The Place of Ethics and the Case against Plagiarism If you must '*Steal Like an Artist'.*

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INTRODUCTION

The subsistent problem of plagiarism among academics and institutions of higher learning has risen to a level that could be defined as *endemic;* presumably because there seem to be no clear-cut solution to address or tackle the issue. De Jager and Brown (2010) opines in a dedicated study that plagiarism among students could either be intentional or unintentional, and as such, there would need to be a variety of contextually-relevant solutions. The study further revealed a lack of consistency and agreement in tackling the problem due to divergent views on definition, approach, policies, codes and procedures surrounding the topic.

This presentation would look at plagiarism and ethics within the context of design and media with special focus on an existing topic in **Creative Thinking (CI11)**, a module within the School of Media and Design, Bellville Campus, STADIO. The main *focal compass* of this discussion would dwell on the submission by **Austin Kleon**, author of the book, *"STEAL LIKE AN ARTIST… 10 things nobody told you about being creative"* where he opines that as nothing is exactly new, young artists can learn a lot by being motivated, inspired and influenced by well-established artists. This process according to Kleon includes taking bits and pieces of an existing work and creating *'new discoveries'* and work of art. However, while there might be some element of truth in Kloen's opinion, there has to be a clear articulation of this line of thought so that a distinct understanding of what is ethically acceptable exists within the parameters of plagiarism and intellectual property infringements.

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Having established the premise of this discussion, we will proceed to identify some ethical issues pertinent to Kloen's perception of *'stealing'* like an artist so we can address and deal with each of the probable impact it could have on students at STADIO. We will also look at some resources required to evaluate the proposed outcomes of Kloen's line of thought by critically analyzing the challenges militating against implementation of the proposal as well as the consequences of not addressing the identified ethical concerns. The discussion would conclude by considering whether putting in place a code of ethics that addresses the issues raised can effectively support a long-term solution.

IDENTIFYING ETHICAL ISSUES PERTINENT TO THE TOPIC IDENTIFIED.

As indicated earlier, the context of this discussion would predominantly be within the creative, design and multimedia field and in order to lay a *foundation* for our discussion around the concept of *'stealing like an artist',* it is important to juxtapose Kloen's opinion against the backdrop of acceptable ethical practices by briefly reminding ourselves about some of the existing thoughts and literature around plagiarism and how it affects students. For a long time, the problem of plagiarism has been a recurring issue in various spheres of higher education (Jiang, Emmerton, & Mckange, 2013). To compound this issue, it has been a challenge to formulate a universally acceptable definition of plagiarism as most authors, depending on their perception and disposition proffer different views around the subject (Belter & DuPre, 2009). A few authors such as Perrin (2009), Larkham (2002) and Culwin (2001) have defined plagiarism as using other people's concepts, ideas, opinions, words, thoughts and reflections without properly acknowledging the original source. Lathrop, and Foss, (2000) added that plagiarism could also be a process whereby a student who did not originally conceive and write about a given subject alone subsequently fails to apply *"…the appropriate bibliographical references"*.

Having established a brief premise around the definition of plagiarism, we may proceed to delving into the concept of *'stealing like an artist'.* Kleon (2012) argues that when people in the creative field term something as an *"original concept,",* in most cases, *"they just don't know the references or the original sources involved.".* He went ahead to add that *"what a good artist understands is that nothing comes from nowhere. All creative work builds on what came before. Nothing is*

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completely original." and that "*…every new idea is just a mashup or a remix of one or more previous ideas.*".

It is important to interject here and state that like in most creative schools and universities around the world, the use of appropriate reference images and visuals as a **_source of inspiration_** in projects and assignments within the School of Media and Design (SOMAD) at STADIO is highly encouraged by lecturers but it should equally be noted that the school provides a clearly defined set of parameters as to where and how these images *(or references)* can be used. This is because STADIO understands that although students may begin their creative projects by sourcing for inspirational references online, there is need to educate students on the proper use of intellectual properties, proper referencing and giving credit where due. Jiang, Emmerton & McKauge (2013) suggests that students are generally expected to commit to acceptable standards of conduct both as undergraduates and later, as career practitioners; but in most cases, the weight of external pressures and assessment could nudge them into international or unintentional forms of plagiarism. This is made even worse due to the ever-increasing reliance on resources from internet search engines as well as the ever-evolving and easily accessible new technologies. That is why STADIO has zero tolerance for plagiarism of any sort and expects each student to adopt the culture of proper referencing as this is the ethical thing to do.

Furthermore, as we live in an era of open-source technological inventions and knowledge, the awareness of ethical practices with relation to plagiarism among some scholars is beginning to wane off. If this trend is not addressed promptly, the will to uphold acceptable ethical standards within the academic space could be compromised. Of immense concern is the operations within the creative field where students *'craftily'* alter existing designs or work of art by initiating minute modifications of an original work. In most cases, through dedicated practice, over time, students perfect the art of *'cheating'* in this manner. Detecting plagiarism in such instances becomes very difficult and time-consuming. As a result, lecturers in the School of Media and Design at STADIO are constantly on the lookout to quickly pick up these discrepancies with a view of pointing students in the right ethical direction.

Next, we shall look at possible ways of addressing the ethical issues identified above and suggest probable interventions that could mitigate the risk it poses to STADIO and specifically, the School of Media and Design.

ADDRESSING IDENTIFIED ETHICAL ISSUES

As stated above, many universities and institutions of higher education have struggled with the problem of plagiarism for many years. This however, should not be an excuse for educators or academic stakeholders to throw in the towel and accept plagiarism as *'an unfortunate new normal'*. To this end, it is pertinent to state that while there is some element of substance in Kleon's (2012) concept of *stealing like an artist*, it is important that this concept is discussed in the right perspective and context so that students do not get the wrong impression.

There are tons of images, videos, literature, creative works, etc. that are easily, freely and readily available to students online. Indeed, there is no harm in lecturers encouraging students to scan through useful online repository so as to *'steal'* or better-still, *be inspired*. However, students must be taught the very valuable virtue of proper referencing and acknowledgment of intellectual property. Lecturers must set the tone in daily class settings by honing on the importance of proper referencing using the approved STADIO referencing guide. As lecturers intensify this process, over time, a *new culture* would be born where the habit of indicating, referencing, quoting and acknowledging the source of an *'inspiration'* or idea becomes second nature.

Similarly, to encourage this acceptable ethical behaviours, lecturers could deliberately include assessments that test students' perception of plagiarism by assigning marks for proper referencing and attribution to source. Conversely, there could be punitive measures like re-writing or re-designing of the assignments until the student shows evidence of acceptable understanding around the subject. It is a process worth exploring if we as lecturers truly desire to guide our students in the right path.

CHALLENGES OF IMPLEMENTATION AND CONSEQUENCES OF NEGLIGENCE

Gaytán and Domínguez (2014) opines that "Designing good policies against academic dishonesty requires good estimations of its incidence and main drivers." Therefore, it is important to critically analyse some of the challenges that could obstruct the suggestions listed above. Firstly, lecturers with limited knowledge on the topic of ethics and academic integrity would pose a major problem to the implementation. That is why STADIO in 2021, oversaw the training of many of its staff on *Ethics in Higher Education for Teaching Professionals.* The outcome of this initiative which was held in collaboration with Globe Ethics was phenomenal and staff gained better insights on the topic of Ethics. This means that more staff would need to be trained *(and re-trained)* until a new culture of acceptable ethical values is upheld at STADIO.

The consequences of not addressing the identified risks above would mean that more students with limited knowledge around the subject of ethics (and plagiarism) would graduate from colleges with skills and knowledge around their chosen profession but would be shallow and vulnerable when faced with actual ethical dilemmas in their world of work. In such cases, they could end up anchoring on the wrong side of the law because they have not been fully grounded around the subject of ethics. Failure to address this crucial topic at the higher education level would simply be disastrous for both the image of the school as well as the graduates who go into the world of work as representatives of what the school stands for.

IS A CODE OF ETHICS REQUIRED?

One of the numerous advantages of higher education is that it affords scholars the much-needed freedom to engage information, pursue knowledge and research a variety of topics that promotes intellectual growth, contribution to *new-knowledge* in a given field, present new discoveries and perceptions, analyse scientific data and arrive at well-informed conclusions. However, all of these laudable ventures would need to be predicated upon the foundation of ethical values because ethics is regarded as one of the most significant elements of the academic activities. Consequently, a Code of Ethics could be considered as a long-term solution in addressing the issues identified. The code of ethics could be formulated to outline the principles and values of academic integrity at STADIO.

In order to properly formulate a code of conduct, a committee comprising of core stakeholders would need to be put in place to brainstorm, investigate, deliberate and draft an acceptable code of conduct that is inclusive and addresses the core of the concerns within the institution. While the scope of this writeup is too limited in discussing the full details of a probable code of conduct, some of the clause that could be included in the draft should include these key words: *Honesty, Trust, Fairness, Respect, Responsibility, Legality and dissemination*. Through dialogue, consultations, further evaluation, more clauses can be added.

CONCLUSION

Cheating and plagiarism in higher education and specifically within schools of media and design has been a cause for continued concern and discussion. Lecturers and scholars are constantly evaluating the best ways to address this ethical dilemma. This is sometimes compounded by the fact that information is readily available online due to continued advancements in technology. Furthermore, the notion that nothing is exactly new and as such artists should *'steal'* ideas for inspirational purposes could be misleading if not properly processed within the appropriate ethical parameters. Therefore, there is need for all stakeholders within the education sector *(Institutions, lecturers, students, scholars, administrators, etc.)* to be grounded in knowledge around the different dynamics of ethics. Such groundings could take the form of intentional formal or informal trainings of all stakeholders who could in turn formulate an all-inclusive code of conduct to guide and anchor all processes regarding cheating, plagiarism and ethics. Finally, further discussions, studies, research and evaluations around the subject should be encouraged as this would generate new ideas and useful scientific data.

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