Dear Colleague: Are You Aware of Self Plagiarism in Academic Publications?

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In mid-October, I attended the Annual Conference on Academic Integrity that was held in George Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri. The highlights of this conference included the continuing journey of all academic institutions to foster academic integrity practices and to raise awareness among the entire community. It may be of interest as well to realize that most recent studies reveal that plagiarism is not on the rise since means to detect and combat it are perhaps more effective and the academic community is more alert to its negative implications. AUC had a strong and active presence in this event and a paper was presented entitled "Academic Integrity and Plagiarism: Be Prepared". The paper addressed how Academic Integrity Standards can be genuinely met and how to prepare for the accreditation process within the scope of academic integrity.

One of the highlights of this Conference was a highly interactive session on Self Plagiarism in Academic Publication that was led by Tracy Betrag, School of Management at the University of South Australia which I attended as well as other Members of the Advisory Council of the Center for Academic Integrity. I thought that this issue is one that has not received enough attention in the past and truly needs a closer look. As we are all aware, we live in a highly competitive environment in which academics is no exception. Hence, faculty -particularly junior faculty - are keen to publish as much as they can in reputable journals and conferences following the motto "Publish or Perish". Self Plagiarism is a term that refers to multiple re-use of text or other academic content of one's own previous papers without proper citation. The issue manifests itself when such content becomes part of several publications for which the author receives credit or which are used towards promotion or hiring. Other somewhat similar terms used are "textural re-use", "multiple submissions", "content recycling" and "republication".

Defining self-plagiarism as opposed to textural re-use is not an easy task and the following questions are raised:

- Do the vast majority of authors cite their own work when resubmitted in a new publication?
- Are there some means to regulate multiple submissions to conferences and journals before a feedback is received? While some journals regulate that, others do not seem to pay enough attention.
- What is the limit, if it can be quantified, of content re-use from a previous paper beyond which a paper is to be rejected?
- Should a faculty that has ten (for example) original publications receive the same credit as a peer who has ten publications which some has overlapping content?

Well, while you may have a definitive answer to some of these questions when considering your own discipline, the same answer may not apply to other disciplines. Against this, the discussion resolved to the following outcome:

- The academic community has to pay a closer attention to self-plagiarism and raise awareness among faculty and research teams particularly within their discipline.
- Quantifying self plagiarism by content is a complex issue as publications contain text, tables, graphs and other supporting materials. Yet, some border lines need to be drawn for each discipline.
- It was argued that if more than one-third- of a paper is from one's previous publication, it should be considered as self-plagiarism unless cited. The paper should be rejected and some actions ought to be taken. An exception lies in review papers provided that they are properly cited.
- Regardless of the percent allowed for re-use from a previous publication, it seems that there is a consent that this "tolerated' percent should be less if it lies within what is claimed to be the core of the paper, outcome or contribution. This is not the case for background information once properly cited.
- Conference committees, publishers and journal reviewers need to clarify and announce their policy on re-use of previously published materials and its originality.

Dear Colleague, I realize that I may have left you with many questions unanswered and that many other opinions and policies may apply to your domain. It is an attempt from my side to share with you some of the international concerns on self-plagiarism on one hand and invite you, your colleagues and students in your department to give this issue more serious consideration.

Share with us your experiences by contributing to the New Chalk Talk series, or by simply sending comments/suggestions to aellozy@aucegypt.edu