Common Misconceptions among Students about Plagiarism

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While grading reports for the courses I teach and reading theses drafts, I come across large portions of text copied verbatim from the internet. I am writing this document to remove some of the common misconceptions about plagiarism.

Misconception 1. If it is only in the introduction/literature review of the report/paper, then it does not matter. After all these are "peripheral" parts of the report.

When you submit a paper/report - it is not just the analysis (which is the meat of the report) but also the quality of writing of the report (including introduction, literature survey, discussion of models, conclusion etc.) that will count towards the marks/ paper being accepted for publication.

Misconception 2. If you cite the source, it is fine if you copy parts of the paper.

This is not true. You cannot copy large parts from any other source verbatim (even if you cite the source). One line or so may be cited verbatim - but within quotation marks.

Misconception 3. If it is freely available on the web, then it is ok to copy it.

These days there are many people who put a lot of material on the web and it is available to everyone free of cost. This is a wonderful thing for spread of information. Most journals papers are also freely available on the web. There are many people who write blogs, newspaper articles etc. for a living and these are also available on the web. They are generating "content" and producing a marketable product that they may get paid for. You cannot copy and pass these off as your own work.

Misconception 4. You will not get caught.

Trust me, most teachers who have many years experience grading reports can easily catch signs of plagiarism. It is easy to detect changes in writing style and ability. Further with the availability of many plagiarism checking packages such as turnitin and iThenticate, it is easy to trace the

original articles and even get a numerical score of the percentage of text that has been copied from elsewhere. In our institute, MTech theses do not pass, if the level of similarity is more than 10%. Sometimes students try to game the system by paraphrasing some parts of the text and changing the order of words, but even so experienced evaluators can catch the discrepancies.

Misconception 5. Everyone does it.

This belief starts very young, often from school. Children often download stuff from the net for their homework. In fact often times they are given assignments that are not appropriate for their age level - possibly so that the level of education appears to be more advanced than it is. Children have no other option but to copy, and teachers and parents that are busy and preoccupied often turn a blind eye. However, it is not a good practice at that time, and it is definitely not acceptable in a university setting. Even if there are some universities and organizations that may turn a blind eye to such "stealing", most respected universities do not tolerate this and most honest students do not resort to it. Even a somewhat mediocre report written by honest effort is better than an excellent plagiarized one.

Misconception 6. It is not harmful.

You may think that if someone has put up their writing on the web and they do not even get to know that you have copied from them - then why should you care?

In today's progressively virtual world, a lot of people's efforts and ideas go into online content - such as writing, music, art, photographs and videos. When you use their content ***to gain personal benefit*** - it is stealing. Note that when you copy other's words, you gain personal benefit out of it - namely that the quality of your writing is perceived to be good. For serious cases of stealing, you may face legal action or your university may have loss of face. Your personal credibility and the institute's reputation is at stake here. There have been cases where an instance of plagiarism has tarnished a researcher's academic reputation long after they indulged in plagiarism.

To conclude

As an institute, our students are our ambassadors to the world. If there is one value we would like our students to inculcate, it is that of academic and professional integrity. Avoiding plagiarism like the plague it is, is the first step towards nurturing a culture of integrity and improving our reputation in the global academic community.