others, the choice of which may have come down to individual preference. However, for the production of an academic submission the decision is often dictated by college, programme or module requirements.

Regardless of the style used, there are commonalities that must be adhered to:

1. Details must be complete.
2. There must be no confusion as to which passage is being referenced.
3. The style chosen should be used systematically throughout.

Author, Date styles

In-text citations can take different formats but the type required of academic submissions is regularly that of the (Author, date) style. The inclusion of page numbers is also commonly considered helpful. Two of the main style types in this format are the Harvard style and the American Psychological Association (APA) style. While Hartley (2008, p. 57) refers to both as being the same, there are distinct differences in the formatting and punctuation of their respective listings and care is necessary to ensure constant conformity to that chosen.

Regardless of which style is used, an in-text citation may be entered in a number of ways (Gillett, Hammond, & Martala, 2010, p. 185) as follows:

The following example utilizes the standard format of insertion of the full citation detail within parentheses including (Author, Date, Page number):

The ... style was adapted from the Chicago style which had been in use from c. 1906.
(Anderson & Poole, 2001, p. 136)

In the following example the name of the author is removed from within the parentheses as it is incorporated into the sentence:

Anderson and Poole (2001, p. 136) stated that the ... style was an adaptation of the Chicago style which had been in use from c. 1906.

Works Cited or List of References

To complete the citation requirements, all citations appearing within the body of the text must relate to a full listing at the rear usually called either a List of Citations or List of References. The content and formatting of such listings is required to follow a concise predetermined set of criteria. Listed alphabetically by author's surname each entry must include, if available: author's surname, first name, date, document title, city of publication, publisher.

In the case of an online resource, extra information in the form of a Uniform Resource Locator (URL) is also required coupled with the date it was last accessed (Creme & Lea, 2008, p. 113).

Customized software

To aid the process of formatting citations, a variety of software is available. One such tool is the inbuilt referencing tool incorporated into Microsoft Word[®]. This tool provides for the selection of various styles and provides prompted data entry fields which, when populated, provide automatic formatting of both the in-text citation and the List of Citations at the rear; most useful.

Information Sources

The sources of available information are varied and may be either electronic or hardcopy. Regardless of the media used, from the perspective of academic research, the same prerequisites apply regarding the necessary verification of its reliability (Redman & Maples, 2011, pp. 50-56).

Online Information

Anderson & Poole (1998, p. 62) pointed out that confidence in the reliability of the content of the World Wide Web was generally low owing to the fact of it being largely unregulated, transient and a source of much nonsense. Since the same holds true today, care must be taken to extensively scrutinize such potential sources before inclusion in an academic paper.

Not to be confused with such highly reliable sources as controlled online peer-reviewed journals, websites found by general search engine exploration can be produced by diverse entities with very different driving forces. Many websites are commercially sponsored, with a vested interest in projecting the belief that their products are the best

available; others may be the fabrication of a bigot, portraying what may be described as a distorted viewpoint.

Journals

Journals present peer reviewed information on focused topics that have been extensively researched. The regularity of their publication ensures currency while the inclusion of extensive citations affords a high level of confidence in accuracy of content. Through college subscription, students are provided with free access to many journals, in both electronic and hardcopy format.

Textbooks

Text books are normally considered a fairly reliable source of background information but it should be borne in mind that the information may be biased by personal opinions of the author. To ensure a balanced viewpoint is developed, research of the writings of more than one author is advisable.

Source Classification

Sources are generally classified as primary, secondary and even tertiary, if really thorough.

Primary

Primary sources provide first hand, original information and include surveys, interviews and peer reviewed journal articles.

Secondary

Secondary sources, are typically 'materials that discuss, explain, interpret, and analyze' (North Central College, 2008) information emanating from primary sources; textbooks are included in this classification. While not necessarily less reliable, secondary sources have the potential to be so, due to the possibility of misinterpretation and subsequent misrepresentation. An advantage of secondary sources is that they present detailed explanations of the information being offered, which, especially at undergraduate level, can be easier to interpret.

Tertiary

The difference between secondary and tertiary is often subjective and can therefore be the cause of confusion for the inexperienced. This category typically refers to such works as directories and encyclopaedias where no attempt is made to give personal viewpoints.

Reliability

While an abundance of sources of reference material are readily available, in a multitude of formats, not all are equally reliable. In order to produce a solid academic paper, one of the essential talents that require nurturing is the ability to evaluate the trustworthiness of sources. In order for a source to be classed as reliable a number of criteria need to be met and therefore typically the following questions should be posed:

- What is the reason for the publication? – Whether the author is impartial or biased.
- What are the credentials of the author? – Qualifications.
- Does the author have something to gain? – Possibly financial or other.
- How continuously accessible is the publication? – Web pages and URL's change.
- How well referenced is the publication? – Amount of research done.

If web based:

- Is the publisher reliable? – the three letter domain code of a website Uniform Research Locator (URL) can give an indication of the type and point of the site e.g.:
 - .edu – indicates an educational site
 - .gov – associated with a government
 - .org – typically a non-profit organization
- How was the site found? – Whether through a search engine or a known database repository; refer to online information section, above.

Data presented on websites of Educational Institutions can generally be relied upon to be sound. Likewise much of what is found on Government sites is factually based but, depending on the topic being presented, it may in some cases be politically biased. It might be considered reasonable to expect that a non-profit organization would have nothing to gain from presentation of dubious information but such is not always the case as information may be presented in a distorted manner in order to support a viewpoint (Shields, 2010, p. 63).

Summary

From the perspective of plagiarism avoidance, the importance of the proper use of paraphrasing was explored. While not attempting to cover the topic of citation methodologies in depth, the requirement to provide proper citations was introduced. The concepts of source type and classification have been reviewed culminating in the ponderance of their potential reliability.

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