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Avoiding plagiarism in academic writing

Anderson I (2009) Avoiding plagiarism in academic writing. *Nursing Standard*. 23, 18, 35-37.
Date of acceptance: November 10 2008.

Summary

Plagiarism means taking the work of another and presenting it as one's own, resulting in potential upset for the original author and disrepute for the professions involved. This article aims to explore the issue of plagiarism and some mechanisms for detection and avoidance.

Author

Irene Anderson is senior lecturer in tissue viability, School of Nursing and Midwifery, University of Hertfordshire, Hatfield.
Email: i.l.anderson@herts.ac.uk

Keywords

Academia; Plagiarism; Professional integrity and standards

These keywords are based on the subject headings from the British Nursing Index. This article has been subject to double-blind review. For author and research article guidelines visit the *Nursing Standard* home page at nursingstandard.rcnpublishing.co.uk. For related articles visit our online archive and search using the keywords.

PLAGIARISM HIT THE HEADLINES in June 2008 when Raj Persaud, well-known television and radio broadcaster and psychiatrist, was suspended from practice for three months by the General Medical Council, for presenting others' work as his own (*The Lancet* 2008). Such conduct is regarded as 'intellectual theft, and totally unacceptable' (*The Lancet* 2008). Plagiarism is not a new issue, however increased publicity and improvements in detection strategies mean that the possibility of plagiarism is more likely to enter the consciousness of the reader. In addition, one only needs to browse the internet to find a plethora of essays for sale or adverts for essays 'to order' (Burnard 2002). Such internet sites do state that essays should be used for information only and not submitted for assessment, but some individuals do not adhere to these guidelines. The person buying the essay may have little idea of the quality of the piece, and may be buying it because his or her writing skills are poor.

Harper (2006) reviewed literature on the extent of cheating among nursing students, views on cheating and the risks of being caught among university students. Harper (2006) identified types of dishonesty, such as the use of mobile telephones to photograph and record information, the practice of plagiarism and buying essays from the internet. Her review indicated that those who cheated in academic studies were more likely to cheat in the workplace. The review also suggested that robust reporting and penalties for cheating had the effect of reducing prevalence of such behaviour. She concluded that, ideally, students should perceive there is a significant risk of being caught and that penalties are severe.

In a UK study, Szabo and Underwood (2004) surveyed 291 students across a range of disciplines and years, identifying that 20% would definitely, and 34% would probably, plagiarise to avoid failing a module. The study found that men were more likely (68%) to cheat than women (39%). Around 60% of the sample was unsure of the skills and ability of their tutors to detect plagiarism, and 28% of the sample perceived that the benefits outweighed the risks of being caught.

Plagiarism is particularly reprehensible in healthcare professions. The Nursing and Midwifery Council's code of professional conduct (2008) calls for nurses to be 'honest... [and to] uphold the reputation of your profession'. Deliberate cheating is morally and ethically wrong and does not encourage the trust of patients and colleagues.

In some cases plagiarism and failure to admit or accept that it has taken place may lead to the individual's fitness to practise being called into question, possibly resulting in more serious professional consequences such as professional censure and suspension.

The internet opens up many possibilities for furthering knowledge, but also creates opportunities to misuse material. An editorial in *The Lancet* (2008) discussed the extent of

cheating in scientific research, but cautioned that plagiarism can be difficult to define and that 'accidental errors' can occur when cutting and pasting text.

Detecting plagiarism

Reputable professional journals preserve their integrity and standards by using external reviewers. Reviewers are generally experienced in their fields and their remit is to check that articles are accurate and up to date to ensure the best possible chance of encouraging evidence-based practice. There is a responsibility on reviewers to ensure that professional standards are upheld. It is commendable that many articles submitted to journals arise from course assignments, but it is of concern when plagiarism has gone undetected at the time of marking such assignments and is detected later by journal reviewers.

There are many ways of detecting plagiarism (Box 1). Software such as Turnitin® is commonly used in the UK (JISC Plagiarism Advisory Service 2007). Essays can be put through this system, which indicates the percentage match found on the internet and the sources of such information. However, one needs to use judgement, as the software detects commonly used words and phrases so there still needs to be some exploration of possible sources. The process can be time consuming but it is important that incidents are properly and fairly investigated.

There is scope to use plagiarism software in a more proactive way to help students develop academic writing skills. If formative pieces of work are fed through the system near the start of a course, students can see any incidences of plagiarism in their writing and take steps to correct their paraphrasing and referencing skills at an early stage.

Some individuals may copy from book sources hoping to escape detection, but many books are available electronically, and can be traced. Specialist readers or reviewers will also be familiar with book text. Sometimes simply typing a phrase into a search engine such as Google is enough to trace the source of a piece of writing.

Experienced essay markers, journal reviewers and editors become adept at detecting changes of style. In extreme examples, barely literate prose may suddenly flow with complex scientific explanations. More subtle examples include American spellings of words and the use of obscure and difficult-to-source references. A sign of plagiarism also involves copying incorrect spellings. When the incorrect spelling is used in

another piece of work for example, that writer may be copying from the book or giving a secondary reference – claiming to have read the original source when they have not. The former is plagiarism and inexcusable, and the latter is incorrect presentation of a secondary source, which is poor academic practice.

Avoiding plagiarism

The risk of plagiarism in academic settings can be reduced by not setting the same essay every year. Burnard (2002) reflected on the possibility of plagiarism extending beyond coursework essays to dissertations. He felt that written examinations may reduce the problem (Burnard 2002). Publicising good practice, enabling students to experience plagiarism detection of their own work at an early stage in their studies, and helping them to develop good writing and referencing styles, may also help to prevent plagiarism. Some students do not understand what plagiarism is, so focusing on formative work can help to develop academic writing skills. In this way individuals can practise their writing and referencing skills in advance of submitting work for formal assessment. Feedback received at the formative stage is particularly valuable and it is important that it is given appropriate attention.

It is important to acknowledge that plagiarism exists. If you are an editor, reviewer or tutor you need to be alert to the possibility, rigorously check sources and consider the use of plagiarism detection software. Programme tutors and module leaders should ensure that course documentation explains clearly what plagiarism is and how it can be avoided. This information should also be reinforced to students at the beginning of their studies and for each module thereafter. If plagiarism is suspected, students may find themselves in front of a school academic misconduct panel. If the offence is proven it may lead to a summons before a fitness to practise panel or health and conduct committee.

As writers we should be careful to cite sources and be prepared to learn from our mistakes and omissions. As a profession we need to recognise that the problem of plagiarism exists and ensure that each journal and educational institution has mechanisms in place to deal with it. Many students worry about the possibility of plagiarism; it may be that those who worry are least likely to do it, but assessment pressures may drive individuals to take risks. The more that can be done early to help people develop writing skills and confidence, the less likely they are to resort to cheating.

Kenny (2007) discusses the risk of bringing the nursing profession into disrepute and that it is

BOX 1

Detecting plagiarism

Original text (Anderson 2007):

There is debate about how often Doppler assessment should be carried out. Guidelines currently recommend every three months post-ulcer healing (Royal College of Nursing (RCN) 2006); however, this is burdensome and probably not necessary for many patients (Pankhurst 2004). Therefore, practitioners should refer to local guidelines.

Example 1 – is this plagiarism?

There is debate about how often Doppler assessment should be carried out. Guidelines currently recommend every three months post-ulcer healing (RCN 2006); however, this is burdensome and probably not necessary for many patients (Pankhurst 2004). Therefore, practitioners should refer to local guidelines.

Answer: this is plagiarism. It gives the impression that these are the words of the writer. In addition, the writer is also claiming to have read the papers cited in the text. To correct this, the text should be put in quotation marks and the reference given with the page number of the original. However, directly quoting does not demonstrate understanding.

Example 2 – is this plagiarism?

There is discussion about how often Doppler assessment should be done. Guidelines currently recommend every three months post-ulcer healing (RCN 2006); however, this is probably not necessary for many patients (Pankhurst 2004). Therefore, practitioners should refer to local guidelines.

Answer: this is plagiarism. It is not enough to just change some of the words; the original source of the writing should be cited. This is an example of poor writing technique. The writer is repeating what was written originally and is not demonstrating any understanding of the text or how the ideas should be applied to practice.

Example 3 – is this plagiarism?

Practitioners may find Doppler assessment every three months difficult to achieve and the decision whether or not to do this may depend on the needs of the patient and local guidance (Anderson 2007).

Answer: this is not plagiarism. The writer has taken an idea and put it into his or her own words, demonstrating understanding of the risk in assessment and a good referencing technique.

inequitable to other students not to challenge plagiarism where it is detected or suspected. As well as university system penalties, a writer who plagiarises will incur the censure of journal editors and may be barred from submitting his or her work in the future. Offenders may also find themselves having to explain their behaviour to colleagues, family and friends.

Conclusion

There is a need to share experiences of plagiarism and means of detecting it to improve

overall awareness and reduce occurrence.

Qualified nurses and educators need to maintain the highest possible standards in publications to act as role models for novice or beginner writers. It would be helpful to have guidance from the professional bodies, specifically with regard to plagiarism, so that anyone who deliberately sets out to cheat is aware that there will be serious consequences. Finally, we need to continue to support inexperienced writers to build skills and confidence, and celebrate academic success achieved through hard work and application **NS**

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