LETTER

Plagiarism, culture, and education: Grounding the discourse in respect and creating space for unlearning

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Every English lesson in high school concluded with the introduction of a new word, its meaning and its usage in a sentence. "Harrowing" was one such word, meaning "distressing". *"My grandmother told us many harrowing stories"* was the sentence taught in class. This information got firmly imprinted in our notebooks and minds. The notebooks were precious reference points during assessments. And lo! The same word "harrowing" appeared in the assessment. Most students who comfortably replicated the very same grandmother's sentence in their answer sheets were delighted to get a full score for the answer. However, a few students who ventured into fresh territory with sentences like *"Going on a bicycle in the neighbourhood was a harrowing experience"* scored a zero. Thus, we grew.

We grew up understanding the dynamics of learning aka marks and the way to get marks. Memorising and imitating verbatim became the best practice, which led to success and boosted confidence. The same mantra was reflected in learning formulae, theorems, historic events, poetry, periodic tables, essays, definitions, parts of the body systems and even drama and speeches. This form of grounding was unyielding, firm and infallible. Although we now realise that academic success was merely measured in marks and not in terms of learning and applying what is learnt.

As the same student journeys into higher studies, these childhood learnings and best practices are tainted with a new concept "plagiarism". *Where was this term all these years?* What was considered as emulating something, following the model, echoing a thought or learning a line by rote is now considered reason enough to lose marks, fail, and repeat assignments. "Dishonesty", "theft" and "severe offence" are the words that shroud the plagiarism without clarifying what it is. As a result, distancing oneself from plagiarism overpowers comprehending what plagiarism is. Students end up focusing on, "how not to plagiarise". They focus on shortcuts and ways of avoiding plagiarism and adhere to them as one would adhere to a ritual and customs, as opposed to understanding the concept of plagiarism and why it is objectionable.

In today's scenario, plagiarism is often expressed in percentages and is identified by the use of software. It is given a distinct quantifiable value. Students know this well and spend hours of time and effort in "paraphrasing" a published work such that it escapes the eyes of the plagiarism check software and clears the so-called cut-off level.

Someone once argued that nothing today can be truly original. Everything is either influenced by or borrowed from an older thought or work. If somehow students learn the importance of valuing a work and its author for originality, they will also move towards creating original work and learn to be valued. If the understanding and discourse on plagiarism stems from this respect and value for original work, plagiarism would be uniformly, whole-heartedly and effortlessly accepted as undesirable. Correct citations and referencing would naturally follow.

Like Kohlberg's pre-conventional stage of moral development, are we here to prevent plagiarism through harsh punishment to the "perpetrators?" [1]. Aren't educational institutes responsible for fostering a milieu for unlearning errors and learning the right way towards original writing? Can role models be made available for training? Can phased assignments and hands-on work be used to set benchmarks for further improvement for students to follow? Can mistakes be considered stepping stones to rising high? Can the system be less judgmental towards plagiarism and inspire more respect for original authors? Instead of punishing the student who stumbles into a pothole, is it possible to teach the student to lay her own path by navigating and filling the potholes?

Things right or wrong, ethical or unethical do not transpire in a vacuum. A layered and complex context and a series of circumstances can give rise to them. Any attempt to move towards what is ethical and what is right must be grounded in understanding this context and this certainly applies to combating plagiarism.

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