University of Basel

Information, data and media literacy

Podcast Transcript

PLAGIARISM

Cornelia Eitel, a specialist of information competence at the University Library in Basel, and philosopher Professor Markus Wild discuss plagiarism.

Cornelia Eitel and philosopher Professor Markus Wild (University of Basel) discuss how plagiarism is handled, the origin of the term, academic responsibility and personal contributions, and plagiarism scandals in politics.

Is the University of Zurich's approach of penalizing student plagiarism with fines of CHF 4,000 the right way to increase academic integrity in the universities?

Yes, the University of Zurich wanted to impose a new disciplinary regulation applicable from September that would punish academic misconduct by students more severely. However, it has since been withdrawn because there was no legal basis for it. That was of course embarrassing for the university, but the real question is why the University of Zurich believes that a fine of up to CHF 4,000 should be imposed for student plagiarism. I think the message is very clear here: the University of Zurich wants to say, first, that plagiarism is academic misconduct and, second, that it is a type of theft of intellectual authorship. It's essentially an academic version of doping. You're gaining an advantage in a fraudulent manner. So I can understand very well why the University of Zurich wants to send a message. But I don't think this alone is the silver bullet – not at all. The penal code is not the ideal means of preventing violent crime; it's really the last resort. Similarly, university disciplinary regulations should be the last resort. It would be much better – and the universities are already doing this to some extent – to teach students from the beginning that academic work and information literacy are important, and that plagiarism is not a trivial offense. When we arrive at university, we enter the academic world, and it is considered a serious scholarly offense to copy or steal ideas without giving proper credit.

Can the term "plagiarism", which was used for the first time in the first century CE and equated at that time with kidnapping, even still be used today? Isn't every text, piece of music or work of art ultimately a synthesis of ideas and thoughts that already exist?

Often the origin of words isn't always very enlightening since words have complicated histories. But in this particular case, the origin of the word is truly revealing and worth mentioning. The word "plagiarism" as we understand it today was introduced about 2,000 years ago by the Roman poet Martial. Martial was upset that a certain Fidentius was acting as if he were the author of Martial's poems. Martial looked for a word to describe this crime, but none yet existed. He finally found what he was looking for in Roman law. It contained the offense of "plagarium" or slave theft. Martial understood his poems to be like freed slaves. Anyone who claimed to be the author of these poems was essentially re-enslaving them, which was a form of kidnapping. Martial borrowed the legal term and introduced a new concept under it. It's the same term we still use today. Incidentally, this also shows that poets can be creators of culture. After 2,000 years, we still mean more or less the same thing by the term: intellectual theft.

What an interesting history of this word...

Yes, it really is an origin of a word that still holds true today. As for the second half of the question, that's actually something that always keeps students busy – given the knowledge we have. There is a very famous image from the Middle Ages by the scholar Bernard of Chartres, who once said that we are dwarfs on the shoulders of giants. That means we can only see as far as we do because we're building on the work of others – standing on the shoulders of giants. That's an image or metaphor that is important for knowledge and scholarship. Everyone who engages in scholarship is building on previous accomplishments, regardless of the discipline. We build on it critically or by continuing to work on it. That's why it's so important to clearly distinguish between what you adopt from previous scholarship and what you contribute to it yourself. A synthesis of previous scholarship – for example, as a master's student, I write a history of 50 years of Swiss psychiatric research – is itself an achievement because it is a demonstration of all the research. It is important in precisely such situations to differentiate between the work of synthesis that you compiled yourself and what you have from others. That's why I think this image is very important. Precisely because we build on the work of others – stand on the shoulders of others – we must distinguish between ourselves and the shoulders, and not act as if we were the giants. Most of us – myself included – are dwarfs.

The same phrase was also the slogan of Google Scholar, the academic search engine, for a while. It was displayed prominently on its landing page: "Standing on the shoulders of giants." I have another question for you: can students in the humanities and social sciences up to the doctoral level even come up with original new arguments and conclusions? Isn't it more the case that everything they write is a synthesis, and for that reason, nearly every word, phrase or sentence should be accompanied by a source citation?

As I already mentioned, synthesis itself can represent an achievement. That should not be undervalued. I certainly believe that master's students can make original contributions. But that involves also having a clear understanding of what has already been done and referencing it clearly. Then, for example, they might discover a premise that has not yet been properly addressed. They might discover an option that had previously been mostly ignored. They might discover parallels between two areas. I believe that's all possible at the master's level. At the bachelor's level, it's more a matter of scholarly finger exercises. You're still familiarizing yourself with academic work. But it is precisely here that it's important to distinguish between what I take from others and what I contribute myself. Finger exercises aren't a bad thing; they are extremely important. As a bachelor's student, it may be a bit of an overreach to expect originality. First, you have to get used to academic work. No one just sits down and plays a Schubert sonata. You start with finger exercises, and it works the same way in science.

That's a wonderful image, but I still have to note that I've frequently gotten very concerned questions in courses from bachelor's students, such as: "How can I avoid plagiarism when I submit my bachelor's thesis? After all, I don't have any thoughts of my own yet." So there are some very intense fears among students – in particular at the undergraduate level.

I can understand that these students might have some fears, and sometimes we don't know if someone else has already had a particular thought. But the point isn't that they have to know everything already. The point is that when I read something, I must write down the source. I have to reference it. But in science, it can certainly happen that I develop an idea and then later run across the same idea elsewhere. Some thoughts hang in the air and already exist elsewhere. The key point here is: "To the best of my knowledge and belief." That is not the same as omniscience. Neither omniscience nor originality are realistic expectations.

Are we currently dealing with a modern type of witch hunt, when self-appointed plagiarism hunters meticulously search through the ancient master's and doctoral dissertations of public figures, eventually ruining their careers?

This is about a systemic search for plagiarism among people who attract public interest. It might be relevant to recall a case several years ago; namely, the case involving Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg in 2011. Mr. Guttenberg was a German politician and member of the CDU who served as the Minister of Defense. In Guttenberg's case, doctoral law and political science students noticed that his dissertation contained a number of quotes that were not cited as quotes. Guttenberg felt increasingly backed into a corner and eventually had to resign, and the University of Bayreuth revoked his doctoral title. Justifiably, in my opinion. When you have a doctoral title, that is symbolic capital. It's an entry ticket into a particular

world. When I was in Berlin, a friend advised me that I should search for an apartment not as Markus Wild, but rather as Dr. Markus Wild. As soon as I included the title, I started getting much more attractive apartment offers. In other words, it gave me an advantage. That's why I believe that people must earn their title honestly, because it gives you access to both social and economic advantages. I find the current cases surrounding the federal elections in 2021 a bit different. Two candidates for Chancellor, Annalena Baerbock and Armin Laschet, both wrote books on politics and used publicly accessible sources in the process. For example, the EU candidate countries in 2004 were copied from Wikipedia. I think it's an exaggeration here to say that this constitutes academic misconduct or a grave misstep, since they didn't copy an academic article or earn titles or awards in the process. This is more a matter of clumsy, sloppy book-writing – which is also bad, of course, and certainly not desirable either. In short, I don't know why we need these poorly written books. They really are not useful. They are unprofessional and do not help us to learn anything about the people. Sometimes it happens that students do sloppy work. But that must not be the goal.