The 'cut and paste' school of thought

Some students, even those at PhD level, do not realise plagiarism is wrong and unethical

Irene Tan

You won’t catch undergraduate Stanley Tang passing off someone else’s work as her own when it comes to her assignments.

The fourth-year student at Nanyang Technological University’s (NTU) Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information feels that there is no point cribbing ideas or words, even if it is never discovered.

“It’s not your work. There’s nothing to be proud of,” declared the 24-year-old.

She could well be in the minority.

In a letter to The Straits Times Forum page last week, an academic lamented how plagiarism was a common occurrence among students.

Professor Mark Featherstone, interim dean at Nanyang Technological University’s College of Science, said that students in Singapore as well as in his native Canada do not seem to realise how it is a “serious ethical breach to pass off someone else’s words or ideas as one’s own”.

Ignorance

“In both countries, I have seen how students can make it all the way to university, even postgraduate education, without understanding what plagiarism is or how to avoid it,” said Prof Featherstone.

“Why should we be educating students who are unaware of the importance of original work? They will not be able to formulate original ideas. If they are not able to understand how to appreciate the work of others, then this is a serious problem.”

Learning by rote

Professor Davis Chor of Singapore Management University’s School of Economics pointed out how Singaporean students also often study for exams by memorising. They will then regurgitate what they read in textbooks in their exam papers.

“Students may have the mistaken impression that their own work is acceptable on a term paper or report that they are submitting. This is also the case in China. Many assignments are graded on how well the students present ideas, not attribute them,” he said.

He cited an example from a local secondary school in Singapore, where he was allowed to copy and use text from books without attributing the original authors for his assignments.

“Teachers are expected to pass on what they have learnt, including how to avoid plagiarism, to students when they enter the teaching service.”

An MOE spokesman said that the issue of plagiarism is incorporated in language, civic and moral education and cyber wellness classes, which are part of the schools’ main curriculum.

The spokesman added that schools have the autonomy to handle cases of plagiarism. The ministry does not track plagiarism cases in schools.

The problem is not unique to Singapore schools.

Professor Hao Xiaoming, associate chair (academic) at the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, said that, besides students, many professors in China - where he comes from - plagiarise too.

In his 17 years in Singapore, he has observed that schools here, including junior colleges, value presentation more than originality or attribution. This is also the case in China.

“Many assignments are graded on how well the students present ideas, not attribute them,” he said. He cited the example of his own son, now 27. When he was in secondary school in Singapore, he was allowed to copy and use text from books without attributing the original authors for his assignments.

“This attitude tends to carry on into junior college and university,” Prof Hao said.

Some students, even those at PhD level, do not realise plagiarism is wrong and unethical.