Dealing with the Problem of Literature Plagiarism in Assignments

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Introduction

Plagiarism is a broad concept. This document only considers plagiarism of literature in assignments. We won't discuss the misuse of artwork or oral sources. The problem of plagiarism is increasing, mainly because digital sources are so available these days. And it certainly compromises authenticity and integrity.

Our main issues with plagiarism are:

- Offenders are cheating, stealing and being dishonest. How inappropriate for those preparing for ministry in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ!
- Offenders are usually not engaging as well with their research material.
- Offenders are developing a habit which they are likely to practise elsewhere.

Theological colleges must oppose the practice. This workshop seeks to provide some assistance and provoke helpful thinking on the matter.

Defining forms of literature plagiarism

Plagiarism is using sources without properly acknowledging them. There are many forms.

Discuss the following forms of literature plagiarism. For each form, ask:

- How common is it?
- How likely is it to be deliberate?
- How serious is it?
- How can it be discovered?

Process issues:

P1: Someone else writes for him.

P2: He uses AI or related software.

Serious referencing issues:

S1: He copies directly without a reference.

S2: He slightly adjusts wording and gives no reference.

S3: He gives a false reference.

S4: He copies directly with a reference but doesn't indicate it as a quote.

S5: He gives a reference but doesn't list a corresponding source.

Lessor referencing issues:

L1: He uses ideas without a reference.

L2: He slightly adjusts wording (as if he put it in his own words) and gives a reference.

L3: He gives an inadequate reference (e.g. no page numbers when such are available).

L4: His reference is so placed that it doesn't indicate what material it refers to.

Self-plagiarism: This involves a student re-using what he submitted previously, without properly acknowledging it. Treat it as when the source is by another author.

Unintentional plagiarism: Colleges must try to remove the possibility of such a claim being valid.

Misrepresenting an author: This isn't plagiarism, but we must address the problem if we discover it.

Examples of some of the forms of plagiarism

Quoted and referenced correctly: *"Sin to the Christian ... is something that worries him, and sometimes trips him up; but it never drives him to despair"* (Lloyd-Jones 1973:254).

Example of S1: Sin to the Christian ... is something that worries him, and sometimes trips him up; but it never drives him to despair.

Example of S2: Sin worries a Christian, and sometimes makes him trip up; but it never leads him to despair.

Example of S3: *"Sin to the Christian ... is something that worries him, and sometimes trips him up; but it never drives him to despair"* (Morris 1987:55).

Example of S4: Lloyd-Jones (1973:254) believes that sin to the Christian is something that worries him, and sometimes trips him up; but it never drives him to despair.

Example of L1: We know that sin does worry and trouble the Christian but, because of grace and enablement, he does not end up despairing.

Example of L2: Sin worries a Christian, and sometimes makes him trip up; but it never leads him to despair (Lloyd-Jones 1973:254).

Example of L3: *"Sin to the Christian ... is something that worries him, and sometimes trips him up; but it never drives him to despair"* (Lloyd-Jones 1973).

Example of L4: Apart from the transition in verse 25, Paul's words at the end of Romans 7 express failure and despair. We know that sin does worry and trouble the Christian, but he does not end up despairing. Surely, a mature Christian like the apostle Paul on his third missionary journey, who often wrote with victory and confidence in Christ wouldn't have spoken those words. On the other hand, it is usually the more mature Christians who take sin so seriously. (Lloyd-Jones 1973:254)

Reducing the occurrences of plagiarism

There are various ways which should preferably all be used. Can you think of others?

Have an assignment writing guide: A college needs a document which lecturers and students can refer to, which clearly spells out the right way and the wrong way of using sources in an assignment.

"Preach" against it: At theological colleges students are hopefully seeking to avoid sin and to please God. The sinfulness of plagiarism must be stressed. It isn't just a technical academic issue. And it is better to fail a course than to cheat. Academic failure is less serious than moral failure.

Help students gain the needed skills: They need the ability to do the following:

(1) Write well in English
(2) Record bibliographic information
(3) Take notes while doing research reading
(4) Store the notes
(5) Quote, paraphrase, summarise and gather information properly
(6) Distinguish between the four
(7) Use source material in an argument
(8) Reference properly
(9) Compile a proper list of sources
(10) Evaluate sources

Warn and penalise: Warn students and heavily penalise plagiarism from their first semester of study. They must quickly learn that it isn't worth it.

Make students sign a declaration: Let them sign that the assignment was their own work and that they didn't plagiarise.

Give very specific assignment instructions: Try to make it hard to get a ready article of the right length on just the right topic from the Internet.

Detecting plagiarism offenses

Without plagiarism checking software

It is impossible to detect all plagiarism, especially without special software. But there are signs to look out for:

- Is the language the language of the student?
- Is he using vocabulary which is far above him?
- Is he using references which don't have corresponding listed sources?
- Are some of the sources unlikely for the student to have used?
- Does he refer to Internet sites which were accessed a long time ago or which are no longer available?
- Is he using pronouns in an inappropriate way (like "I" when obviously not referring to the student and "you" when obviously not referring to the lecturer)?

Ask a student directly to tell you about the sources he used and how he wrote various parts of the assignment which you find suspicious. It is harder for him to lie to your face than to deceive subtly in an assignment.

With plagiarism checking software

Insist on students submitting digitally, preferably as documents by a regular word processor.

Depending on the software, one must be careful to interpret the results fairly and properly. Go through the exact fits and other similarities which the programme picks up. It will take more time, but you can't just use the output as the percentage of plagiarism.

If there is plagiarism, determine which of the forms it is. Also realise that some literary sources might not be known by the checker.

Also realise that the better checkers with access to more sources are obviously more expensive.

Dealing with plagiarism offenses

The process must be simple enough not to deter lecturers from dealing with offenders.

At the same time, the process must be detailed enough to distinguish between what is more serious and what is less serious.

When you decide on the process, document it in a policy. That will ensure more fairness and consistency. It will also make it easier to deal with unreasonable offenders.

Keep a log of plagiarism offenses, so that lecturers can check a student's record of previous offenses, if there are any.

It is important to log every significant offense.

It is important to personally address the offending student. He must understand well what the problem is. He must get the opportunity to explain what he did and why. He must get the opportunity to ask questions. Ideally, in the end, he must learn and/or repent.

It can help a student if he resubmits an assignment. But the due date for the assignment must be early enough to allow for this, not a week before the exams.

Outcomes for plagiarism offenses

Design your own scheme for dealing with plagiarism offenses.

Below are two schemes which could work for your college or be adapted.

The second one distinguishes between the various forms of plagiarism (see page 1 of these notes).

Scheme 1

The first table indicates the outcome of offenses. The second table describes the various outcomes.

Offense	Student	Degree of plagiarism	
		<20%	**>20%**
First	1st year of any undergrad. programme	A	B
	Other	B	C
Second	1st year of any undergrad. programme	B	C
	Other	C	C
Subsequent	Any student	D	D

Outcome	Description of outcome
A	He resubmits. Multiply new mark by 75%.
B	He resubmits. Multiply new mark by 50%.
C	He gets 0 for the assignment.
D	He fails the course.

Scheme 2

The first table indicates the outcome of "first semester" offenses (the first semester in which the student is caught). The second table describes the various outcomes.

Form of plag.	Higher level than 1st year undergrad.	More than 20% of paper involved?	Outcome
L	No	No	#1
		Yes	#2
	Yes	No	#2
		Yes	#3
S	No	No	#2
		Yes	#3
	Yes	No	#3
		Yes	#4
P	No	-	#5
	Yes	-	#6

Outcome	Description of outcome
#1	Subtract 10% from his mark. Don't log the offense.
#2	Subtract 15% from his mark. For #2 to #7 log the offense.
#3	He resubmits. Multiply new mark by 60%.
#4	He resubmits. Multiply new mark by 40%.
#5	He fails the course.
#6	He fails the course. He is expelled.

For subsequent offenses, step up the outcome. If there was one previous semester in which the student offended, the outcome is one step up from what the table indicates (e.g. #3 to #4). If there were two previous semesters in which the student offended, the outcome is two steps up.