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Use of Bibliography and Academic Plagiarism among University Students

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Abstract

Given the proliferation of student plagiarism from the Internet, the intention of this study is to understand academic plagiarism among university students and how they cite and reference the information they find on the Internet. The study was carried out at Mondragon University (Basque Country, Spain). Quantitative data was collected using two questionnaires, and qualitative data was collected through five different focus groups. The participants were students and their lecturers. The findings suggest that students do not understand the importance of citing and referencing the information they use in their academic research. While students believe that they do not plagiarise, lecturers consider that plagiarism is a real problem.

Keywords

university students; academic plagiarism; use of bibliography; information literacy

*Uso de bibliografía y plagio académico entre los estudiantes universitarios***Resumen**

Este trabajo pretende comprender mejor el plagio académico entre estudiantes universitarios y cómo hacen referencia a la información que citan. También analiza el uso que hacen de la bibliografía y descri-

be cómo buscan la información académica que necesitan. La investigación se realizó en Universidad de Mondragón, donde participaron 140 estudiantes de la licenciatura en Comunicación Audiovisual del curso 2007-2008 y 22 de sus profesores. Los datos cuantitativos fueron recogidos a través de dos cuestionarios, uno para los alumnos y otro para recoger la opinión de los profesores (sobre cómo buscan información sus alumnos). Los datos cualitativos se recogieron a través de cinco grupos de discusión. Los resultados muestran que los estudiantes tienen dificultades para buscar la información académica que necesitan, que buscando información son menos competentes de lo que ellos creen, que solamente utilizan el buscador Google, que no buscan información en inglés y que buscan información de manera no lineal ni planificada.

Palabras clave

búsqueda de información, alfabetización en información, alfabetización digital, estudiantes universitarios, internet

1. Introduction

The Internet is the main source of information that students use for their academic assignments (OCLC, 2005; Fuentes Agustí, 2006; Sureda, Comas, 2006; British Library, 2008); publishing information on the Internet is relatively simple, and almost anyone is capable of managing a website. Consequently, the Internet offers a vast amount of information resources that are constantly updated. The combination of these factors means that the majority of the university community's members has the same resources and sources of information at its disposal as the most advanced learning centres. The majority of students, lecturers and researchers is able to access information offered by the most prestigious journals and scientific websites in the same way and at the same time as the most renowned scientists because the conditions for access to the information are the same for everyone in many universities, through digital collections in university libraries.

Just a couple of decades ago, what was only a dream for scientists, pedagogues and social agents (that information should be within everyone's reach) is now a reality. At the same time, however, this means that information copying is now very simple, and it would appear that plagiarism has increased among students. But what do we understand by plagiarism? How can academic plagiarism be defined? According to Comas and Sureda (2007):

Cyber-plagiarism is understood as [...] locating, adopting and presenting others' ideas, theories, hypotheses, results, texts, etc. as one's own, in any piece of academic work.

In addition, the literature distinguishes between two types of plagiarism (Park, 2003; Bugeja, 2001): intentional plagiarism, where others' ideas and texts are directly presented as one's own, and unintentional plagiarism, where quotations and paraphrases are incorrectly made, or simply where the sources are not cited because students do not know how to do so.

According to Sureda and Comas (2008), 61.1% of university students admitted to having used texts from the Internet without mentioning the author, presenting the ideas as their own. In the

same study, 3.3% of students said that they had handed in, as their own, assignments done by other students. The results of studies carried out in other countries are similar (Teixeira & Rocha, 2006; McCabe, Butterfield & Trevino, 2006; Rey-Abella, Blanch & Folch-Soler, 2006; Agnes, 2008).

So what do university lecturers think about all this? According to Sureda, Comas and Morey (2009), university lecturers believe that students plagiarise because the Internet makes it very easy for them to do so; students do not value effort and hard work; they do not manage time properly; they do not know how to do academic assignments; furthermore, lecturers do not properly monitor such assignments. Likewise, it would appear that the teaching-learning methodologies used by lecturers and the characteristics of the assignments that students are asked to do actually encourage plagiarism (Hunt, 2003; Sureda, Comas & Urbina, 2005).

2. Methodology

Quantitative and qualitative methodologies were used in the research design. Simultaneous triangulation of methods (questionnaires and focus groups) and triangulation of data (of students and their lecturers) (Rodríguez Ruiz, 2005) were also used to enhance the validity of the results.

Participants

There were two types of participants: students and their lecturers. While the object of study was the students, their lecturers were also asked about what the students did, for triangulation of data purposes. A total of 115 students and 22 lecturers took part in the study. Of the students, 25 were in the first year, 33 in the second year, 31 in the third year and 26 in the fourth year of the Audiovisual Communication bachelor's degree course in the 2007/2008 academic year, in the Faculty of Humanities and Education at Mondragon University, Eskoriatza (Guipúzcoa, Basque Country, Spain). All the students (apart from the first-year students) had received three hours of training on how to do academic assignments and on the use of bibliography as part of a subject in the first semester of the second year. This is the reason why the lecturers said that they did not usually explain how to cite bibliographic sources in their subjects.

Data collection took place between November 2007 and February 2008.

Questionnaires

Two types of questionnaires were used. The student questionnaire was the first to be validated. Then, taking it as a reference, the lecturer questionnaire was created and validated. The questionnaires were based on indicators from the Association of College & Research Libraries' Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education (ACRL, 2000). Also taken into account were the questionnaires used in research by Mittermeyer and Quirion (2003), and by Sureda and Comas (2008). They contained five questions, four on a frequency scale and one task question. For the latter, they had to interpret a bibliographic reference.

Focus groups

Focus groups were held to gather information about the students' and the lecturers' social discourse, feelings, experiences and concerns about academic plagiarism and the use that the students made of bibliography. In total, five focus groups were convened: four with the students and one with the lecturers. The focus groups were designed and analysed in line with the guidance offered by Murillo and Mena (2006), Suárez (2005) and Llopis (2005).

3. Results

3.1. Questionnaire results

In the tables, data on what the students thought about the use of bibliography and academic plagiarism are compared with data on what their lecturers thought about what the students did. The standard deviation is shown in brackets.

3.1.1. Citing the author when information created by others is used

The students said that they very often cited the authors of information that they used (two thirds), whereas their lecturers thought that they did so less often.

Table 1. Citing the author when information created by others is used. Students and their lecturers

<i>Mean for students</i>	<i>Mean for lecturers</i>	<i>Level of significance</i>
1,86 (0,95)	1,05 (0,52)	U=436,5; p<0,01 *

Scale: 0-3

The following table shows that the students said that they cited more often as they progressed through their course. The academic year in which they claimed to cite more bibliographic sources was the third year. In the fourth year, however, the frequency of citations returned to levels approaching those of the first year.

Table 2. Citing the author when information created by others is used. Students per year

<i>First year, mean</i>	<i>Second year, mean</i>	<i>Third year, mean</i>	<i>Fourth year, mean</i>	<i>Level of significance</i>
1,58 (0,96)	1,87 (0,94)	2,30 (0,87)	1,62 (0,92)	$\chi^2=9,44$; p<0,05 *

Scale: 0-3

3.1.2. [Task-item] Ability to interpret a bibliographic reference

In order to find out more about the students' real dynamics with regard to bibliography, a task-item was incorporated into the questionnaire. The result was that more than half of the students were unable to interpret a bibliographic reference properly. It is significant that the lecturers considered that only 6.7% of their students was able to interpret a bibliographic reference.

Table 3. [Task-item] Ability to interpret a bibliographic reference. Students and their lecturers

Percentage of students	Percentage of lecturers	Level of significance
45,2%	6,7%	U=428,0; p<0,01 *

Percentage (%)

The students' ability was similar in all years and no progression was observed as the years went by. However, the results for the second year were slightly better than the other years, which may be due to the three hours of training on how to do academic assignments and on the use of bibliography that the students received in the first semester of the second year.

Table 4. [Task-item] Ability to interpret a bibliographic reference. Students per year

First year, percentage	Second year, percentage	Third year, percentage	Fourth year, percentage	Level of significance
41%	59%	38%	38%	$\chi^2=3,04$; p=0,39

Percentage (%)

3.1.3. Use of information created by others as one's own, without making any changes

The students said that they did not present information created by others as their own in their assignments, without making any changes to it or citing the author. However, the lecturers considered that this was usual practice among their students.

Table 5. Use of information created by others as one's own, without making any changes. Students and their lecturers

Mean for students	Mean for lecturers	Level of significance
0,68 (0,77)	1,83 (0,62)	U=244,0; p<0,01 *

Scale: 0-3

As the students progressed through their course, they tended to present information created by others as their own more often, without making any changes to it or citing the author, as shown in the following table.

Table 6. Use of information created by others as one's own, without making any changes. Students per year

<i>First year, mean</i>	<i>Second year, mean</i>	<i>Third year, mean</i>	<i>Fourth year, mean</i>	<i>Level of significance</i>
0,47 (0,61)	0,47 (0,78)	0,83 (0,72)	1,00 (0,84)	$\chi^2=9,09$; $p<0,05$ *

Scale: 0-3

3.1.4. Taking into account that the information's intellectual property always belongs to the author

The students said that they took into account that the information's intellectual property always belonged to the author for half the number of times that they handled information, although their lecturers thought that the frequency was lower.

Table 7. Taking into account that the information's intellectual property always belongs to the author. Students and their lecturers

<i>Mean for students</i>	<i>Mean for lecturers</i>	<i>Level of significance</i>
1,60 (0,92)	0,95 (0,70)	$U=544,5$; $p<0,05$ *

Scale: 0-3

When comparing the student data by year, no differences were found.

Table 8. Taking into account that the information's intellectual property always belongs to the author. Students per year

<i>First year, mean</i>	<i>Second year, mean</i>	<i>Third year, mean</i>	<i>Fourth year, mean</i>	<i>Level of significance</i>
1,63 (0,95)	1,70 (0,91)	1,48 (0,99)	1,57 (0,87)	$\chi^2=0,73$; $p=0,87$

3.2. Focus group results

3.2.1. First-year focus group analysis

The first-year students considered that copying information created by others in an academic environment was an issue of personal ethics, and they did not express any value judgment on this conduct. They thought that it was easy to detect who had copied, and they all said that they did not usually do so: "I prefer doing an assignment my own way, even if it's wrong, rather than doing a perfect assignment using other people's words."¹

This group considered that, to use information created by others, it was essential to feel identified with what they had said. If they did not identify themselves with a text, then they did not use it in their assignments.

1. Translator's note: The source language of this and all subsequent student comments was Spanish.

When they used information created by others, they did not usually make any bibliographic citations, although they claimed that they knew how to make such citations if necessary. They only made bibliographic citations when it was strictly necessary, that is to say, when the lecturer explicitly asked them to do so.

3.2.2. Second-year focus group analysis

This group's thoughts on the issue were quite confused. They considered that it was never acceptable to use information created by others, whether paraphrased, translated or quoted; they considered this to be copying, that the quality of their assignments would be lower, and that the lecturer would penalise them for doing so: "it happens a lot... if you haven't got a clue about a topic and you manage to find a good article and copy it in one way or another, and then, on top of that, you go and put the bibliographic citation, well he's going to say: 'you're good at copying, aren't you?' So it's often better to sign it yourself without saying a word, and that's that." They considered that it was a better strategy not to offer the reader any bibliography and to present the assignment as if they had not used information created by others: "if you give the bibliography and stuff, he'll soon realise where you got the information from, because you're giving him all the clues. It's often better to keep quiet and not cite anything." However, they were not sure whether their conduct was right or wrong: "hey, if you find something you were looking for, well that's what you're going to write, isn't it? The lecturers are very quick to tell us that we're copying when we use other people's information, but if there's no choice, what are we supposed to do about it?"

They were very sure about the procedure they needed to follow when using sources of information in their assignments: "copying everything no, but taking some text in Spanish and translating it into Basque and adding a couple of things, well yes."

In general, they thought that they could use information from the Internet as they saw fit; they did not have any ethical qualms in this respect: "if it can't be used, well why do they post it on the Internet?"

They considered that they did not have much need to make bibliographic references in the course of their work, and when they did so, it was generally in extended assignments. However, their lecturers did not normally ask them to make any bibliographic references and citations.

3.2.3. Third-year focus group analysis

Third-year students thought that using information created by others as if it were their own was a little cheeky, but they did not consider the conduct to be inappropriate. They made bibliographic references and citations only when they were asked to do so, and that did not happen very often: "when the assignments are big, then yes, but if we're asked to read a text, we search for a bit of information and create our own text, and then you don't put the bibliography."

Some members of the group said that they used direct quotations in their texts, especially when they wanted to insert an author's words literally. However, these students did not relate this practice to bibliographic citations, and it was not clear what procedure they followed. The discourse on direct

quotations was contradictory. On the one hand, they said that they had been taught how to make citations and references, and on the other, that they would find it hard to make them properly: "they've taught us how to do it, but I can't remember how to."

When they had to do academic assignments, the procedure that they normally followed was to search for a variety of information and then draft a new text, making particular use of paraphrasing: "we underline the main ideas, we use other channels, we go to other sources to search for information, but always for information that's somehow related to the topic, and then we put it all together, a sort of potpourri or collage." A Bakhtinian air and a connection with the berrypicking theory (Bates, 1989) can be observed in this explanation.

3.2.4. Fourth-year focus group analysis

The fourth-year group did not show any interest in the issue. In their opinion, they were not used to making any bibliographic citations because the lecturers did not ask them to do so: "we don't generally cite the authors because we're not asked to do so and because many of the assignments are practical." However, they did consider it positive to provide citations and produce bibliographic references in academic assignments.

3.2.5. Lecturer focus group analysis

During the conversation, it became clear that the lecturers believed that their students did not usually make any citations or references: "fourth-year students don't know how to cite, and that's a pretty basic thing. They'll leave university without knowing how to insert other author's texts in their assignments"² or "I believe that the problem [of not citing or using bibliography] has arisen in every final-year project I've seen since I've been a tutor." They considered that the teaching staff was largely responsible, that is to say, that the lecturers did not get their students used to working with bibliographic references and citations, and that they did not teach the students how to use information they found on the Internet properly: "it may be something that we've overlooked, because we don't help them with the bibliography" or "we don't usually do any work on bibliographic citations, or on how to present direct, in-text quotations, and it's crucial for them to learn how to manage the direct- and indirect-speech issue." The lecturers also thought that all of this was reflected in the quality of the students' assignments: "the students don't handle much information when doing their assignments, and they lack attention to detail and accuracy; they refer to things generally and don't mention anything specific."

The focus group lecturers expressed great concern about academic plagiarism among students: "right now, plagiarism is a major problem in this faculty, especially for subjects given in Spanish. Because it's one thing to build on information, and quite another to copy it directly. As a faculty, I believe that the message we put out should be much stricter, that plagiarising is equivalent to a fail."

2. Translator's note: The source language of this and all subsequent lecturer comments was Spanish.

Not having an anti-plagiarism policy in the faculty was considered to be a negative aspect: "as an academic institution, we've yet to realise the gravity of this situation and actually convey that to the students. But it shouldn't be that way, and the message we ought to convey is that plagiarism has its consequences." They also realised the difficulties that this involved: "yes, but to do that we have to be very tough and very specific."

Likewise, it was also considered that intentional copying or using other people's ideas without citing them was not the same as doing so unintentionally, simply because the students did not know how to make the bibliographic references or citations. The lecturers felt that the fact of living in a culture where originality is especially rewarded had an influence: "everything has to be original, created by me, it has to be mine; if not, it is considered to be plagiarism." That is why they felt that many students thought that it would not be a good idea for them to cite the ideas that they were using because, if they did, it would be obvious that their work was not original, and the that lecturer would penalise them for it. With this in mind, it was considered expedient to train students on creativity and originality too: "working on the issue of originality and creativity with the students, on what it means to drink from universal fountains of knowledge, etc."

4. Conclusions and discussion

4.1. The students do not often cite the sources of information that they use because the lecturers do not ask them to do so

Based on the information gained from all the focus groups and the questionnaire, it is clear to conclude that the students did not usually cite the sources of information that they used in their academic assignments. Over half of all the students did not know how to interpret a citation (this result is slightly higher than the one obtained by Mittermeyer and Quirion (2003) for Canadian students). However, almost two-thirds of the students said that they cited the sources of information used. It would seem, therefore, that there is some contradiction between what they did and what they said they did. The explanation for this may be that the students knew what the good practices were (citing the sources of information used) and ticked them in the opinion items on the questionnaire, but, through the task-item and the focus groups, it was possible to elucidate what the real practice actually was (they did not cite the sources).

The students in all years and the lecturers stated that the main reason for the students not citing the sources of information was that the lecturers did not ask them to do so, with the law of minimal effort thus prevailing. The attitude of the teaching staff in this respect was ambiguous; on the one hand, they considered it essential for the students to learn how to construct knowledge by basing their ideas on information created by others, but on the other, they did not encourage this in their lectures or in their teaching practice. They considered themselves and the academic institution to be the main culprits for this worrisome situation.

4.2. A lot of students consider citing the sources of information used to be a dangerous because they believe that the lecturer will penalise them if he realises that they have used ideas and information created by another person

The evidence was not categorical in this respect, though this idea did arise in three of the four groups. They considered that citing the sources of information gave the lecturer too many clues, which would then lead to him penalising them. They believed that it was better not to offer bibliography or make citations, and to present the work as if it were totally original. In the literature, nothing like this has been found, and it is clear that further research is required to better understand and change this mechanism.

4.3. The students consider that they do not often plagiarise, but their lecturers feel that plagiarism has become a problem

It is clear that the students felt that they did not plagiarise. They considered plagiarism to be an issue connected with each individual's personal ethics, without judging it.

The students' actions differed depending on the format of the information; when working with texts, they did not act in the same way as with music or videos. The same conclusion was reached in a study of the behaviour of young British people undertaken by the British Library and JICS (2008a). However, both Frand (2000) and Shih and Allen (2006) concluded that the attitudes of young people did not vary with the format.

In keeping with other studies (Luckin et al., 2008; Stock, 2008; British Library & JICS, 2008b), the lecturers felt that plagiarism had become a problem, though with the particular feature that plagiarism happened mainly in subjects taught in Spanish, probably due to the fact that much more information is available in Spanish than in Basque. In order to solve this problem, the lecturers considered that educational organisations should create more specific, tougher policies. The lecturers believed that one of the reasons for the propagation of plagiarism was the fact that we live in a culture where originality is rewarded, and that this might confound the students when it comes to understanding how knowledge is created. It is clear that this is a complex issue, and it would appear that incorporating content related to the creation and construction of knowledge into the curriculum could be effective, in such a way that students are able to understand that, in order to create knowledge, it is necessary to draw on prior knowledge, and that one of the main ways of achieving that is to use information created by others. By doing so, they would understand the dynamics of the 'wheel of knowledge', which they could become part of.

In-depth research also needs to be done on students' real information-handling practices to find out about what they really do, since this study has made it clear that there may not always be a match between what students say they do and what they actually do.

Finally, in order to be able to work with students on topics connected with originality and knowledge creation, tradition, copying, plagiarism, and the importance of using and acknowledging prior knowledge, etc., it is worth investigating further into the most appropriate didactic transposition.

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