D I G I T H U M

The Humanities in the Digital Era

Dossier "Academic Cyberplagiarism"

Academic Cyberplagiarism: Tracing the causes to reach solutions*

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Two figures on the prevalence of academic plagiarism among Spanish university students suffice to give an idea of the scale of the practice: 61.1% of Spanish university students acknowledge having copied excerpts from websites on at least one occasion and included them in the work they hand in as their own; and 3.3% state that they have bought work and handed it in as if they themselves were the authors (Sureda *et al.*, 2008).[1] Accusing fingers were immediately pointed at the internet – wrongly in our view. It is certainly the case that the net has led to an increase in cases of academic plagiarism among university students: the internet and ICTs "facilitate" the perpetration of that practice, which runs counter to academic integrity. However, the roots of the ill spread far and run deep.

Blaming ICTs for the rise in cases of plagiarism in academic settings is like blaming bank robberies on the presence of cash in those buildings. There would indeed be no robberies if there were no money in the banks, but there would be more if bank staff left their safes open. Obviously, bank staff do not leave piles

1. The data emerged in 2007 from a sample of 560 students from around Spain. A more thoroughgoing study carried out on a representative sample of students at the University of the Balearic Islands (727 respondents) revealed still higher percentages: 76.6% acknowledged having copied content from websites and presented it as their own and 4.7% said they had bought work. These figures square with the results found in recent years in research carried out in other countries using the same research method (Underwood *et al.*, 2003; Chapman *et al.*, 2004; Bilić-Zulle *et al.*, 2005; Teixera *et al.*, 2006; McCabe *et al.*, 2006; Rey-Abella *et al.*, 2006; Agnes 2008).

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of cash sitting beside the main door of their banks. In the field of education, however, incitements to fraud are constant, running from unreasonable academic tasks being set by teaching staff to the existence of portals offering *à-la-carte* academic papers (Sureda *et al.,* 2007b). To return to the example cited above, it is also important to be aware that guarding against bank robberies is not the sole responsibility of the security staff or the judges and statutes. The vast majority of people would never rob a bank, even if given the chance. As we see it, much the same is the case with academic plagiarism: the problem does not concern teaching staff alone, nor does it concern all students. Be that as it may, it is nonetheless an ill that can only be cured if it is properly diagnosed and not hastily attributed to some likely-looking suspect.

Plagiarism in academic settings was not engendered by the internet, though the internet has most probably made it easier (to commit, but also to detect). Plagiarism is a complex cultural phenomenon. Our current attitude to creation, authorship and intellectual property, copyright, authors' rights in general and indeed plagiarism itself goes back a little over three centuries, and is closely bound up with they way we perceive other notions such as individualism, autonomy, originality and private property (Swearingen, 1999). The notion of authorship and intellectual property in connection with written texts emerges very clearly in Europe at the time in history when the Protestant Reformation and the coming of the printing press converged (Mallon, 2001). The promotion of individualism and originality fostered by the Enlightenment and Romanticism are also key factors in understanding how authorship evolved in operational terms. Enlightened Humanism elevated the ideas of Locke to lofty heights – the idea that knowledge is the fruit of the mind and human capacity viewed as individual exercises. That was the origin of the notion of the private ownership of ideas and knowledge, and also of the concepts of authorship and copyright in a sense close to their modern one (Foucault, 1968). However, we must stress that the issues of creation, originality and authorship were not always viewed in the same way; they are social constructs that have changed slowly over time, and will no doubt continue to change.

Howard (1999) discerns four basic pillars supporting the modern notion of "authorship": autonomy, originality, ownership and morality. The starting point on the path marked out for us by Dr Howard is that authors must be autonomous in relation to their creations, and then that their creations must be original. As a second step, the authors' autonomy and originality demand proprietary rights of ownership over their creations to ensure that they are safeguarded. Lastly, authors who do not follow the principles of autonomy and originality in their creations show, in Howard's words, "a lack of morality" (Howard, 1999), and deserve to be punished accordingly. From our present-day standpoint, the four properties of authorship singled out by Howard may seem perfectly natural and even scarcely open to question.

However, it must not be forgotten that the four characteristics of authorship, like plagiarism itself, are still cultural constructs and ideological expressions of a specific model of society at a specific time in history. In any creative expression at any time in the history of humanity, there are two contrasting pairs of terms and conceptions: imitation *vs.* originality, and collaboration *vs.* autonomy. Those twin aspects appear in one form or another throughout the centuries, and whether one or the other is stressed depends essentially on the social, economic and political factors at work at any particular time. Hence, as noted above, plagiarism is not a phenomena spawned by the internet, and how it is viewed has not remained constant over time. Furthermore, we make bold to venture that its defining coordinates will change again in the future.

The internet environment and the potential associated with ICTs are shaping the writing and the notion of authorship in the future. The content posted on the net (and more especially its transmission and exchange), along with the new forms of communication made possible by the internet, amount to another step – maybe a decisive one – in reformulating authorship, originality and creation. A new specific status in the transmission of knowledge can be seen to be emerging in the new colloquial writing styles (eg, in "chats" or synchronous communication systems) and new forms of contact, exchange and presentation, and in terms of immediacy, the democratization of authorship, the "horizontalization" of production, interactivity, the various forms of identity associated with the use of the internet, the vast amount of information compiled there, the ease of exchange and cooperation, and so on; and this new emerging status will upset many things in the years to come, if it has not done so already.

When delving into the analysis of academic plagiarism, the coexistence of two clearly distinct positions can be seen: the first one, already mentioned at the beginning of this paper, "blames" the internet and ICTs in general for plagiarism, and suggests establishing detection, control and regulation measures. The second stance involves recognizing that present-day students are facing an array of complex social, economic and technological challenges, and that new tools are needed if they are to be tackled appropriately. In that context, academic plagiarism emerges as just another strand in the generational spectrum, and various factors are picked out to explain its causes.

The factors that can help to throw light on the background to the phenomenon of plagiarism in students are many. To simplify our position, we can distinguish factors closely associated with the education system (which we could call intrasystem factors) from ones that are external to it (extrasystem factors). Even so, they all interact to form a complex mesh, a complex system, that should be carefully appraised.

The following are to be singled out from among the intrasystem factors:

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- The impoverishment of the teacher-student relationship, owing principally to massification in universities. It has been shown in various studies that a closer interpersonal relationship between the teacher and the student brings a decrease in academic plagiarism (Underwood *et al.*, 2003; McCabe *et al.*, 2006).
- The lack or inadequacy of documentary strategies (both in finding and in managing and citing resources) in university students. In many campuses, "information literacy" is still a pipe dream (Comas *et al.*, 2004; Jansen *et al.*, 2005; Comas *et al.*, 2006).
- Asking students to produce kinds of work that "incite" plagiarism in them. Examples might include: setting work in the same ways year after year; not following up the tasks being undertaken, contact being made only when the student hands in the work; setting work assignments without explaining the significance of the task; not demarcating the subject or subjects on which work is expected to be done; not giving clear guidelines as to the sections the finished work is to include.
- Excessive workloads. The transformation of assessment processes over the last twenty years in universities, with fewer examinations to be done from memory and more assessment based on course work, has led to an increase in the number of pieces of work required, and thus in the temptation to resort to plagiarism.
- Poor management by the students of the time and resources available.
- Superficial and insufficiently explained assessments of student projects.
- The lack of clear rules on this issue (particularly in Spain).
- The education system, which stresses results over the process involved. By making the mere capacity to perform a task the prime objective in education, there is little time or recognition for metalearning, creating and thinking. It is surprising, in this information and communication society of ours, that the students are less creative, innovative and dynamic in the sphere of the education system than they are in other contexts – even when using the same tools or resources (Conley, 2003; Rollnick *et al.*, 2008; Kempkes *et al.*, 2008).
- The change of mentality regarding the role of students at universities:[2] students as client-consumers, and *fast-food* learning (Marcus, 1999; Harburg, 2006).
- Competitiveness among students, leading them to seek the "best" way of getting the "best" results.
- Economy of effort on the part of the students.

- The convenience, ease and anonymity afforded by ICTs in plagiarizing.
- The lack of collaboration and coordination among teaching teams.
- A lack of understanding among students (and among teachers in some cases) of what academic plagiarism is. A great deal of plagiarism is unintentional, prompted by ignorance of academic norms and standards in producing pieces of work.

As for the factors external to the education system, the following may be highlighted:

- The idea, widely embraced among young people, that everything on the internet belongs to everyone, and can be borrowed, used, appropriated and disseminated at will.
- Social models and schemes based on the culture of reproduction rather than on the reproduction and production of culture.
- Factors relating to the videoclip generation (Funes, 2005; Garcés Montoya, 2006): seeing and doing many things in a short time, thereby extending the scope of the action though detracting from its depth.
- Examples encountered almost daily of fraud and a lack of ethics in many areas of our life: political corruption, academic fraud, speculative moves in finance, the justification of wars by false evidence, doctored accounts in big companies, the mass production of articles imitating well-known brands, etc.

In facing the growing issue of academic plagiarism, universities[3] have reacted in the form of measures that can be illustrated by referring to three professional roles: the judge, the policeman and the educator. After issuing norms of conduct on the issue of plagiarism, academic institutions take on the role of judge when they penalize offending students. The penalties concerned range from failing the students in the subject concerned to cancelling and withdrawing a previously-awarded qualification when infringements are discovered and proved after the students have completed their studies.

Institutions taking a policing role can be seen particularly when they adopt and use software for detecting plagiarism, such programs being increasingly popular in higher education. It is probably an effective method for dissuasion and for achieving immediate goals. However, if we believe that technology is just another factor in the ill rather than its cause, we cannot cling solely to technology as our saviour. Moreover, we find, paradoxically,

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2. This factor is at present much more evident in English-speaking contexts than in ours.
3. Again, more particularly in English-speaking contexts.

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that some of those anti-plagiarism programs run counter to the protection of authors' rights, since they use databases fed by academic work handed in by students who have not given their consent to their work being used by the software company behind the program. And then 100% effectiveness cannot be claimed for those computer tools, since ways have been found to dodge their scrutiny (McKeever, 2006; Chaudhuri, 2008). Some (Sureda *et al.*, 2007b; Comas *et al.*, 2008) also think that the use of these systems has prompted a rise in the marketing of original academic papers and the appearance of an industry devoted to that field. The fraud occasioned by these academic-paper "factories" generates a new factor for inequality among students: only those with purchasing power can dodge the institution's control systems, while those who cannot must either take their chances or resign themselves to doing the work that others have procured with very little effort.

Thus we come to the third of the roles taken on by the institutions: the role of educator. Education professionals have been devoting great efforts recently to chasing up and detecting fraud, but little effort to remedying the situations that foster it. Detection work – the policeman's role – is necessary, and may well be effective in the short term. Over the long term, however, little will be achieved unless what students are asked to do puts the emphasis on original, personal work, on work involving methods for tracing and solving problems, and on critical analysis. Furthermore, the capacities and skills of students must be enhanced.

Plagiarism in the academic world may be like herpes, the skin disease that is known to be containable but not curable as a disease. To understand the spread of this disease of plagiarism, certain characteristics of the "biotope" in which it develops should be borne in mind. We must remember that we are teaching a cohort of students who in many cases are members of the first generation in their families to be given the chance of university education; a generation that has felt the impact of part-time work and videoclip culture; and a generation that has grown up using technologies requiring a reformulation of the principles of authorship and intellectual property, they being its chief standard-bearers. The proliferation and popularity of internet and ICTs in education has led to literacy not being a sedentary, closed affair or a skill to be acquired, but rather an itinerant development process. The process by which information becomes knowledge lies in the capacity to decode a text and interpret it in the first person. Classic forms of literacy, based on coding and decoding, must be combined and translated into an environment featuring the media and mixed information. Mechanisms need to be put in place to guard against and to clear up the confusion encountered regarding looking for, locating and using information; for therein lies one of the main reasons behind the emergence of plagiarism as a burning issue in the current educational scenario.

Plagiarism is a symptom of a crisis in positioning, the tip of the iceberg of the necessary reshaping of the roles of the teaching staff, the students, the library staff and the administrative staff in our universities. Similarly, the various arguments and stances associated with academic plagiarism also point to the relationship between knowledge and society. In short, in-depth discussions and reflection are needed for remedying a situation we perceive as dangerous.

The collection of articles we have drawn up for this paper – articles we hope will be of assistance in the debate that is needed – tackle academic plagiarism from various standpoints. On the one hand, Santiago Cavanillas (lecturer in Law at the University of the Balearic Islands, Spain) introduces the regulatory side in connection with academic plagiarism. Lecturers Lidija Billić-Zulle and Mladen Petrovečki (School of Medicine, University of Rijeka, Croatia) draw up a present-day overview of the issue on the basis of the research done on academic plagiarism in Europe in recent years. Karl Jones (Liverpool John Moores University, UK) presents and describes the main plagiarism-detection tools implemented in universities. Lastly, the authors of this introduction and Mercè Morey present a compendium of websites, portals and bibliographic references that may awaken readers' interest in this subject.

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