

I INTRODUCTION

1. INTELLECTUAL HONESTY

As students of Hong Kong Baptist University, you are investing a great deal of time and money in acquiring an education. So it is worthwhile to ask: What exactly does a good education mean to you? Does it just mean acquiring a body of established ‘knowledge’, or is there more to it?

Frankly speaking, it would hardly be worth your while to attend a university just to turn yourself into a ‘storehouse’ of other people’s knowledge and ideas – a computer can do that far better than you ever can. No, the most valuable thing that you can learn in the university is how to educate and improve your *mind*, that part of you which no machine can replace in terms of its capacity for comprehension, evaluation and creativity, and its ability to solve problems and discover new knowledge. What is the use of acquiring knowledge which your mind can only copy mechanically, but not comprehend, evaluate, apply or extend?

If you really want to develop your mind, one absolutely essential condition is that you should approach the task with complete *honesty and integrity*. You will never learn anything of value through dishonest means. Intellectual cheating is cheating of the mind – not just other people’s but your own. It prevents your mind from ever achieving anything through genuine intellectual effort, and therefore from growing and reaching its full potential.

2. WHAT IS PLAGIARISM?

The most common form of intellectual dishonesty is plagiarism. **Plagiarism** means **taking someone else’s words or ideas and passing them off as your own**. You could call it a form of intellectual ‘theft’, but in a sense it is even worse than theft. When you steal someone else’s property, you acquire it dishonestly, but you would not want to parade it in front of others. When you plagiarize someone else’s words or ideas, you not only steal them from their rightful owners, but you present them to other people (your teachers, classmates, and other readers) as if they were your own words and ideas, and you try to take credit for them. It is *doubly* dishonest – stealing what belongs to others, and pretending to be more intelligent and knowledgeable than you really are, or to have done work that you haven’t actually done.

Plagiarism is, unfortunately, something which can be found (to varying extents) at all levels in the world of education, because we are dealing with knowledge and ideas, and these are much more easily ‘borrowed’ than physical objects. You can find it in schools, where some students copy from their classmates’ homework or from books and other sources. You can find the same thing among some university students, who should know better as they are more mature. You can even find it among people who are supposed to be professionals (academics, scientists, scholars), though much more rarely.

Here, for your amusement, is a sentence from the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (Longman, 1987), given as an example under 'plagiarize': 'Half the ideas in his talk were plagiarized from an article I wrote last year'. And here is a sentence from a completely different English dictionary (published in Shanghai in 1997), also under 'plagiarize': 'Half the ideas in his talk were plagiarized from an article I wrote last year'. A coincidence, perhaps?

3. THE TEMPTATION TO PLAGIARIZE

The temptation to plagiarize is probably greater than the temptation to steal. One reason has to do with need. In a (relatively) affluent society like ours, most students do not feel the need to steal anything. But the temptation to plagiarize may arise every time a student has to submit an assignment, project or thesis, especially just before the deadline. It is always easier to appropriate other people's ideas and words and pass them off as your own, than to think of and write up your own ideas. A second reason has to do with the ease of committing the offence. Theft is usually not that easy (don't ever try to steal a book from the library!). But most people believe that it is much easier to get away with plagiarism, as long as they do not plagiarize from the most obvious sources.

4. WHAT KIND OF PEOPLE COMMIT PLAGIARISM?

Some of the people who commit plagiarism know exactly what they are doing. They are fully aware that they are taking words and ideas from other people and trying to pass them off as their own, and they know that this is wrong. But through a lapse of moral judgement, and the pressure of meeting deadlines and so on, they choose to take this dubious way out. To such people, we can only say: *don't do it*. If they cannot be persuaded by moral and intellectual arguments, then they should think of the consequences when they are caught. Make no mistake about it: plagiarism is a serious offence, and the penalties can be severe (see Part V).

But, either through ignorance or carelessness, many students who commit plagiarism apparently do so without realizing that what they are doing constitutes an unethical act and a punishable offence. This may stem partly from their early education and cultural background, rather than personal dishonesty. In certain traditional modes of education, it is considered desirable to memorize and regurgitate large chunks of information or text, and all 'knowledge' is regarded as common property, freely available for copying by whoever needs it. (Perhaps the editor of the dictionary cited above felt this way?) This attitude is, however, incompatible with modern conceptions of higher education, which emphasize intellectual integrity and originality.

The present handbook is designed to help you avoid the common pitfalls of plagiarism and maintain your intellectual integrity.