

From Academic Plagiarism to Information Literacy: Mediation in the Ethical Use of Information

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Abstract. This work explores the institutional strategies performed to combat academic plagiarism in Mexican higher education by pursuing two specific aims: 1. To know the role of Mexican university libraries in the processes linked to prevent academic plagiarism; 2. Identify the skills related to copyright and intellectual property pertaining to university librarians. The methodology used is a descriptive and exploratory study of four public universities that offers education in social sciences and humanities located in Mexico City. Information was obtained through a survey of the librarians (data concerning to skills, knowledge and attitudes) and the content revision of information literacy courses or workshops provided by them. Finally, the relation between the librarian's responsibility to restrain this dishonest activity and to promote information literacy, towards achieving the ethical use of information is analyzed.

Keywords: Academic plagiarism · Copyright · Information literacy
Ethical use of information

1 Introduction

In Mexico, academic plagiarism is a matter that has taken greater relevance in recent years due to its incidence at different academic levels; according to Morales [1], plagiarism is a practice that: “has increasingly proliferated, regarding the intellectual creations of scientific, humanistic, technical, pedagogical or educational character, at all levels, [by] teachers and researchers as well as students seeking their doctoral degree”. Plagiarism is a phenomenon directly related to the degree of originality of the author and the personality¹ that imprints its creation, however, what strategies or mechanisms are made in Mexican universities to stop or deal with this dishonest practice? Even more, what's the role of the libraries and their librarians facing this important problem affecting the educational sector.

To face this problem, academic and university libraries have had to developed new severe strategies regarding information skills. Actions taken in the library field have

¹ Assumed as the characteristic that attach the author with his work, that is, the work has characteristics of the author, either by style or originality, Copyright in Latin America “Personality” is so important that there is a moral right that is inseparable and cannot be waived.

been reinforced with the development and implementation of various literacy efforts and information skills, particularly directed to new students on how to use information, correct citations, textual quotations, plagiarism in the web environment, among other topics [2]. Through this the students realize many of the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information, aware of the access and the ethical and legal use of information: “This involves an understanding of risk, an understanding that there are not fixed rules around copyright in many areas, and that it is not their role to sanction and police others’ behavior but to work towards mutually satisfactory solutions” [3].

Is also important to analyze the relation between the responsibility of the librarian to stop this dishonest activity and to promote information literacy, to achieve the ethical use of information and their success on its academic trajectory.

2 Academic Plagiarism and its Relationship with Copyright

Among its different meanings, the Dictionary of the Spanish Language, defines plagiarism² as the action of stealing, deceiving or copying other people’s works³. Focusing only on the copy of other works, and leaving aside other elements useful to conceptualize the term, however, in this sense the University of Berkeley, points that academic plagiarism “is defined as the use of intellectual material produced by another person without recognize its source” [4]. Plagiarism is the lack of personal accountability to accredit someone’s authorship in a work. Hence the relationship with copyright, because it protects all work fixed in⁴ a material medium if it is original⁵. The lack of originality and paternity of a work is then understood as plagiarism, since in theory the plagiarist has no attribution or faculty to recognize authorship over the work. In this context, the following quotation can clarify the act of the plagiary: “Plagiarism is the opposite of absolute originality, but it is born of the same dream. The plagiarist also aspires to the masterpiece. But he is so empty of himself as he believes, that is able to become another, cutting moorings with his ‘internal self’, rejecting any reference to himself... he also runs the risk of getting lost” [5, p. 371].

In summary, the characteristics of academic plagiarism are related to:

² From lat., *plagium* ‘action of stealing slaves’, ‘action to buy or sell free people as slaves’, and the gr. *Πλάγιος* plagiarism ‘oblique’, ‘trickster, misleading’. 1. Action and effect of plagiarizing (copying other people’s works). <http://dle.rae.es>.

³ A profound revision refers to Marcial the poet (I d.), who helped the confusion by using the word “plagiarism” for the first time in his Epigrama L: “I commend Quinciano, my little books... If they complain of their painful slavery, they come to their aid entirely. And when he proclaims himself to be his master, say that they are mine and that they have been released. If you say it loudly three or four times, you will make the *plagiarist* embarrass.” From the Greek “*plaguis*” (oblique, astute) not from the Latin “*plague*” (coup) [5].

⁴ Fixation, accord to Article 6 of the Mexican Copyright Law is the inclusion of letters, numbers, signs, sounds and images in any medium and which are then allowed to be perceived or reproduced.

⁵ The core idea of copyright is the originality that a work must have, however, the Mexican Copyright Law is unclear, opposite to the German case where the matter of originality is akin to philosophical questions and the degrees of originality that a work must have.

1. Lack of originality.
2. No relationship of the personality of the author with the work or creation.
3. Non-existence in the protection of Copyright.

It is necessary to point out that, in the historical evolution of copyright in Mexico, the word plagiarism was related to falsification. The falsification consisted of publishing a work or copying a sculpture, paint, etch or musical work without the express authorization of the author, as evidenced by the Law of 1846 and the Civil Code of 1884. Over time, the copyright ceased to be influenced by the French Civil Code, since Mexico still had many laws from the Iberian Peninsula.

It was in the 19th century that the first provisions on copyright emerged during the Independence and the Reform period. These laws were directed to strengthen the freedom of expression and of the press, rather than with the recognition of an author by the creation of a work. The core of these laws was that the author could leave his work protected over thirty years after his death and the heirs would receive economic remuneration. In this sense, the central idea that encompasses copyright during the 19th century is the originality of a work, nevertheless, Mexican law is imprecise and is open to multiple debates, since it only mentions the following: "The works protected by this Law are those of original creation susceptible to being divulged or reproduced in any form or means" [6, Article 3].

But, what can be considered original? How to determine the originality of a work? What characteristics define a work's originality? Are there degrees of originality when performing a work? These questions have not yet been answered by the Mexican Copyright Law, in the copyright field what for some is considered original for the rest could be a mixture of someone else's ideas. On the contrary, the German Copyright Law (*Gesetz über Urheberrecht*) accurately indicates the protection of intellectual creations, so the work must reflect the personality of the creator and the level of creativity. That is, creation goes beyond a construction, must do with philosophical issues, where there is a spiritual content, therefore, central to the German law, the individuality is a key factor for the protection or not of a work.

Currently the term plagiarism is not included in the Copyright Law in Mexico, however one article is directly related to the integrity of the work. Article 18 mentions that the author always has the faculty of: "respect for his work, opposing any deformation, mutilation or other modification of it, as well as any action or attempt that causes demerit of it or prejudice the reputation of its author" [6, Article 18]. That's why the term plagiarism does not exist in the Mexican Copyright Law, because most conflicts lay on that article and within the integrity of the work. The development of plagiarism, as we know it today, has varied over time and according technological developments, for example, when the printing press was created, the problem consisted mainly of the abuses committed by editors, printers, booksellers and librarians, who did not give proper recognition of the authorship by stealing someone else's work, for his own economic benefit mainly (*The Statute of Anne*). Now a day, there are a variety of types of academic plagiarism, such as:

1. "Full plagiarism: Total copy of the original content without any change. Generally made by people who do not know the subject.

2. Partial plagiarism: The content is a mixture of two or three different sources, presents a high level of wrong paraphrase and synonyms.
3. Minimalist plagiarism: Plagiarist focuses on the ideas, concepts and opinions of the text. For many it's not considered as plagiarism, hence the confusion. It can be assumed as the theft of ideas or reflections of another.
4. Original source citation: Provides information about the source, but omits data or certain information to retrieve the cited text or even gives false references.
5. Self-plagiarism: Perhaps the most debated, lies in the author intentionally deceiving his readers. Uses his own work (totally or partially), presenting the same idea in a different way" [7].

2.1 Use of Information: From Academic Plagiarism to Information Literacy

Academic plagiarism deals with the use of information, that is, an activity of dishonest appropriation of the ideas or fragments of a work without the proper recognition of the author. Consequently, the ethical use of information has a parallel development to the evolution of the Information Literacy (IL) concept, since Paul Zurkowski defined IL as the use of techniques and skills necessary to use a wide range of information tools and solve a requirement or need for information. According to Zurkowski, "People who have been trained in the application of information resources to their work can be considered literate, competent in information. They have acquired the necessary techniques and skills for the use of the wide range of documentary tools, in addition to primary sources, in proposing informational solutions to their problems" [8].

In this sense, the use of information refers to mental processes, reasoning and principles of ideation⁶. The ethical use of information has been approached from different perspectives and disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, librarianship, administration, among others, as a multidisciplinary area of study. However, there are still terminological inconsistencies. To set up the concept of ethical use, it is necessary to refer to Todd [9] who makes a clear assessment of what the use of information is, prior to focusing on the ethical use of information. Use of information, refers to a process of change, approaching on the individual and its cognitions, about "doing something with the information" [9]. A more integral process, that is not framed within the theoretical models of search and retrieval of information, which we are usually familiar with, is a procedure involving the performance of cognitive interaction with information. Here is where the basic principle of copyright begins, in the creation and ideation, to later fix it in a material support.

Wingens [10], mentions the lack of theory regarding the use of information, although there is some research based on generalizations and empirical facts, furthermore in the librarianship developed in Spanish language, exists a controversy on the term "use of information", and the inconsistency of it on its use in the specialized

⁶ Ideation is the beginning of any creation of the author and the beginning of the process of designing a work. Ideas in copyright are not protected, however, protection begins when that idea is embodied in a material medium. However, it is important to mention the transcendence of ideation in the process of creating an intellectual work.

literature. When addressing the term of the use of information, it focuses more on the search and retrieval of information bound in libraries and catalogs, rather than the actual “use” of it.

For librarians in Latin America, the law that is framed is the “Right of Author” and not the Copyright, where they substantially change the way of defining the author’s moral rights. In short, the use of information is linked with techniques, skills and abilities to use information tools, and with the learning of a person to recognize and identify the correct practices to solve a problem of information. That said, the approach of the librarian teaching activities has developed different strategies ranging from instruction, user training, and development of informational skills to the information literacy.

2.2 Ethical Use of Information; Challenges and Perspectives in Mexican University Libraries

The university library plays an important role on this matter; society expects it to proceed with efficiency and rigor for the recognition of intellectual property, mainly through the sanction of committed cases and the prevention of future omissions: “There is no doubt that every person should have the exercise of their cultural and educational rights guaranteed, both to inform themselves and to express themselves, and with full respect for creative freedom, so that universities and research centers must foresee certain mechanisms which inhibit the presentation, publication or distribution of third-party texts as their own works, since they are harmful acts to others work, lacking any intellectual value and that generate a false reality of its origin, content and authorship, the community and with profound social impact” [1, p. 107].

Relevance of plagiarism in the academic field is not new, it goes back to the first texts of Gilgamesh, considered the oldest literary work the world, and with the first Greek philosophers where the pupils claimed authorship of their masters’ works who did not support their ideas. In Mexico, Copyright Law implies that academic plagiarism cannot be understated as a “methodological error”. For example, university theses and dissertations have automatic protection since one principle of the referred law, is that the protection of the work exists from the moment they are fixed on a material support, regardless of merit, destiny or mode of expression [6, Article 5]. So, there’s an automatic shield for the work since no registration is required at the National Institute of Copyright (INDAUTOR for his Spanish acronym). This lack of formality has put many works and their authorship in question, however, and the institution responsible of resolving such conflicts is the INDAUTOR and its experts. Regarding dissertations and thesis, the failure to cite properly this type of document is considered plagiarism and has also legal repercussions. Because the work is being made public from the moment of the degree examination (it’s no longer unpublished), the author of the plagiarized work can at any time claim its right to integrity.

Technological advances are ahead on the regulation of this matter, from the printing press until the creation of Internet. For instance, the printing press made it possible for large volumes of works to be spread without the author’s’ permission, that’s why *The Statute of Anne* was established in 1710. At present, the extensive use of the Internet has resulted in a proliferation of new practices that facilitates the access, linking

copying and paste, creating a debate in the academic field about the convenience of uploading full theses to institutional repositories or if it is really a good idea. The natural question is, how to avoid academic plagiarism if there is a wide access of information through Internet?

To face this problem, the actions taken in the librarian field have meet two aspects of the information skills:

- Literate: Instructional efforts on information skills, designing specialized courses or classes focused on correct citation practices (how to cite properly, textual quotations, direct and indirect quoting, etc.) and other ways to raise awareness on this subject.
- Knowing our community: User studies help to determine the ethical use of information, before implementing a pedagogical effort, it is necessary to make a diagnosis of the student community.

The study carried out an online survey⁷ of librarians working on reference service or related with any informational skills activity. The main purpose of the questionnaire was to explore institutional strategies to face academic plagiarism in higher education, developed in university libraries from the four main public metropolitan universities in Mexico City that offer education in the social sciences and the humanities: The National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), The College of Mexico (Colmex), the Metropolitan Autonomous University (UAM), and the Autonomous University of Mexico City (UACM). The survey was intended to obtain data pertaining to skills, knowledge and attitudes related to copyright and the use of information of the librarians working on these universities; as well as a content review on their information literacy programs and other instructional efforts that address the topic. Questions were mostly of the closed type, although being a small sample, some questions were opened looking to gather more information on the subject. According to this, the responses obtained were grouped into topic categories concerning:

Policies of prevention taken by university libraries:

- 50% do not have any strategy to prevent academic plagiarism at the moment
- 60% does not contemplate the prevention of academic plagiarism on their policies
- Not a single library has a microsite regarding the prevention of academic plagiarism
- 100% considers some sanction regarding the academic plagiarism among its community
- Actions to prevent academic plagiarism driven by the libraries:
- 80% do not offer any course, class or seminar intended to prevent academic plagiarism among their community
- Actions that do exist range from: courses (induction, special classes, general), awareness campaigns among the community and the faculty, and the acquisition of software to detect plagiarism
- Types of sanctions when detecting academic plagiarism:
- Guidance
- Analysis of the cases and the documents

⁷ See Appendix A.

- Expulsion, among other administrative sanctions
- Knowledge about the subject (by the librarians):
- 80% do not have basic knowledge about copyright
- 100% claims to know about the ethical use of information
- 50% use the APA bibliographic style standards, the rest vary
- 66% are familiar with software that helps detect academic plagiarism
- 66% participate in some action to raise awareness among their community
- 50% do not participate in the process to evaluate actions of this type in their institution
- 66% of librarians are familiar with the Creative Commons licenses
- 100% claims to be familiar with Open Access
- 100% Support the belief that if a document is available in the Internet, does not imply it can be freely taken
- Information resources addressing plagiarism:
- There are no information resources publicly available, about any literacy initiative to prevent academic plagiarism among these libraries and their communities.

The above data shows that Mexican universities in the metropolitan area need to play a more active role to prevent academic plagiarism among their communities, as the present situation can be assumed as a lack of coordinated efforts and communication between the universities and their libraries, leaving the librarian outside the problem. The librarians recognize the necessity of been prepared about copyright to increase the possibility of effective intervention and strengthen the skills required to avoid the problem, since neither the library staff nor their patrons seem to be aware about the mechanisms of prevention, decisions, consequences and penalties regarding academic plagiarism are effective at their institutions.

In the case of The Colmex (Daniel Cosío Villegas Library), librarians have been concerned and involved in the subject, working on facing the problem from within library science. Some of the actions taken by the library that may work as an example took place in 2016, based on the cooperation of their professional staff: A *Workshop* on copyright and digital plagiarism imparted to the Tepeji Technological Library staff. By first providing the basic elements of copyright, and then by collaboration with the group a working tool called “*Plagiometer*”, a graphic and didactic material in the form of a table that consists of visualizing the different manifestations of plagiarism hidden in everyday life and that are often confused or unknown by the academic community. This serves as a metric to measure the level of plagiarism, so that the students could recognize some poor practices in the use of the information, and which was the equivalent to what the National Polytechnic Institute did about the violence in Mexico with the “*Violentometer*”⁸. A *Survey* was also conducted to determine the behavior from the community of The Colmex when searching for information and how to link it with library activities and services. This helped understand the processes in which library staff were not involved. Finally, the institution’s *Ethical guidelines* were revised, to have a wider area of action at the time of detecting academic plagiarism,

⁸ More information available at: http://www.genero.ipn.mx/materiales_didacticos/paginas/violentometro.aspx.

generating a posture of faculty towards what they expect from the final works and the dissertations. It was also considered to provide the community with tools (software to detect coincidences) and with more involvement in the information services of the library.

For the Colmex Library, there is a clear position and a working path of the institution about the matter, since plagiarism is included on the institution's Ethical principles. Besides, the library has included on their Information Literacy courses for almost ten years ago, topics concerning the ethical use of information and the necessary practices for assuring it, whose treatment has been considered of great relevance by the faculty and the students. In some cases, promoting the adoption of the IL courses due to the interest of the academic programs or their students to obtain that specific knowledge. In this sense, the library decided to use the digital platform Turnitin, to avoid academic plagiarism, and this has been accepted with enthusiasm by the community.

3 Conclusions

Due to academic plagiarism librarians have the opportunity to create new services and make them available to their community, always guided by the ethical principles emanated from their institution and of associations that promote the ethical use of information. Academic plagiarism is a historical problem, however, currently Information and Communication Technologies, and especially the widespread use of the Internet, have modified certain practices in the use of information. Nowadays disseminating digital content is quicker and more effective, so much that sometimes Mexican Copyright does not respond adequately because of their restrictiveness. An effective strategy is to promote the understanding and recognition of the Open Access movements that works towards the free culture of knowledge, such as adopting Creative Commons licenses or using them to generate educational content. The different software to prevent plagiarism, which have been used so little use in the Latin American academy, can be a good ally when to ensure the quality and truthfulness of the work presented by the students. There is a great diversity of them and some are Open Access sources. Being aware of their existence and disseminating them among their community will increase the value that faculty and students give to our daily work.

Mexican librarians must assume a leading role as the ambassadors of practices and strategies which prevent plagiarism, alerting their community about the different ways in which plagiarism might occur, since these faults range from the most innocent act of neglect to the most elaborate practices of academic piracy. The librarian as a curator and keeper of his collection, must assure the good use of the materials and the quality and authenticity of it. Even though it is not from the library where an effective monitoring of the academic originality should come, in any case library should serve as the main support for university authorities in the strategies they undertake to eradicate these faults within our community, as well as actively participate in the debate or discussion on such strategies. Finally, for today librarians it is fundamental to know the basic elements of copyright to determine that plagiarism contravenes the author's moral rights and deeply harms our community.

Appendix A

Online survey: Strategies against academic plagiarism.

*Required (a: Closed questions; b: Open questions)

1. Position held: *. (b)
2. Does your library have any strategies to prevent academic plagiarism? * (a)
3. Does the library include prevention of academic plagiarism in its community? * (a)
4. Does the library contemplate in its policies some sanction regarding academic plagiarism among its community? (b)
5. What actions does the library do to prevent academic plagiarism in your community? (b)
6. Does the library provide a course, workshop or seminar to prevent academic plagiarism in your community? (b)
7. If so, please provide the URL or other information with public information about the course, workshop or seminar to prevent academic plagiarism in your community? * (b)
8. Do librarians at your institution have basic knowledge of copyright? * (a)
9. Do you know what the ethical use of information is? * (a)
10. What bibliographic style (s) do you use? * (b)
11. Do you know any software that helps to detect academic plagiarism? * (b)
12. Do you participate in any action to raise awareness about these issues in your community? * (b)
13. Does the librarian participate in the process to evaluate such actions in your institution? * (a)
14. Do you use the Creative Commons license for your works? * (a)
15. Are you familiar with Open Access? * (a)
16. If a document is on the network, does it mean that it can be taken freely? * (a)
17. What actions does the institution undertake to detect any situation regarding academic plagiarism? * (b)
18. If your library has a microsite, public information resource, or other support regarding the prevention of academic plagiarism, please provide the URL or other identifying information. * (b)

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