

Copying the works of others: When is it ethical?

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Be sure to visit the Louvre in Paris at least once in your life. When you go, besides viewing many of the world's most famous works of art, you may be surprised to observe young artists - accompanied by easels, canvases and painting accoutrements - copying the works of the masters.

Interestingly, the city known for art appreciation and education also has teachers who encourage replication of classic works to build appreciation and understanding of great styles and techniques. The apprentice-students gain appreciably through such experiences, but few of us are worried they will pass off their faux Monet or Rousseau paintings as their own.

In more familiar educational settings - as we might find in the classrooms, laboratories, libraries, studios and study areas here at Texas Tech - we can imagine "copying" as a learning exercise. And indeed, copying - under many guises - may seem OK to Internet users who routinely observe the duplication of the works of others without apparent permission or attribution. However, copying as an exercise and copying with the intent of portraying others works as one's own are wholly different matters.

In our academic and scholarly lives, taking the words of another and using them as our own, without proper attribution, is the equivalent of the students in the Louvre taking the paintings off the walls and walking out the door with them. In other words, plagiarism is an academic heist.

When discussing plagiarism, we often refer to intellectual property, which includes the fruits of original inquiry and creative efforts such as algorithms, books or papers, chemicals and devices, drawings, films, genetically modified animals, microorganisms and plants, ideas or theories, manuscripts, maps, recordings, software and works of art.

For the purposes of this article, we will concentrate on written works, but it is important to recognize intellectual property has a broad range of components.

Federal law and regulations, state law and university policies govern intellectual property ownership. Indeed, U.S. copyright law insures the ownership of original work by mere declaration of the creator thereof and for our purposes - authors.

Thus, while authors may formally seek registration of copyrighted material, as in the case of publicly produced books, journals and magazines, copyright protection of intellectual property exists (i.e., for the author's life plus decades thereafter depending on the date of publication) regardless of registration. Thus, the concept of ownership and protection take on special meaning, particularly when we consider plagiarism.

The Tech Student Handbook (2008-2009) refers to plagiarism in the following terms: "The attempt of students to present as their own any work not honestly performed is regarded by the faculty and administration as a most serious offence and renders the offenders liable to serious consequences, possibly suspension." The take-home message for students - and, really for all members of the Tech community is this: Plagiarism is a serious misconduct matter that is taken seriously at the university.

We have not compiled data on the incidence of plagiarism among Tech students, but anecdotal evidence suggests plagiarism is sufficiently prevalent to be a concern - reflecting trends at the national level. Thus, the faculty and administration are making every effort to insure plagiarism cases are handled thoughtfully and diligently.

You might wonder at this point about the roots of plagiarism. If you ask many instructors, particularly those in English, you are likely to learn that they have heard all the excuses for plagiarized work from their teaching experiences with students. Among the most common reasons are procrastination, feelings of inadequacy as a writer, family and occupational pressures, cultural (and other) beliefs, and the thought that "it's all well-known material."

Now, place the above behavioral proclivities and cultural situations in the context of the busy and sometimes seemingly overwhelmed students. Also, place these elements in the context of essays and papers readily and quickly available through literally thousands of Web sources, mix with students who would compromise their values and those of Tech, and you have a potential cultural milieu for plagiarism or other forms of academic dishonesty.

Compound this situation with a view "that everyone is doing it" because of shoddy practices perceived through the Internet and possibly comments from misguided friends or relatives, and the temptation to plagiarize is reinforced.

At the risk of sounding overly moralistic, I want to suggest that plagiarists cheat more than the authors of original work. They cheat themselves by compromising opportunities to develop capabilities and skills that are absolutely obligatory in our 21st century world, where innovation and creativity are keys to successful professional careers.

So, those who are tempted to think they can get away with plagiarism should forget it. Additionally, the professional world of work can be just as harsh on plagiarists as what is experienced in the academic environs.

The take-home-message for students is this: Avoid plagiarism at all costs, do not delude yourself that ignorance is an excuse, avoid the behavioral and cultural traps that predispose some individuals to academically dishonest thinking, and commit yourself to developing first-rate scholarly and writing abilities and skills that will hold you in good stead for the 40 or more years of your professional life.

As the old expression goes, "imitation is the sincerest form of flattery," but when it comes to original creative work, it can lead to plagiarism, lest appropriate attribution is used. This article

represents a personal commitment to help deter plagiarism among students and, for that matter, all colleagues and friends who honor integrity in scholarly pursuits of all types.

I hope this short discourse, including the roots of plagiarism and advice on its avoidance, will be informative to some, a reminder to others and perhaps insightful to still others.

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