UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON PLAGIARISM

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ABSTRACT

Plagiarism is a pervasive and increasing problem at all levels of study in higher education. Institutional awareness of plagiarism has largely been to focus on a pedagogical response and deterrence through punishment. The study sheds light on students' experiences of plagiarism, their understandings of and attitudes towards it. Based on a self-reported study of a stratified sample of 300 undergraduate students drawn from three colleges of a public university in Ghana, this paper explores the nature of plagiarism and students' understanding of the concept. The study revealed that unattributed copying and falsification of references was a common activity amongst students as a result of poor understanding and lack of real engagement with plagiarism and referencing issues. It is evident that the institution's 'awareness strategies' to avoid or minimize plagiarism is not effective. The paper concludes that institutional efforts to dissuade students from plagiarism should be centred on focusing not only on deterrence through punishment but on developing a more holistic institutional pedagogical approach instead of in a piecemeal manner.

KEYWORDS: Plagiarism, Education, Plagiarist Acts

INTRODUCTION

Issues of plagiarism within the broad context of an academic writing framework have become an increasing problem at all levels of study in tertiary institutions worldwide. Plagiarism is often conceived as fraudulent behaviour that diminishes the intellectual property of the original author and rewards plagiarists for their work (Sutherland-Smith, 2005). Hannabuss (2001) defines plagiarism as 'the unauthorised use or close imitation of the ideas and language or expression of someone else' (p. 313), and the representation of this work as one's own. Carroll (2004) defines plagiarism as the "passing off of someone else's work, whether intentionally or unintentionally, as your own for your own benefit" (p.9). In the context of university education, plagiarism can be placed on a continuum ranging from the copying of a few sentences without acknowledgement to the copying out of an entire manuscript, falsification of essays and assignments, lack of acknowledgement or improper acknowledgement of sources of information (Christensen & McCabe, 2006; East, 2005; McGowan, 2005).

Academics share concerns of Carroll (2004) that plagiarism threatens the value of academic work and devalues the integrity of awards. They concur that plagiarism prevents the plagiarist from learning how to synthesise ideas or engage in rational argument and therefore stifles the habitual plagiarist's academic skills of analysis and evaluation, inhibiting his/her intellectual development. Since academic writing is contingent on developing sound research and writing skills, critical reading and comprehension of appropriate sources, careful note-taking, paraphrasing, judicious use of quotations and giving credit to authors for their ideas and writing as highlighted by Burton (2007), plagiarists deny themselves the opportunity to master these skills, making academic writing increasingly difficult as they progress through their degree

courses. The role of the student is to transfer the knowledge and skills acquired through the privilege of tertiary study to the benefit of their future job roles. Qualifications gained through the practice of academic dishonesty in general and plagiarism in particular provide the student with a lesser range of knowledge and skills to apply for this purpose.

The literature on plagiarism offers many different reasons why student plagiarise (Devlin & Gray, 2007; Roig & Caso, 2005; Breen & Maassen, 2005; Underwood & Szabo, 2004; Park, 2003). These range from a genuine lack of understanding of scholarship requirements, misunderstanding and confusion when students are not familiar with proper ways of quoting, paraphrasing, citing and referencing, time constraints to produce written work, too much module content, fear of failure, chances of remaining undetected to parental pressure to succeed, lack of legitimate sources of academic support due to the inaccessibility of teaching staff and lack of library resources. Just as there are a number of possible explanations for why students plagiarise, there are also circumstances conducive to plagiarism.

There is consensus among academics that technology has increased what is in the public domain and made it easier to access and plagiarise. The growth of Web-based information and easily reformatted texts provide means and opportunity that has changed the dynamics of plagiarism. The widespread availability of access to the Internet provides opportunity and undoubtedly facilitates plagiarism by making it possible for students to find and save large amounts of information with little reading, effort or originality, thus making it difficult for the user to perceive the quoting of text as taking someone's property. Furedi (2003) however argues that the Internet does not "possess the moral power to incite otherwise honest students to cheat" (p. 16). Some students will plagiarise knowingly and others will do so inadvertently. However, whether intentional or unintentionally, plagiarism is viewed as unacceptable (Carroll, 2004). Table 1 below, describes and explains various acts of plagiarism.

Table 1: Actions that Constitute Plagiarism

Plagiarist Acts	Reason why Action Constitutes Plagiarism
Copying someone else's work without acknowledgement.	Reaping undeserved benefit from someone else's hard labour.
Copying chunks of another's work to one's text, acknowledging but not making clear that the words and ideas are not yours.	Taking an author's unique phrases and presenting it as your own.
Blending an author's words with your own.	It is taking an author's unique phrases (if it is not using the standard academic terms for a particular subject).
Taking an author's work and rewording arguments and evidence from that work.	The collection of ideas, the organisation of those ideas and the thinking about how those ideas fit together is the work of another.
Referring to sources cited in a secondary source without having accessed those sources.	The writer seems to have researched beyond the secondary source when in actual fact he/she is not well read.
Use of references from a text, then neglect to acknowledge the use of that text as a source.	Denies the rightful recognition for the author who initially collected the references and reviewed the literature.
Copying one's own work without acknowledgement.	Pretending it is a first time production.

Integrated from East (2005)

Hunt (2003) explains the importance of academic citing conventions and notes that scholars acknowledge to:

... Advertise their alliances, they bring work to the attention of their reader,

They assert ties of collegiality, they exemplify contending positions or define

Nuances of difference among competing theories or ideas... (p. 4)

Writers need to demonstrate how their ideas are connected with what has previously been claimed in order to find value and place in an existing body of knowledge. Novice academic writers therefore need to learn how to use citations to their advantage, discovering who and what evidence are seen to be valued.

A series of major studies conducted in universities in the United States of America, the United Kingdom and Australia (Christensen & McCabe, 2006; McCabe, 2005; McGowan, 2005; Underwood & Szabo, 2004), widely acknowledge the existence of academic misconduct in universities, particularly in the form of plagiarism. Studies have also shown that students writing in a language that is not their mother tongue who cannot keep up with the demands of a course, either as a result of weakness in academic skills or language skills can also be vulnerable to plagiarism. Such students may come from academic cultures or intellectual traditions where copying is an expected learning practice and therefore the concept might be totally alien. Their attitudes towards plagiarism would differ significantly. For such students, East (2005) notes, the boundaries between emulation and plagiarism will not be sharply defined. It is against this backdrop that Pennycook (1996) argues that plagiarism "needs to be understood within the particular cultural and historical context of its development, it also needs to be understood relative to alternative cultural practices" (p. 218).

Leask (2006) expressed comparable sentiments when he called for a greater understanding of 'cultural others' and the problems they face when trying to adapt to the 'new rules' of academia. He notes that although all students are initially outsiders to the academic discourses, such students are going to be 'culturally distant from these [academic discourse] communities' (p.188), and would, therefore, need to make many fundamental adjustments to their value systems as well as learn new and difficult skills. This transition will require time and effort, with much support from staff. Angélil-Carter (2000) lends support and describes plagiarism as a difficult issue that "may be a surface manifestation of complex learning difficulties which relate to the educational environment, the nature of academic discourse and nature of language" (p.2). In consonance with Leask (2006), she argues that students have to grapple with the academic writing discourse, and simultaneously take on one or more new disciplinary discourse/s from which they are "socially and conceptually distanced" (p.126). For foreign or second-language students who are struggling with English as the medium of communication, this difficulty is further compounded.

Context and Purpose of the Study

Undergraduate plagiarism is an issue of concern among lecturers at the University of Cape Coast, particularly those who supervise students' dissertations. To address this concern, new students are taken through a course on Information literacy which includes cataloguing and libraries, strategies for searching for information on the Internet, use and misuse of the internet, as well as plagiarism in the first semester of study in the first year at university. A student handbook which both defines what plagiarism is and the possible consequences if breached is given to every student on entering university. This university policy assumes that a good understanding of institutional policy reduces the risk of engaging in plagiarism. However, the definition of plagiarism proffered, centres on obvious acts such as 'copying another's work and pretending it is one's own or substantial use of other people's work and the submission of it as though it was one's own' (University of Cape Coast, 2012, p. 56). Consequently, apart from a clear understanding of verbatim use of other people's work without acknowledgement, students are likely to have difficulty comprehending what Breen and Maassen (2005) describe as 'grey' areas (see Table 1). One might argue that it is the lack of clarity about plagiarism that influences how students perceive plagiarism.

In the absence of anti-plagiarism web crawling software, lecturers in my community of practice who have had the experience of identifying and managing instances of plagiarism identify inconsistent quality in student writing, use of complex or inappropriate language or jargon, discrepancy between the essay and the student's language ability, lack of or incorrect citations, change in font and font size, and well-written text that is not related to the topic as indicators of possible acts of plagiarism (Ellery, 2008). My encounter with a student I suspected of plagiarising provided impetus for this study. I was drawn to Byrne and Trew's (2005) argument that "to be effective, interventions that aim to reduce or prevent offending behaviour need to be based on a sound understanding of what leads people to offend, and what leads people to stop offending" (p.185). The aim of this study was to explore students' behaviours and knowledge about plagiarism, with the intention of informing the institution on approaches that might promote a greater awareness of plagiarism and therefore, reduce if not prevent its occurrence. Research questions that direct the study are:

What is the nature of undergraduate plagiarism?

What are undergraduate students' understandings of plagiarism?

Why do undergraduate students plagiarise?

How can plagiarism be prevented or reduced?

METHODS

A descriptive survey was employed to provide an understanding of plagiarism among students. Stratified random sampling of undergraduate students allowed for selection of students whose views and experiences are likely to be more representative than when taken from the student population as a whole. The population was divided into groups and 300 undergraduate students were randomly selected from the Colleges of Education, Humanities and Legal Studies, and Health and Allied Sciences of the University of Cape Coast. Twenty-five students each from first, second, third and fourth year of each College were randomly selected. One hundred and seventy six males (176 =58.7%) and 124 females (124= 41.3%) participated in the study. All students in the sample should in principle have been fully aware of the meaning of plagiarism because the topic is covered in the student's first year as part of a lecture and the student handbook carries definition of the term. Participation in the study was voluntary and it was possible to withdraw at any time. No identifying information was included on the questionnaire. Consenting students were given ten minutes to complete the questionnaire which required the self-reporting of misbehaviour. Although responses might be limited by deliberate falsification and recall error, there is evidence to suggest that self-reports of acts of academic dishonesty are reasonably accurate (Rogers, Smoak & Liu, 2006). Under-reporting does not appear to have presented a major problem in previous investigations.

Respondents were asked to self-report how often (if at all) over the past year they copied and inserted into their own work, without acknowledgement of where the material came from, the following taken from published sources, from the Internet, textbooks or from the work of other students:

(a) a couple of sentences; (b) several sentences; (c) a paragraph; (d) a number of paragraphs; (e) an entire piece of work; (f.) and whether they falsified references. The frequencies were measured on a five point Likert scale (very often, often, sometimes, occasionally and never). 'Yes or no categories that asked respondents whether they think it is wrong to copy from a text or the work of another without acknowledging it and whether they think it is alright to copy a text if they share the ideas was incorporated to gauge respondents' ethical positions on the issue of plagiarism. Finally, in order to gain

a sense of the issues surrounding the contexts and meanings of these behaviours, open-ended items were provided for narrative responses to enable respondents to explain their conceptions of plagiarism and reflect on reasons for plagiarising. Statistical Package for Service Solution (SPSS) version 16 was used to analyse the quantitative data generated. It was my contention that the survey data was best analysed in a relatively straightforward manner. Thus, the quantitative analysis of the survey data is described in terms of frequencies, cross-tabulations and, where appropriate, means. The open ended questions were analysed qualitatively using the constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This involved reading all the responses to the items to gain an overall sense of the data. The data was then read again and 'open-coded' to produce an initial code list. This was then selectively coded in terms of categories related to the aims of the study.

FINDINGS

The findings of the study show that a significant proportion of all respondents admitted to copying (82%) without acknowledging the source over the past 12 months. Self-reported copying however decreased as questions moved from copying a few sentences, several sentences to more serious copying of a paragraph, a number of paragraphs to an entire piece of work. An indication that while copying without acknowledgement was common among students, they found copying large chunks of material without acknowledgement inappropriate as shown in table 2 below:

Table 2: Trend of Copying Among Students

Statements	Very Often		Often		Occasionally		Sometimes		Never	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Unattributed copying of a few sentences	52	17.3	58	19.3	58	19.3	112	37.3	20	6.7
Unattributed copying of several sentences	41	13.7	47	15.7	69	23	109	36.3	34	11.3
Unattributed copying of a paragraph	43	14.3	41	13.7	54	18	112	37.3	50	16.7
Unattributed copying of a number of paragraphs	24	8	39	13	51	17	113	37.7	73	24.3
Unattributed copying of an entire piece of work	14	4.7	22	7.3	35	11.7	59	19.7	170	56.7
Making up references	79	26.3	78	26	36	12	65	21.7	42	14

From the trend of copying, a total of : 93.3% (n=280) of the respondents self-reported copying and inserting a few sentences into their work, and 36% (n=110) did that often or very often; 88.7% (n=266) of the respondents self-reported copying and inserting several sentences into their work, and 29.3 (n=88) did that often or very often; 83.3% (n=250) of the respondents self-reported copying and inserting a paragraph into their work, and 28% (n=84) did that often or very often; 75.7% (n=227) of the respondents self-reported copying and inserting a number of paragraphs into their work, and 21% (n=63) did that often or very often and 43.3% (n=130) of the respondents self-reported copying an entire piece of work and 12% (n=36) did that often or very often. The majority, 56.7% (170) said they never copied an entire piece of work. It was disheartening to find out a significant number of respondents, 86% (n=358) self-reported making up references and 52.3% (n=157) did that often or very often. What is worrying is that the majority of respondents who made up references did so at a sustained level. The data indicate that female students engaged less in plagiarist acts than their male counterparts as shown in table 3 below:

Table 3: Unattributed Copying by Gender

Statements	Gender	Very Often	Often	Occasionally	Sometimes	Never
Unattributed copying of a few sentences	Male Female	33(18.8%) 19(15.3%)	31(17.6%) 27(21.8%)	34 (19.3%) 24 (19.4%)	66 (37.5%) 46 (37.1%)	12(6.8%) 8(6.5%)
Unattributed copying of several sentences	Male Female	28(15.9%) 13(10.5%)	25(14.2%) 22(17.7%)	42(23.9%) 27(21.8%)	65(36.9%) 44(35.5%)	16(9.1%) 18(14.5%)
Unattributed copying of a paragraph	Male Female	31(17.6%) 12(9.7%)	22(12.5%) 19(15.3%)	32(18.2%) 22(17.7%)	64(36.4%) 48(38.7%)	27(15.3%) 23(18.5%)
Unattributed copying of a number of paragraphs	Male Female	17(19.7%) 7(5.6%)	20(11.4%) 19(15.3%)	28(15.9%) 23 (18.5%)	70 (39. 8%) 43 (34.7%)	41(23.3%) 32(25.8%)
Unattributed copying of an entire piece of work	Male Female	8(4.5%) 6(4.8%)	11 (6.3%) 11 (8.9%)	21(11.9%) 14(11.3%)	32(18.2%) 37(21.8)	104(59.1) 66(53.2%)
I made up references	Male Female	49(27.8%) 30(24.2%)	50(28.4%) 28(22.6%)	19(10.8%) 17 (13.7%)	41(23.3%) 24 (19.4%)	17(9.7%) 25(20.2%)

More than eighty-five percent (85.5%) of females in the study self-reported copying compared to 90.3% of males and 76.3% made up references compared to 79.8% of males. From a gender perspective one can say that males plagiarised more than females though females are not left far behind. In response to the yes or no categories, the majority of respondents, 74.3% (n=223) thought it is wrong to copy from a text or the work of some other person without acknowledging it, yet almost all respondents engaged in such practices. They however, saw nothing wrong with copying their own work without attribution (92.7% = 278), not realising that constitutes plagiarism.

Respondents' explanation of plagiarism bothers on the obvious: 'copying someone's else' work without acknowledging it'; 'stealing someone's piece of work'; 'taking somebody's work as your own' represent 76.7%; copying the ideas of someone without acknowledging represents only 19.8%. The less obvious acts of plagiarism did not feature in their responses. Reasons students listed for plagiarising in order of frequency include: 'the writer is an authority...imparting information to the reader so it is alright to use the information' which can be described as culture specific; 'the writer expressed what I wanted to say better' bothers on language issues; '... so much free information on the internet... it is difficult to identify the source of information most of the time so you copy'; '... it is difficult to write without plagiarising... the authors whose ideas we use, got their ideas from others' and 'acknowledging in-text... out-text... referencing is complex and confusing... I always provide a reference list'. The last three responses may be attributed to the institution's failure in engaging students effectively with issues of plagiarism and acknowledgement.

DISCUSSIONS

Discussion of results is done in relation to the research questions.

What is the Nature of Undergraduate Plagiarism?

The findings of the study show that copying a few paragraphs of an essay from a book or the Internet without acknowledging the source of information was a common activity amongst respondents. The study suggests that, as well as

deliberate falsification of references, a general confusion might also give rise to unintentional plagiarism. Respondents thought copying someone's work without acknowledgement is wrong, yet almost all of them engaged in it. The notion of wrongness might explain why self-reported copying decreased as questions moved from copying a few sentences to 'serious copying' of paragraphs and an entire piece of work. This can in turn be explained against the institution's definition of plagiarism as outlined in the student handbook which describes plagiarism in terms of 'substantial use of other people's work'. Thus copying a few sentences seem acceptable, and 93% of students did just that. The notion of wrongness does not extend to making up of references (86% of respondents reported engaging in that act). Fabricating references was rife possibly because as respondents regarded copying a few sentences as less fraudulent, they probably regard making up of references in the same way. References, after all, constitute a few sentences. I would rather like to think that fabrication of references is a result of misunderstandings and poor academic scholarship, or perhaps to conceal malpractice.

What are Undergraduate Students Understanding of Plagiarism?

Respondents' explanations of plagiarism present obvious cases of plagiarism where verbatim text was inserted in a student's assignment without due acknowledgement. They were unable to discern the more subtle aspects of attribution of ideas and paraphrasing of text which Breen and Maassen (2005) describe as 'grey' areas. In not fully understanding what plagiarism is, what the 'grey areas' of plagiarism are, respondents are likely to plagiarise inadvertently. This is not to discount deliberate dishonesty as in the falsification of references, probably driven by a desire for better grades. As Carroll (2004) notes, plagiarism, whether intentional or not, is unacceptable. This places responsibility on the institution to revise its definition of plagiarism to encompass the subtle or grey areas which are likely to cause confusion.

Why do Undergraduate Students Plagiarise?

Reasons given for plagiarising can be categorised under cultural issues, language issues, and lack of engagement with plagiarism and referencing issues. Cultural issues have to do with the notion of the teacher as an expert and the writer or the text as authority to impart knowledge to the learner. Context emerges as a very important factor in influencing decision to plagiarise. Dependence on the teacher and the text fosters copying which may be seen as legitimate appropriation. The nature of learning experiences that students are familiar with and the assessment methods that they are exposed to are of relevance in understanding the context within which students operate. This highlights Leask's (2006) and Pennycook's (1996) argument for a greater understanding of 'cultural others' and the problems they face when trying to adapt to the 'new rules' of academia and also the need to understand plagiarism itself within the particular cultural and historical context of its development. The emphasis seems upon helping students to acquire the skills needed to not only understand how but also why to avoid plagiarism.

Secondly, students indicate a lack of confidence in their own ability both in the academic writing discourse, which requires a certain style of expression, and in the discourse of the discipline, which depends on language and jargon with which many students are unfamiliar.

In trying to sound academic, they plagiarise. As East(2005) points out, using new terminology is one way that novice writers build their vocabulary and attempt to sound academic, but also recognising unacknowledged unique phrases is one way that lecturers determine that acts of plagiarism have been committed. The challenges of the academic writing discourse, and disciplinary discourse/s to the foreign or second-language student who is struggling with English as the medium of communication and rules of academic communications from which he/she is socially and conceptually

distanced is outlined by Angélil-Carter (2000) and Leask (2006). Leask's paper, however, highlights that good teaching is in itself a deterrent to plagiarism.

Finally, respondents expressed difficulty in identifying sources of information from the Internet, difficulty in writing without plagiarising, and they find referencing complex and confusing, an indication of a lack of real engagement with plagiarism and referencing issues. It is evident that intervention measures to dissuade students from plagiarising are ineffective. There are misunderstandings and uncertainties which might have resulted in unintentional plagiarism and falsification of referencing.

How can Plagiarism be Reduced or Prevented?

It has been argued that all learning is plagiarism, that we use ideas from other people all the time, incorporate them into our academic and working lives, and gradually take ownership of them. However, the term 'plagiarism' has a particular meaning in relation to academic study on formal education courses. The construct plagiarism assumes that knowledge has a history and that past authors must be acknowledged. The integration of previously published written texts into a new text is governed by a set of rules, the violation of which is called plagiarism. Students need to learn the rules of the game. In dealing with plagiarism, a balanced approach that includes both prevention and deterrence needs to be taken. Educating students about the expected conventions for authorship and the appropriate use and acknowledgment of all forms of intellectual material has become necessary as the reasons given by students for plagiarising relate mainly to a poor understanding of how academic texts are constructed, correct referencing norms and issues such as the recognition of author's stance in academic writing and how this is indicated through the use of language and referencing. An academic writing framework that integrates plagiarism and provides clear instruction on what can be considered the norms of the discipline will be very helpful. Furthermore, the use of language to establish authorial voice need to be addressed explicitly by lecturers.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There is general agreement among critics that, in a variety of ways, tertiary institutions are somehow contributing to the potential for academic dishonesty among their students by providing inadequate definitions of terms such as plagiarism as is evident in the student handbook. Whilst students were able to clearly define cases of plagiarism, where verbatim text was inserted in a student assignment without acknowledgement, they seem unaware of the more subtle aspects of attribution of ideas which might lead to inadvertent plagiarism. Furthermore, it is evident that the university's 'awareness strategies' to avoid or minimize plagiarism is not effective. The findings have highlighted how important it is for the institution to develop an understanding of the perceptions of university students' on plagiarism. While the findings of this study indicate that the institution is taking responsibility for teaching the rudiments of referencing, it would seem that more needs to be done to provide student support and communicate explicit messages on academic misconduct as high levels of unintentional plagiarism suggest systemic failings in this respect.

It is important for the institution to provide explicit definitions of actions and behaviours which constitute plagiarism, providing a clear statement of values and behaviours which are to be promoted. Acquiring attitudes, values and practices that help prevent plagiarism is a long-term and iterative process and need to be incorporated into the curriculum at all levels of study and with sustained effort if it should make an impact. As a way forward, students need to learn about the principles of academic writing, the development of the author's voice and the place of acknowledgement that is not

done in a piecemeal manner. Deterrence measures which include visible and effective systems for monitoring and detecting plagiarism, including appropriate punishment can help address the situation.

As in other studies on academic dishonesty, this study presents some limitations and caution is advised in generalizing these findings. This has to do with students' self-reported study. However, self-reports remain the main means by which data are gathered in research on academic fraud and many researchers have concluded that self-reports of cheating are generally reliable and valid. The study has gone some way in adding to existing knowledge of literature in the field of academic misconduct from the perspective of the student. While the results provide a greater understanding of how students perceive plagiarism, caution is needed in drawing strong conclusions due to the study's exploratory nature. It is proposed that further studies would extend this research in order to determine whether similar results emerge.

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