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CYBER-PSEUDEPIGRAPHY: A NEW CHALLENGE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY AND MANAGEMENT

James Smith Page

Abstract

There is no lack of critical literature dealing with cyber-plagiarism and the implications for assessment in higher education. The practice of the selling of academic papers through the Internet is generally included under the category of plagiarism, although it is suggested that this ought to be considered under the separate category of cyber-pseudepigraphy. Pseudepigraphy is defined in this essay as the deliberate ascription of false authorship to a piece of writing, and cyber-pseudepigraphy is defined as using the Internet to have another person write an academic essay or paper, without this authorship being acknowledged. It is suggested that cyber-pseudepigraphy has widespread implications, and five critical issues are discussed. The essay finally raises the prospect of a return to some form of unseen examination as a method of student assessment as a way of dealing with this problem. [Page breaks from the print version of this article are indicated in bold brackets].

Essay

There is no lack of critical literature over the past decade dealing with the growth of academic plagiarism through the Internet. Anderson (1999), Austin and Brown (1999), Decoo (2002), Harris (2001), and Lathrop and Foss (2000) are some examples. The practice of buying completed academic work through the Internet is generally included within the category of plagiarism or cyber-plagiarism. However I would suggest that this practice is quite separate from plagiarism, and ought to be understood as a form of Internet or cyber-pseudepigraphy. Pseudepigraphy, in a restricted sense, refers to the ancient Middle Eastern practice of writers ascribing a false name as the author of a particular work, usually to give a piece of writing greater authority or credibility. In an extended sense, we can refer to pseudepigraphy as any attempt to assign a false name to a piece of writing. The instance where someone pays another person to write a paper or even a thesis for [429/430] academic assessment is a modern example of pseudepigraphy. There is of course nothing new about a student doing this. As with plagiarism, it is a form of fraud. However, it is reasonable to suggest that modern factors, such as the financial advantage accruing from attaining a higher education qualification (Day & Newburger, 2002), and the advent of the Internet, have provided enhanced motivation and possibilities for this practice.

Much of the opportunity for cyber-pseudepigraphy comes from services advertised on the Internet to assist with the writing of essays, sometimes known as "term paper mills". It would not be prudent here to list the websites of these organisations, although these are also often displayed on student noticeboards. Most such websites specifically state that they are only research or editing services - thereby keeping ethical respectability and safeguarding against litigation. There is often a fine line between advertising to assist a person and actually completing the work itself. Thus, cyber-pseudepigraphy could be defined as using the Internet to procure another person to write an academic essay or paper. A number of socio-economic

factors encourage such a practice, although undoubtedly one of the foremost is the commodification of higher education and associated emphasis on credentialism. Higher education (and indeed all education) is increasingly seen not in terms of personal growth or attainment of skills, but rather in terms of attainment of a specific qualification. Moreover, there are ample data indicating that those with higher education credentials do enjoy greater earnings. It is therefore not surprising that the option to pay someone else to write an academic essay or paper is such an appealing proposition.

There are also arguable cultural reasons for the growth in cyber-plagiarism and cyber-pseudepigraphy. Larochelle (1999) argues that the poststructuralist emphasis on the demise of the author means that the idea of the sole and autonomous author for a document becomes very tenuous. Randall (1999) has argued that plagiarism is a logical extension of imperialism, in that a person mines and exploits ideas that can assist in the completion of a particular task. More recently, Randall (2002) has argued that plagiarism is long established and inevitable, as writers constantly utilise the ideas about them. Angelil-Carter (2000) argues that plagiarism can be part of a process where by the writer discovers his/her own voice. However, in this regard pseudepigraphy is quite different from plagiarism, as pseudepigraphy, in the modern context of higher education, cannot be explained as anything other than fraudulent. My own view is that the cyber-plagiarism and cyber-pseudepigraphy can be best explained through the neo-liberal dominance of market place economics. Education, including higher education, is rarely seen as an end in itself, but rather in instrumental terms as “something” or a commodity to be acquired. The question therefore becomes how can this “something” be acquired most readily. The obvious answer is to pay for it or at least to use for free what is already available. In this essay I want to raise five critical issues relating to cyber-pseudepigraphy and relevant to student assessment in higher education.

The first critical issue related to cyber-pseudepigraphy is that this form of fraud may be very common. McCabe, Trevino and Butterfield (2001) have presented evidence [430/431] that academic cheating in general has become more pervasive. At the moment, no specific data are available on cyber-pseudepigraphy and these would be very difficult to obtain, due to the fact that fraud and the nature of the fraud are being discussed. Research into the extent of academic fraud is also something which institutions of higher education would be hardly likely to encourage, since this would result in potentially adverse publicity for the institution. The marker of an essay may well have suspicions that a particular essay has not been written by the nominated student author — especially if the marker knows the student personally. Yet obtaining proof of this is another matter. What we do know is that the Internet is being increasingly used as a reference source by students in writing essays and papers. It therefore follows that students will have increasing access to commercial essay writing services now available on the Internet. The growth of such essay writing services is perhaps the most important indicator of the prevalence of this form of academic fraud. Put very simply, these Internet essay writing services would not be proliferating if there were not a market for the services offered. There is good reason to suspect that this form of fraud may be widespread.

The second critical issue arising from cyber-pseudepigraphy is that this form of fraud poses a significant challenge to public confidence in institutions of higher education and the qualifications bestowed by those institutions. With plagiarism, there can be some doubt that the writer has unconsciously borrowed ideas that he/she might have read before. However, with pseudepigraphy, there is no doubt that the action is fraudulent. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that there is no sure way of determining whether a specific essay has in fact been written by the indicated author or if it has been a commissioned essay. It is difficult not to see this as undermining the integrity of a qualification bestowed by an educational institution. Any particular process of assessment not only needs to be working, but it needs to be seen to be operating fairly and justly. John Rawls has suggested (1972, 4-5, 453-454) that one of the characteristics of a basic social institution is that there is a general

public confidence that such institutions satisfy accepted principles of justice and fairness. Clearly a situation wherein individuals are able to pay for papers and essays to be written for them, and through this to attain a qualification, is a manifestly unfair and unjust one, and can only serve to undermine confidence in the social institutions which allow this to happen.

The third critical issue related to cyber-pseudepigraphy is that this poses a major problem of justice and fairness for students. The problem is not merely a corporate but also an individual one. Put simply, higher education institutions have a responsibility to those students whose submitted essays and papers as their own to ensure that there is a mechanism to ensure that all work submitted for assessment is actually written by the students. If this does not happen, then the value and authenticity of a qualification is undermined. This is not fair or just to the student who does submit authentic work. The student who submits authentic work has a reasonable expectation that the educational institution will have in place structures and procedures to ensure that non-authentic or pseudepigraphic work is not [431/432] submitted for assessment, or at least that non-authentic or pseudepigraphic essays or papers are detected.

The fourth critical issue arising from cyber-pseudepigraphy is that there is a problem with character education within higher education. As Aristotle demonstrated, character is something which is developed through habit. We become what we do. The problem with tolerating fraud, such as pseudepigraphy, is that the higher education institution is indeed assisting in the entrenchment of dishonesty. The fact that the institution itself is not perpetrating the dishonest action does not alter this. One of the ironies of the debate about academic cyber-fraud is that education for ethics and character is sometimes seen as part of the solution to the problem. However, without having specific structures in place to prevent such fraud, it would seem that the higher education institution is part of the problem. This is especially the case in an assessment culture which continually rewards external results rather than the character of the student of a particular discipline.

The final critical issue arising from cyber-pseudepigraphy is that it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that educational institutions and national authorities need to take urgent action. For some time, standard approaches to dealing with cyberplagiarism have included greater interaction with the student, gradual monitoring of student progress, a strong commitment to formative and well as summative assessment, and usage of plagiarism detection techniques. Thus, ideally, a tutor or teacher will discuss with a student his/her understanding of a topic and encourage the student to engage with the subject matter. There are however serious practical difficulties with this, given the mass nature of modern education and given the growth of distance education. Moreover, with cyber-pseudepigraphy, the standard techniques to deal with cyber-plagiarism are simply not effective. The problem is that the marker is obliged to assess any student on the quality of the work the student has submitted, and there is no sure way to determine whether the student has actually written the specific item of submitted work. Ultimately, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that, in the Internet age, higher education institutions must revert to at least some element of unseen examination in student assessment, be this oral or written. Without alternative methods of assessment, this is the only means that can ascertain that the work being submitted for the student has been actually written by the student.

In the long term, one might well hope for a change in educational philosophy. One might well hope that higher education might be seen as a process of personal growth, rather than merely a process of acquiring a credential. However, given the growth of the commodification of higher education, such a hope seems unlikely to be fulfilled in the near future. The view of this writer is that, given the nature of cyber-pseudepigraphy, the only effective response can be some form of unseen examination. Whatever is done, it is important that some action is taken by universities, and that national and state agencies with responsibility for the oversight of higher education insist upon action being taken. Without this, it seems we are at serious

risk of a steady [432/433] diminution of the credibility of higher education institutions and the process of higher education.

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