# Higher Education’s role in Academic Dishonesty: Plagiarism as an (Artificial) Moral Panic

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## Introduction

Especially in a digitally ubiquitous age, a great deal of academia’s attention has been placed on the phenomenon of plagiarism and other transgressions against “academic integrity.” As higher education has become increasingly digitally integrated, student culture’s acceptance of plagiaristic practices and instructors’ fears of them have increased (Mills-Sen, 2015). Such practices are rebuked by academia with strong moral language. But upon further review plagiarism in academia is not only not the moral issue it’s made out to be, educational delivery systems themselves are instrumental in cultivating plagiaristic behavior.

## Academic Integrity as a Concept

The concept of academic integrity is ever-present in university policy and pedagogy. The word “integrity” itself derives from the latin “integer,” or “integritas”, suggesting a meaning of “whole or entire” (MacFarlane, Zhang, & Pun, 2014). A working definition some scholars use is that academic integrity means understanding what it means to be honest within the particular context of academic achievement (Lofstrom, Trotman, Furnari, & Shepard, 2014). As such, it is something of a catch-all phrase which is meant to cover everything from blatant copying to more subtle manipulation of research data.

Academic integrity is emphasized by scholars of academia as a foundational virtue, upon which the value and substance of the entire academic profession rests. The validity and worth of new ideas, theories, experiments, and their subsequent confirmations or denials all rest on ethical integrity (Soroya, Hashmi, & Soroya, 2016). When research, theory, and arguments do not rest on this ethical foundation then the fruits of learning are polluted.

Clearly, academic integrity is a patently *moral* concept. This is reflected somewhat plainly in how theorists describe its importance, but it is also reflected in how the importance of academic integrity is communicated in learning institutions. And this is the first problem with academic integrity—like many other novel moral concepts, it is wrought with subjective interpretations and a lack of uniform understanding among those who are supposed to be enforcing it. Research into the teaching of academic integrity has shown substantial disagreement on *how* it should be taught, whether or not it is even teachable, and even what it is (Lofstrom, Trotman, Furnari, & Shepard, 2014).

## Cheating versus Plagiarism: Blurred lines and missed Distinctions

Nor are scholars are agreed on definitions of certain “academically dishonest” activities. The two main buzzwords (“cheating” and plagiarism”) are viewed at varying levels of convergence and divergence by instructors and academicians (Flint, Clegg, & MacDonald, 2006). Copying the answers for a test from a peer has been viewed both as cheating and as plagiarism, as has falsifying research data, as has purchasing papers, as has collaborating with other students when the assignment called for individual production.

This conflation is unfortunate since plagiarism *does* have a very specific meaning. As Professor Russell Hunt (2005) points out,

As everybody in academia knows, plagiarism involves taking an utterance which you didn't originally utter, and, without acknowledging that it's not your own original invention, allowing or inviting others to attribute it to you. The OED's first definition is "the wrongful appropriation or purloining, and publication as one's own, of the ideas, or the expression of the ideas (literary, artistic, musical, mechanical, etc.) of another." (para 7).

Plagiarism—rather than “cheating”—is what academic institutions seem most concerned about, and scholarly literature about plagiarism and academic integrity has multiplied almost exponentially with the Internet age (Macfarlane, Zhang, and Pun, 2014). With the rise of the Internet age, there is a surplus of information which can be easily taken and used without proper attribution (Eret & Ok, 2014). Plagiarism is a much lower-risk proposition than leaning over to copy a peer’s paper while the instructor is supervising an exam.

But plagiarism is very much distinguishable from “cheating” because it doesn’t, as a term or rule, preclude innocent mistakes. While a student can hardly “accidentally” lean over to copy a peer’s exam answers or pay a peer to copy their paper, it’s perfectly conceivable that nothing other than an inferior grasp of the peculiar and highly technical citation conventions used in academia could be the catalyst for plagiarism. So while academic integrity is clearly a moral concept and while plagiarism clearly falls under the umbrella of academic integrity, it is not common for institutions to *care* why or how plagiarism occurred. To take one example, the prestigious Duke University’s academic integrity department distinguishes operationally between intentional and unintentional plagiarism, but does not *morally* distinguish between them (Avoiding plagiarism, nd). Even among scholars who study plagiarism, there is an unwillingness to distinguish between intentional and unintentional plagiarism (e.g. Flint, Clegg, and McDonald 2006; Perry, 2010; Robinson 2014).

Clearly, this is a problem. In most bodies of law (we suppose that academic policies, codes of conduct, etc. are, though not civilly binding, at least *faux*-laws) *whether or not someone meant to do what they did* plays an instrumental role in determining whether or not they broke the law, or which law they broke. The chasm between (for instance) killing someone while sleep-walking, or through an industrial accident, and premeditated murder is vast. These are *different* actions with different moral content.

We of course imagine that in practice, if not in policy or research, an academic institution would take into consideration whether or not a student meant to plagiarize. The point of discussing higher education’s failure to morally distinguish between intentional and unintentional plagiarism is not to suggest that students are being kicked out of universities for making a truly innocent and inadvertent mistake. The point is that this failure of academia policies and theorists to so distinguish is evidence of how poorly developed and communicated their moral standards for academic integrity *are*; we also want to introduce the idea that “anti-plagiarism,” though a sentiment which *might* be valid, certainly isn’t explained or proposed with any moral clarity by the moral custodians of academic integrity.

## Plagiarism as a Moral Panic

Academia appears to have committed to and entrenched itself in the dogma that “plagiarism is bad” to such a degree that it’s actually forgotten why scholars bother to cite their sources in the first place. Professor Russell Hunt (2002) has written a series of different articles bemoaning higher education’s relative obliviousness on this point. Hunt argues that there is a subtle but nevertheless profound difference between academic integrity in the realm of professional scholars and academic integrity in the realm of students. Scholars, he argues, cite sources correctly and practice the conventions of academic integrity for a variety of *positive* reasons: they are announcing their scholarly allegiances, they are acknowledging the extant progress of the scholarly discourse, they are *genuinely contributing* to that progress, and so on. On the other hand, students who don’t plagiarize aren’t achieving anything positive at all, they’re simply “avoiding something negative” (para 45).

The moral imperative placed on students to practice academic integrity is just a negative precept. Students are not learning *to* participate in a scholarly discourse, they’re learning *not* to fail to cite sources, *not* to cheat, and so on. Are these valuable lessons? Maybe, but they’re morally primitive and unsustainable, and they certainly shouldn’t be at the *forefront* of student life. In principle they’re not any different from a parent who tells their five year old to stay out of the cookie jar “because I said so.” As moral maturity sets in and industriousness develops (in the case of adult learners, this has already happened—or at least it’s much further developed than it is in a five year old) the threat of fear becomes a less sustainable deterrent, because the only thing maintaining academic integrity among students is “not wanting to get caught.” So is it any surprise that as technology has progressed, various forms of academic “dis-integrity” have manifested? The risk of “getting caught” is decreasing, so of course students who previously didn’t plagiarize simply because they didn’t want to get caught are going to reconsider their decision.

At a policy level, academic integrity’s communicated value isn’t commensurate to its actual purpose. The *reasons* that scholars cite sources have nothing to do with following the absolute moral edicts of learning institutions:

[Scholars] use citations for many things: they establish their own *bona fides* and currency, they advertise their allegiances, they bring the work of others to the attention of their readers, they assert ties of collegiality, they exemplify contending positions or define nuances of difference among competing theories or ideas. They do *not* use them to defend themselves against allegations of plagiarism. (para 44, *emphasis* original)

Students are told to cite their sources because if they don’t, they’ll be expelled. Now true enough, if a scholar in the professional-academic world perpetrates some serious fraud, he can expect to be taunted out of his profession. So this isn’t to say that consequences for plagiarism are out of bounds. It’s to say that the consequences are Draconian and tyrannical *because they lack any positive justification*. They’re little more than an *ipse dixit*.

And it’s hardly consistent with the goal of higher education and the *ethos* of intellectual advancement to have academic activity rest on a foundation of secular moral command. Mixed messages are sent when an environment whose goal it is to cultivate intellectual advancement, critical thinking, non-normativity, etc. confines the pursuit of those goals squarely within an unjustified but absolute moral assumption. This tension may often go un-explicated but it is there and the fact that plagiarism has certainly not subsided *despite* the continued efforts and warnings of instructors shows that it is becoming more and more punctuated.

And what’s lost by not positively justifying the importance of citing sources is actual learning. Instead of students being taught about the virtues of learning, about the intellectual excellence of scholarly discourse, and instead of learning to value the pursuit and accumulation of knowledge, student emphasis is re-directed and re-focused—by instructors and their institutions—on negative moral imperatives based in secular authority, not reason. Plagiarism becomes a moral panic, something for which one can pay the ultimate price, and student learning occurs under the weight of that panic, where journals, periodicals, and reference material are approached as though they were delicate explosives which could detonate if mishandled. Rather than being encouraged to excitedly pursue the findings of those already established in their fields as a vehicle for their own intellectual advancement, students are *warned* not to mishandle whatever they learn. What’s being learned isn’t how to be a scholar, how to write, how to form an argument, but just how to avoid being expelled.

## Educational Delivery as Empowering Plagiarism

As is often the case when an institution has an enduring but poorly articulated or developed disgust of something, higher education has failed to be introspective and and thus failed to realize that its very infrastructure and delivery methods not only *don’t deter* but *positively empower and encourage* plagiaristic behavior. In an illuminative study, Pabian (2014) pointed out what seems obvious if one only stops to think about it: instructional methods *teach* students how to plagiarize. Pabian argues that plagiarism is not a *deviation* from academic norms, but is *integral* to the educational process which “revolve[es] around replication of authoritative knowledge” (p. 818). Instructors advise students to “copy down” what is on the board, to “remember what is said,” and as technology is progressed they (the students) are sometimes provided with authoritative notes without even having to make an *effort* to copy them down. Exams are often delivered with close-ended questions or multiple choice answers, all of which carry the expectation that students would “provide the ‘correct’ answers as pre-defined by the examiners” (p. 815). The very way in which knowledge is communicated to students in a university indispensably depends on a student’s ability to copy down and then repeat what they are told without care for attributing a source.

And that’s how it *should* be, shouldn’t it? Implied in the very *idea* of education and learning is that it is possible to master a discipline, and that the masters of disciplines (i.e., instructors) are authorities whose ideas should, at the very least, be taken seriously and used as premises for further investigation. In other words, there’s not really a way *to* learn that doesn’t involve going to someone who knows more and (at least to start), simply *copying and* *repeating* the knowledge they have and that the student lacks.

So for all intents and purposes, “going to class” is materially the same as plagiarism. Only if a student *avoids* class and *doesn’t* read their text book and *ignores* instruction are they going to be able to avoid copying down and repeating what they’re told. But of course if they don’t go to class, if they don’t read their textbook, and if they just go with whatever they think is right without regard for what the established authorities in their discipline have to say, they’re not *learning* anything. And they’re certainly not “getting their money’s worth” out of their tuition. If they go to class, they’re only going to actually *learn* if they “plagiarize” their professor. The tensions mentioned earlier viz. the moral absolutism of anti-plagiarism policies guiding the accumulation of liberal knowledge pale in comparison to the tensions posed by comparing plagiarism to university learning.

## Revisiting Plagiarism

Given these tensions, there is a need to revisit plagiarism. There is a need to figure out not just *when* it’s wrong, but *if* and *why* it’s wrong. This is the discussion which should be occurring before academic institutions develop policies to punish it, before instructors develop strategies to avoid it, and before students fall into anxious heaps trying not to anxiously commit it.

Intuitively, plagiarism “seems wrong.” We tend to conflate it with academic dishonesty, with laziness, and with ethical laxness. To challenge that view and test its validity, it makes sense to understand *why* plagiarism happens when it does. The reasons are multiple and varied. Research has found that some reasons are biological; men plagiarize more than women because they’re more likely to be driven by a desire to outperform; age also plays a factor, with older students being less likely to plagiarize, a fact which might be explained in part by having accumulated more knowledge and expertise; now, independent of age, gender, and other intrinsic factors there are also environmental influences, and these are the strongest predictors of plagiarism—students were more likely to plagiarize if they had time constraints, conflicting deadlines, and overloaded course requirements (Eret & Ok, 2014). Equally instructive might be considering what reasons *don’t* influence plagiarism. An awareness of proper writing and citation conventions has been found to be a non-factor in the decision to plagiarize, as has parental education level (Eret & Ok, 2014). What this all suggests is that if a student *does* plagiarize, it is out of a desire for success, sometimes mediated by extrinsic factors like deadlines or being over-burdened which might impede that goal.

Hunt (2005) argued that academia places too much of an emphasis on grades and certificates, and not enough emphasis on the actual learning process. As a result, students are focused on turning in “a good paper” above all. Student motivations for plagiarism would support that argument. Also supporting this argument would be the reasons that student’s *refrain* from plagiarizing. Students who don’t plagiarize are not motivated by a love of learning or an appreciation for academic honesty, but by a fear of getting caught (Robinson & Glanzer, 2017). Students who plagiarize are not, *carte blanche*, morally disreputable manipulators. They’re just trying to give instructors what they’ve asked for and they’re doing it in the way they’ve been trained to. Repeating what they’ve heard from a source more reputable than them.

This is all to say that plagiarism is *goal oriented*. In any other industry it would be called *creative problem solving*. Most students are not going to become professional scholars; they’re going to go into some line of business or another. When they do, they’ll be given different tasks by their managers. If they need a human resources policy manual written, they’re going to delegate it to a technical writing firm; if they need a written report on something or another and they have fires to put out elsewhere, they’re going to delegate that, too. Only in academia is it *frowned upon* to do this.

And even in professional academia, it’s only a pragmatic problem. The pragmatic problem is that if professional academics were to abandon all anti-plagiarism controls and cease citing sources, the *industry* would collapse because the “trail of idea generation” would be lost. No one would know where any ideas came from and as a result, all academics would be in professional parity, with references to orthodoxy lost, with conference invitations being sent out indiscriminately, with speaking events being led by amateurs instead of experienced journeymen, etc. Now, these are all perfectly legitimate reasons to maintain anti-plagiarism standards in professional academia—but none of them are *moral* reasons. So it’s a complete *non-sequitur* to then impose these standards on undergraduates and students without academic aspirations under threat of academic excommunication.

This isn’t to say that plagiarism *never* has moral quality, only to properly contextualize what moral quality it *can* have in a learning context. Students have something of a moral obligation—to themselves, at least, if not to society—to take their studies *seriously*. To develop themselves, to become competent, and to become knowledgeable (this obligation may intensify relative to their area of pursuit—it’s more punctuated in a medical student than it is in a student of music). If plagiarism impedes this development, *then* it takes on a moral quality and is pretty clearly contrary to the purposes of academic institutions. But we say “if” because the decision to plagiarize, as we’ve just seen, is by no means a decision that only occurs when a student doesn’t or doesn’t want to understand the material. Given that the delivery of education is *itself* an exercise in copying, memorizing, and repeating the ideas of an authority figure, we can be safe in assuming that there’s no inherent contradiction between plagiarism and learning—and that’s even before we examine the motivations of plagiarists and non-plagiarists alike, none of which suggests that plagiarism and learning are incompatible.

Other than that, it’s very difficult to imagine how plagiarism can be sold as a moral evil to students, especially not as a particularly insidious or disastrous one. Only *in* university, and only *at the highest levels* of it, does a failure to properly attribute one’s ideas actually present any serious disruptions. And even there they’re not *really* moral considerations so much as they are pragmatic ones.

## Elephant in the Room: Intellectual Property

Plagiarism is often warned against by expressions that presuppose that ideas can be owned. “Put it in your own words,” “do your own work,” “make sure to properly attribute your ideas,” and so on. All of these expressions indicate a sense of *ownership*. And plagiarism only makes sense (as a moral evil) *if* an idea can be owned.

Maintaining the idea of plagiarism as an unqualified moral evil depends largely on quietly ushering in a set of largely unspoken premises about intellectual property. Until this point we’ve purposefully avoided a discussion of intellectual property since it’s a topic unto itself which could be discussed (and has been discussed) for hundreds of pages without ever using the word “plagiarism.” And we’ll certainly be unable to expound on it any great detail, except by way of conclusion, to draw attention to the fact that any philosophical resolution about plagiarism will invariably disrupt widely held notions about intellectual property.

Intellectual property is of course a very new concept, it’s not one that can be found in the seminal philosophical literature on property and rights. It’s an idea which has great *pragmatic* value because it allows for the control over information dissemination, and especially in a world where so many purchases are aimed toward software, intellectual property plays a pivotal role in maintaining the world’s economy. Real or not, it is certainly *important*.

It is somewhat alarming how infrequently the scholarly material on plagiarism is completely reticent on intellectual property. Few of the authors surveyed in this work make any acknowledgement of it. Hunt (2005) does, albeit briefly and indirectly, with the rhetorical question:

Doesn't asking students to focus first on the ownership of ideas and texts instantiate a profoundly static, accumulative, building-block notion of what knowledge is (what Paolo Freire called "the banking model" of education), and one that supports a sort of neo-capitalist notion of scholarship? (para 23)

The answer to that question would certainly *appear* to be “yes.” Whether that is a good or a bad thing is an entirely different matter, but before we can arrive at moral or true/false judgments we first have to know what exactly we’re judging. Hunt puts it in fairly salient terms here. We have a concept of education, inasmuch as it feeds and defends the moral panic over plagiarism, which views learning as a fundamentally transactional activity over the currency of ideas.

So it seems that plagiarism as an evil isn’t just an underdeveloped moral proposition trying to pass itself off as a great intellectual virtue. It’s a can of philosophical worms, which if opened, can’t help but draw attention to the hyper-commercialization of learning, and a whole sequence of unproven philosophical assumptions about ideas and ownership. More than anything, the incessant assertions of plagiarism as an unqualified moral evil seem to be something of a dogmatic smokescreen to sustain the edifices upon which these elite structures—educational and otherwise— rest. Empires have been built on the foundation of intellectual property, so we can hardly imagine that challenging the concept would bear any *practical* fruit, although challenging it certainly brings clarity to the notion of plagiarism as a moral evil.

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