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Educating yourself about plagiarism – Case studies on Grey areas

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Educating yourself about plagiarism – Case studies on Grey areas

In this peer assisted, academic led workshop, students will discuss some common but difficult scenarios that might or might not be considered as academic misconduct or plagiarism. The aim of this exercise is to make them aware that avoiding plagiarism needs focussed development of their writing skills reflecting on experiences.

Note to educators:

You can use each scenario for one group (of 4 to 5 student). These individual scenarios would open up a lively discussion amongst the students and make them think and relate to their own situations. You are advised give further directions, advise and clear conclusions for each scenario after their group discussion.

This guide will assist you to effectively deliver the session.

Scenario 1:

Lucy finds an ideal article for her essay, which is not copyrighted and she decides to copy paste it onto her essay.

In order to decide whether Lucy has committed an academic misconduct, we need to ask the following questions:

- a) Is it a word-to-word copy of the original? Or whether it is paraphrased?
- b) If it is a word-to-word copy, then, is the sentence written within the quotation mark?
- c) Whether the borrowed sentences are with or without in text-citation and proper referencing?

Now discuss within your group the following myths in relation to above scenario and provide suggestions on how Lucy could have used information from non-copyrighted article without being accused of plagiarism.

Myth 1: *“non-copyrighted articles can freely be copied without citation”*

Myth 2: *“the maximum limit for word-for-word copying is six consecutive words”*

Myth 3: *“paraphrasing is simply rearranging the sentence using synonymous words”*

Myth 4: *“If reference list clearly states the original source, then there is no need for in-text citations”*

Teacher/Instructors notes:

All these myths are wrong.

Myth 1: An article (whether it is copyrighted or not) is written and owned by another person, it should be properly acknowledged. If the citation is not available, then at least its source (or web link) should be given.

Myth 2: This is misleading, academic writing is all about creative synthesis of sentences based on facts that are already available or published. In fact, “word-for-word” copying may be allowed when quoting someone’s idea with proper acknowledgement. Although some authors claim the maximum allowable limit for copied quote is six consecutive words, there is no limit for a “quote”. In fact, an entire essay can be made of quotes, if they are properly acknowledged/referenced. However, this would not address the expected learning outcomes of that article nor gives the authenticity for claiming that is one’s own work.



Myth 3: Paraphrasing is a skill of using other's ideas/information by transforming the content to suite your research into your own words, but without altering the original intended meaning.

Myth 4: The whole idea of referencing is not only giving credits to original authors but also identifying those statements within the article to help the reader to carry out further search from the original source (if needed). There is no point of giving a list of reference without identifying the places where one used others' ideas.

Scenario 2:

Kumar was searching the internet for ideas to write an essay on “An in vitro model to study the syncytial apoptosis.” He finds a web page on the same subject with the same heading. Kumar copies directly from the internet and changes the sentence order.

In order to decide whether Kumar has committed an academic misconduct, we need to ask the following questions:

- a) Has he acknowledged the original version and given reference?
- b) Even if has acknowledged the original version, is it a good academic practice just to copy the whole document and claim as his own work?

Now discuss within your group the following myths in relation to above scenario and provide suggestions on how Kumar could have used the article from website while maintaining academic integrity.

Myth 1: “Direct copying from the internet is an acceptable academic practice as long as it is properly cited”

Myth 2: “You can gain ownership of a downloaded report as long as the sentence order is changed, with proper acknowledgement to the original source”

Teacher/Instructors notes:

Both myths are wrong.

Myth 1: Direct copying is not an acceptable practice as it does not let one to show his/her own ideas. By properly citing, one might protect from accusations of academic misconduct but it is in fact another form of cheating.

Myth 2: Anything that is thought, wrote, or published belongs to the original author. In other words “ownership” only applies to one’s original thoughts.

Scenario 3:

Magdalena copies several sentences (word for word) to make several paragraphs directly from another internet article and put them in inverted commas with proper reference.

In order to decide whether Magdalena has committed an academic misconduct or achieved the learning outcomes expected from her, we need to ask the following questions:

- a) Just by copying, has Magdalena achieved the learning outcomes of this piece of work?
- b) What is the purpose of literature survey on academic writing?

Now discuss within your group the following myths in relation to above scenario and provide details on how Magdalena could have used the article from website maintaining academic integrity and achieving the learning outcomes.

Myth 1: "Copying one or two sentences (but not several paragraphs) is acceptable, provided they are properly cited"

Myth 2: "Using several sentences (word for word) to make several paragraphs directly from another article is not plagiarism as long as the sentences were written within inverted commas with proper reference and in-text citations"

Teacher/Instructors notes:

In fact, both myths are literally correct, however one might ask whether Magdalena has written or synthesised anything on her own?

Myth 1: As far as academic integrity is concern copying sentences and using them with proper citation is acceptable. However rather than just being honest, she has not learnt anything, as she has neither understood, nor created his/her own article.

Myth 2: In fact, this is what quoting is but this does not allow anyone to learn anything and be creative. Although Magdalena has not plagiarised, she has not produced an original piece of work.

Scenario 4:

Nancy asks her friend Rima to see her essay, she then note down the structure and jots down the main idea. Nancy goes home and writes her own essay based on the notes.

In order to decide whether Nancy, Rima, or both has (have) committed an academic offense, we need to ask the following questions:

- a) Is Nancy's report simply based on Rima's essay or has she researched more and written cohesively with her own style?
- b) Did Rima know that Nancy wrote the essay based on her own essay?

Now discuss within your group the following myths in relation to above scenario and provide suggestions on how to decide whether one or both students have committed an academic offense.

Myth 1: "The ideas or the concepts of one author can be used by another author without acknowledgements"

Myth 2: "As long as the sentences are not copied, no one can prove that you have copied other person's ideas"

Teacher/Instructors notes:

In fact, both myths are literally wrong.

Myth 1: Even the original ideas should be properly acknowledged (this can be shown as "personal communication with Dr X" within the text)

Myth 2: It might be true, it is impossible for one to prove his own ideas but academic integrity should be beyond the need to prove. It is all about integral behaviour. As Charles Marshall (2003) stated "Integrity is doing the right thing, even when no one is watching." [Excerpted from Shattering the Glass Slipper: Destroying Fairy-tale Thinking Before It Destroys You. By Charles Marshall 2003]

Scenario 5:

Rachael and Mandy are two MSc students who live in the same flat and use the same computer at home. Mandy copies some parts of Rachael's assignment, which was saved by Rachel onto their common computer. Can Rachel be considered as accessory to academic misconduct?

In order to decide whether Rachel has been involved in an academic misconduct, we need to ask the following questions:

- a) Has Mandy copied Rachel's assignment without latter's knowledge?
- b) Even if Rachel did not know this, was it wise for her to save an important assignment without encryption (or password protection)?

Now discuss within your group the following myths in relation to above scenario and justify Mandy, Rachel or both have committed an academic misconduct.

Myth 1: "If ones essay is reproduced by another one with or without the former's knowledge, both are culpable for the offense"

Myth 2: "The work saved onto common university/school computers is deleted every 24 hours so you do not have to password protect your work"

Teacher/Instructors notes:

Here both myths are debatable and subject to argument.

Myth 1: Common sense would show that if one's essay is reproduced by another without the former's consent/knowledge, it is the one who copied is culpable for misconduct. However, if the original owner has willingly given his/her work to be copied, then both are culpable.

Myth 2: While work saved onto common university/school computers usually gets deleted regularly, it is advisable either to password protect one's work or delete once it is safely transferred onto a personal device. Make sure you empty the recycle bin of the institutional computer too.

Scenario 6:

Julian and Jessica are assigned a group practical work, which requires carrying out experiments obtaining and discussing the data as a pair. After which they were expected to write individual reports. However, there is a very high similarity between their report.

In order to decide whether Julian and Jessica have colluded and therefore committed an academic misconduct, we need to ask the following questions:

- (a) Is the similarity mainly in the data/results section; or throughout their reports?
- (b) Is there any need for the common data to be used extensively in other parts of their individual reports?

Now discuss within your group the following myths in relation to above scenario and justify whether Julian and Jessica have committed an academic misconduct.

Myth 1: "Reports involving group work expect peer assisted learning/discussion, therefore we can use the ideas from others within the group"

Myth 2: "It is really hard to write different essays based on common data"

Teacher/Instructors notes:

Again both myths are debatable and subject to argument.

Myth 1: While reports involving group work expect sharing of data obtained from group work, it is absolutely essential to maintain individuality in the report writing. The data might be common but it is subject to different types interpretation and discussions. Common data usage does not give the right to share the interpretations and discussions.

Myth 2: It is somewhat hard to write different essays based on common data. The "crude data" but not the "analysed data" can be shared. Also teachers should give explicit instructions about what is expected from the group and as individuals.

Scenario 7:

Zita has carried out a series of experiments using colorimetric measurements and got some exciting results to support her theory. However, she has forgotten to note one crucial reading. So she decides to fabricate this reading onto the graph with the other data.

In order to decide whether Zita has committed an academic misconduct, we need to ask the following question:

- a) Was the lost data point was arbitrarily fitted in the graph to suit the hypothesis?
- b) If so, has Zita revealed this with proper explanation for this inclusion justifying her act?

Now discuss within your group the following myths in relation to above scenario and provide suggestions on deciding whether Zita has committed an academic offense.

Myth 1: "As science allows approximation, it is entirely acceptable to adjust one or two data point to suit the trend and therefore these manipulations need not to be revealed"

Myth 2: "Data manipulation should be carried out within statistically acceptable range; yet all these manipulations should be explicitly explained and justified"

Teacher/Instructors notes:

Myth 1 is definitely wrong; yes science allows approximation but not data manipulation. Myth 2 may be debatable.

Myth 1: Approximation is entirely different from data manipulation, and all approximation should be well explained within the article. Deliberate manipulation under the disguise of "approximation" is another form of misconduct.

Myth 2: Approximation of data, rather than "manipulation" is allowed provided it is carried out within statically acceptable range and explained the reasons/justifications for approximation.

Scenario 8:

Your lecturer has given a common example for “receptor specific targeting in pharmacology”. You have used this example in your formal report without acknowledging your tutor.

In order to decide whether you have committed an academic misconduct, you need to ask the following question:

- a) Is the example given by your lecturer considered as common knowledge (at least in your field of study)?
- b) Even if it is considered as common knowledge, has your lecturer given any references for it?

Now discuss within your group the following myths in relation to above scenario and provide suggestions on how to decide whether you have committed an academic offense.

Myth 1: *“Notes from your own lecturer can be used without acknowledgement”*

Myth 2: *“The information that are considered as common knowledge need not to be acknowledged”*

Teacher/Instructors notes:

Myth 1 is another grey area within academic integrity but myth 2 is correct.

Myth 1: It depends on whether the information given by lecturer is his own opinion and whether he/she is going to mark the report. If he/she has used an example taken from a published source (it may be his own manuscript), then students are expected to learn more from the source and properly acknowledged when used.

Myth 2: If the lecturer has used an example which is considered as common knowledge, then there is no need for citation. If in doubt whether the information is common knowledge, then it would be appropriate to cite the original source.

Scenario 9:

Amanda was asked to write an essay on gene therapy. She researched about the topics took notes and wrote an excellent report on her own properly paraphrasing with her own statements. However, she has failed to give any attributions to any of the articles she read.

In order to decide whether Amanda has committed an academic misconduct, we need to ask the following question:

- a) Has Amanda used only the information that are considered as common knowledge (at least in her own field)
- b) Has Amanda deliberately avoided in-text citing and referencing or she only failed to submit the reference list?

Now discuss within your group the following myths in relation to above scenario and provide details on how to decide whether Amanda has committed an academic offense.

Myth 1: "if you understand the essence of the article and write in your own style suited to your own topic, you do not have to reference the original article"

Myth 2: "Referencing are not needed, if all the articles researched are submitted together with the essay"

Teacher/Instructors notes:

Both myths are wrong

Myth 1: Whether you have understood, and synthesised your own article, you should cite the original source and give full reference list because the ideas are from another sources.

Myth 2: Submitting articles that have been researched does not take away the expectation of a proper referencing. Also the reader would have the time or the patience to find out which information in your essay is from which article submitted.

Scenario 10:

Emma produced an excellent report on “Cell specific chemotherapy in testicular cancer” for a final year BSc module in 2015 and got 80%. She is now doing an MSc course in a different university where she has been asked to submit the same report. She decides to submit the same report she produced for BSc.

In order to decide whether Emma has committed an academic misconduct, we need to consider the following myths:

Myth 1: *“Since the essay is originally written by you after proper research and attributions, there is no harm in recycling”*

Myth 2: *“You can recycle your own past essays, provided you are in a different institution”*

Now discuss within your group the myths in relation to above scenario and provide details on how to decide whether Emma has committed an academic offense.

Teacher/Instructors notes:

Both myths are entirely wrong.

Myth 1: This removes originality and authorship. As an integral academic, you should acknowledge this as a reproduction of your own work”. Also when an essay is written and submitted, that partly becomes public property.

Myth 2: As explained above, academic integrity is all about being truthful and acknowledge, whether you work in the same institution or not. Also just by recycling essays one is not learning anything new.