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Plagiarism Within Extension: Origin and Current Effects

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Abstract: Extension publication editors from around the United States are finding cases of plagiarism within manuscripts that Extension educators submit as new public education materials. When editors confront such educators with the problem, some don't understand it as such, rationalizing that reproducing published information for a new purpose qualifies as authorship and a legitimate method for fulfilling their Extension job duties. This article describes potential repercussions of such assumptions, underlying reasons for the problem, and solutions.

Identifying Plagiarism in Today's Extension Publications

When all three publications editors in the Washington State University Extension unit that I am a part of found plagiarism in manuscripts during the same month, I thought it worthwhile to ask if other editors on the Association for Communication Excellence in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Life and Human Sciences (ACE) publishing listserv had similar experiences. The two dozen-plus responses (most within 1 day) from across the country confirmed my suspicion that the problem is widespread.

The question I posed to my ACE colleagues was framed within the context of an unwitting offense because the responsible Extension educator I had recently dealt with seemed devoted to getting information to the public. Plagiarism is an awkward charge against an individual in a field largely characterized by benevolent intent. Nevertheless, not providing attribution for content that you did not generate appears blatantly wrong in a society that values integrity, justice, and responsibility (Ianinska & Garcia-Zamor, 2006). Can these contradictory standpoints be reconciled? My conversation with this educator led me to a better understanding of a complex issue that affects the future of Extension.

Among other challenges, copyediting requires pointing out to authors that their readers may have other ways of interpreting the world than they do. Within the context of plagiarized publications, that means readers will wrongly assume whoever is listed as an author generated all the uncited text on their own for the first time rather than taking it from another author and/or source. Applied to Extension publications, this is a violation of trust that damages an already struggling reputation; it demands recognition and remedies (Bull, Cole, Warner, & McKinnie, 2004; Coates, 2004; Ekanem, Mafuyai-Ekanem, Tegege, Muhammad, & Singh, 2006; Rathod, 2010).

Understanding Extension Plagiarism from a Historical Perspective

Like any multifaceted situation, a lot can be explained by examining the historical context from which it evolved. According to Extension veterans (i.e., those who have been in the organization since the 1970s), using publications from other states was historically encouraged based on the rationale that it saved taxpayers' money because federal funding supported their creation. Complete federal government financing also eliminated the possibility and consideration of copyright protection (a related issue primarily distinguished from plagiarism by legality).

Tom Knecht, former director of the Office of Agricultural Communications at Mississippi State University Extension Service, was an observant witness to publishing practices during this era. Generously sharing insights gained from more than 30 years of experience in communications management, he notes:

The system had the advantage of efficiency, since it was not necessary for specialists in every state to write what would amount to the same publication. In fact, at one time there were even regional and national Extension publishing projects to help eliminate this duplication of effort.

The now-familiar shrinking budget changed matters dramatically. Supplementing federal funding of publications with county and state money not only opened the door for commercial sales as a way to keep Extension agencies afloat, but brought up the need for copyright enforcement. Knecht explains that when Extension educators and administrators looked into their rights under these new circumstances, they found that partial federal funding did not preclude universities from copyrighting their publications.

Contemporary Complications

The fundamental historical shift within Extension from a national resource to individual state entities fuels two of the major driving factors for why plagiarism is a problem within Extension today. Knecht points out that the Internet has ironically complicated the business of producing Extension publications:

Most [Extension educators] are very poorly informed about the whole copyright business anyway. From their ignorance of the law and sometimes from the behaviors of their colleagues, they get the impression that they can take and use anything they want since it's for nonprofit educational purposes. The advent of the Internet has made copying so easy that they get the impression it's all out there for the taking, and they act accordingly.

The other major contributing factor to Extension educators committing plagiarism is the internal organizational pressure to "publish or perish" based on promotion and tenure requirements. This unfortunately means that the quantity of publications produced rather than their quality is rewarded. O'Neill (2008) mentions publications in eight of her 15 recommendations for moving up within the Extension ranks. However, she also confirms Nichols' (2004) observation that "field-level faculty often lack both [the] time and research skills" required to write an original publication. Because of the many other pressures of the job, the opportunity, energy, and experience it takes to create original research that is both relevant and captivating to Extension clientele are extremely difficult to find.

Approaches to Curtailing Extension Plagiarism

It is important to clarify such pivotal terms as "plagiarism" and "copyright" when used to argue the credibility of Extension is in jeopardy. Copyright infringement is the legal and therefore more complex counterpart to the ethics-based offense of plagiarism that is the main focus here. According to Merriam-Webster.com, plagiarize means "to commit literary theft: present as original an idea derived from an existing source." (In this context, text recycling, also known as self-plagiarism, is applicable as well; see Zirkel [2010] and Bird and Sivilotti [2008] for details.) But what about the utilitarianism value inherent to Extension? This moves us toward a fresh examination of what is best for the largest number of people. And as Milburn, Mulley, and Kline (2010) remind us, the continued existence of Extension in the United States is most likely dependent on proving its relevance to the federal government by creatively and effectively meeting the current needs of local populations.

Training materials aimed at curtailing plagiarism within Extension materials are key to promoting institutional policies dealing with professional ethics. Such content should be designed for both authors and peer reviewers and address 1) the complications widespread use of the Internet has raised in terms of unattributed incorporation of information into new sources, 2) how this relates to violating copyright law and making educators and their institutions vulnerable to lawsuits, and 3) the consequences that instances of plagiarism (whether knowing or not) have on the public opinion and survival of the USDA Cooperative Extension System.

The Scholarship Solution

The people who make up Extension clearly want to produce materials that are relevant and respected; *JOE* articles often touch on this within the context of effective public education. These discussions often examine the nature of scholarship, which is a helpful place to look when determining what should initiate (and therefore justify) a new Extension publication.

Adding to the current base of knowledge is really what defines scholarship, as so many Extension scholars have elaborated on within this forum (Adams, Harrell, Maddy, & Weigel, 2005; Bushaw & Long, 1996; McGrath, 2006; Norman, 2001; Olson, Kuza, & Blinn, 2007; Weiser & Houglum, 1998) and what I believe can secure against committing plagiarism. Adapting research findings to changing local community needs is a primary way that Extension can be relevant and distinguish its products from the plethora of generic Internet search engine results (Bull, Cote, Warner, & McKinnie, 2004; Stienbarger, 2005).

While access to and dissemination of information is no longer the struggle it used to be thanks to the Internet, distilling that data into reliable information that can be applied to an individual situation has become overwhelming for many. This is a growing and yet largely overlooked opportunity for the locally based Extension organization that Dik and Deshler (1988) identified more than two decades ago. The current USDA Web page describes Extension's role today as providing the public with "*personalized, validated information addressing specific questions, issues, and life events in an aggregated, non-duplicative approach*" (National Institute of Food and Agriculture, 2010; emphasis added). Educators can fulfill this mission by building off each other's work rather than using it as a substitute. In this context, proper source acknowledgement is naturally incorporated in the purpose of the newly created document.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Despite the multiple constraints that Extension educators must contend with, it is not acceptable to reproduce other people's work or even your own without adequate acknowledgement. Nor does gathering other

people's ideas into one place qualify as authorship. However, it can be a valuable contribution when sufficiently evaluated and properly cited.

Creating new publications that rely on previously published sources is a common and accepted practice, but the manner in which those references are used and cited is not always straightforward, so many land-grant universities offer guidance to their authors. eXtension is another source for helpful information on plagiarism and copyright, including a publically available online short course produced by the University of Maryland University College (2002). Extension educators need to take advantage of such training materials and apply the content to their authorship as well as peer review responsibilities (Rathod, 2010). Literature on scholarship (Adams, Harrell, Maddy, & Weigel, 2005; Bushaw & Long, 1996; McGrath, 2006; Norman, 2001; Olson, Kuza, & Blinn, 2007; Weiser & Houglum, 1998) can also help Extension authors refocus on what they have to offer the public.

As an Extension publications editor who is repeatedly reminded of the potential the organization embodies, I hope these efforts in combination will reinforce each other and eventually eliminate instances of plagiarism that have such a serious blow to the relevance, legitimacy, and continued existence of USDA Extension.

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