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Review Article

Plagiarism in nursing education and the ethical implications in practice

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Abstract

An important ethical issue in nursing education continues to be the evolving concerns of plagiarism. Plagiarism presents itself in a variety of different circumstances, which can influence both the classroom and the clinical environment. Nursing educators often struggle with how to handle the impact of plagiarism. This article aims to provide nursing educators with some practical learning strategies and recommendations to address present day plagiarism issues.

Keywords: Health profession, Medicine, Nursing, Education

1. Introduction

Plagiarism has been recognized as a violation of academic integrity for centuries and continues to be a prominent issue in nursing education. With the internet age and the access to a wealth of information at one's fingertips, plagiarism can easily occur among today's college students (Price, 2014; Smith, 2016b). Although the incidence of detecting plagiarism has changed over the years, the definition has not. The act of plagiarism has evolved into an important ethical issue in nursing, requiring nursing educators to consider the academic honesty of students who plagiarize. It is not only the act of plagiarism that interests nursing educators, but the possibility of future unethical actions from those who plagiarize intentionally or unintentionally. It is no

secret that the professional role of the nurse requires many characteristics such as honesty, integrity, and trustworthiness to name a few (Price, 2014; Smedley et al., 2015; Smith, 2016b). In fact, according to the 2017 Gallup report for the past 16 years, nursing has been ranked the highest among all professions in the areas of honesty and ethics (Brenan, 2017; Moore and Gaviola, 2018; Norman, 2016).

2. Main text

Plagiarism is not as clear-cut as its definition states. Whether intentional or unintentional, the use of another's words without proper acknowledgment and paraphrasing only covers the surface of the act of plagiarism. Self-plagiarism can be an additional aspect to consider when exploring plagiarism (Smith, 2016b; Souza, 2016). Further description of this topic within the literature uncovers a more complex process, making the topic one of much debate and concern for both educator and learner. Students may not respect the rules of plagiarism, by either not reading the policies or simply choosing not to adhere to them (Souza, 2016). Adding to the complexity of the issue is the lack of standardization in how educators deal with plagiarism. Often instructors in the same course and the same program will have varied methods in penalties regarding plagiarism. Most institutions of higher learning have well-established policies in place for plagiarism regarding academic integrity; however, various interpretations of plagiarism by both the student and educator make plagiarism a complex issue (Souza, 2016). A review of the literature suggests that plagiarism is indeed perceived differently by students and educators (Price, 2014; Smedley et al., 2015). Plagiarism is considered by most educators to be deeply rooted in ethics and morals when committed intentionally (Smith, 2016b).

Thornock (2013) studied nursing students and academic integrity. She focused on the classroom as well as the relationship between dishonest acts, such as plagiarism, and patient-centered care. Deterrence of this type of behavior was encouraged early to thwart ethical issues and poor outcomes. Thornock (2013) also addressed the significance of plagiarism in nursing education as a moral concern. She supported the overall goal of the nurse educator in preparing students to provide safe and effective care but sees plagiarism as a potential problem in reaching this goal.

Teaching students the fundamentals of American Psychological Association (APA) formatting is an important step that nursing faculty often neglect. Price (2014) discussed the increase in plagiarism specifically among nursing students. It was noted that increased school pressures felt by students has led to a rise in plagiarism, and the use of plagiarism detection software has made it easy for nursing faculty to detect this growth. Souza (2016) discussed concerns over students who intentionally commit plagiarism and whether they may more likely become a nursing professional

that engages in dishonest and unethical acts. Therefore, providing training on what constitutes plagiarism is more than ever encouraged among nursing educators.

Upon entering nursing school, students often are exposed to other forms of referencing styles. One of the potential challenges facing nursing students is the lack of preparation regarding APA formatting style. The magnitude of this is essential for nursing students to understand how its use provides nursing a voice in scientific literature. Resources such as student guides to writing APA papers may provide step-by-step instructions on how to format written work. In addition to guides, most universities have writing centers available to assist students in writing and citing in APA style. This style of writing may be intimidating to students who have not been exposed to it before; which, unfortunately may lead to unintentional plagiarism acts, such as parenthetical citation errors and improper referencing of sources utilized.

A strategy that nursing educators might consider is having beginning nursing students research available resources to aid in APA writing. This might include having assignments, discussion boards, and/or group activities in which students are assigned to visit on-campus and online resources for writing help. Other APA introduction activities might include quizzes to test student knowledge regarding APA basics. These quizzes can provide educators with informal feedback regarding problematic areas for students. Educators thus can promote early intervention or provide additional practice work to help students become more familiar in weak areas.

Another strategy that nursing educators may also find useful is flipped learning. Flipped learning is the process of exposing students to content prior to class and then utilizing class time to deepen one's understanding of the material. This is one learning strategy that lends itself well to educating students on APA style. Educators might consider having students divide into smaller groups and prepare lessons on APA rules and writing guides. These student groups could then provide in-class teaching sessions on the basics of APA style to their peers. Educators may then give students in-class assignments in which they have to work with APA formatting.

Moreover, nursing faculty often have unreal expectations for nursing students who lack APA fundamental skills. Nursing faculty should ask themselves at what level should students be exposed to APA. Alternatively, the working knowledge of APA format on critical assignments should be expected of students throughout the program. One way to assist students is the use of scaffolded learning exercises. Scaffolding in education has its roots deeply embedded in the principles of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Colter and Ulatowski, 2017). Through scaffolded learning experiences, educators assist students in the process of learning new tasks and building skill levels. The assistance that an educator provided is continually adjusted and minimized with each phase until the student has reached a level of competency. For example, advanced level nursing students might be assigned to mentor

and assist new incoming students with the process of learning APA format. By setting up a peer-to-mentor support network, senior level nursing students are able to assist in reviewing and advising lower classmen in the basic rules of APA style. This provides benefits to both the upper and lower level students. Senior nursing students are required to have a strong foundation in APA style and writing techniques. Furthermore, this gives the beginning student a peer to ask questions of and to review assignments prior to submission.

Educators may also consider activities and assignments that requires students to become familiar with plagiarism detection software like TurnItIn©. Students may be given small written activities to upload into TurnItIn© for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. This will assist students to understand how plagiarism detection software works and how it might be used to screen for plagiarism issues. Another activity that can assist students using a scaffolded learning approach is to allow students to submit their work through a plagiarism detection program as a preliminary check prior to submitting the assignment to the faculty member. The student should then be given the option to view the similarity report in order to learn from their mistakes. This allows the student to see how the plagiarism detection program works and allows them to make adjustments in writing before submitting for a final grade.

An additional aspect of plagiarism education is that students understand the definition of plagiarism. Mastering the ability to paraphrase content is a skill that can be developed and improved upon with experience. Students often think that providing a citation is sufficient to attribute credit, but it is essential that students understand how to paraphrase. Allowing students the opportunity to practice scholarly writing will aid in developing their writing abilities and to help avoid plagiarism.

There are a variety of different ways in which educators can help nursing students come to understand what plagiarism is and the ethical issues surrounding it. This is an excellent time for nursing educators to bridge how ethical concerns surrounding plagiarism may also raise warning flags for students in the clinical environment. The issue of plagiarism plays well into the ethics of a professional nurse. Helping the student to understand the academic penalties of plagiarism is only one aspect. Nursing student must also understand the ethical and moral relationship between professionalism and plagiarism.

The issue of plagiarism not only affects the work students perform in the classroom but also translates over to the clinical environment. Nursing educators are given the responsibility to address plagiarism among their students to help construct future ethical and professional nurses. This act can start in the classroom by teaching how to avoid plagiarism with student assignments, employment applications, and paperwork in the clinical setting (Smith, 2016a). Nurses are taught to uphold the professional standards of honesty, integrity, and ethical practice. Ethical behavior will maximize a nurse's quality of patient care (Smith, 2016b). The nurse's professional

image, seen by the patient population, is further supported by the ability to present and write proficiently in the clinical setting (Smith, 2016a).

Student perceptions of plagiarism and academic integrity presented a wakeup call to educators regarding the increased prevalence of plagiarism (Woith et al., 2012). The reputation and integrity of the profession begins in the classroom and extends into the clinical environment. The authors concluded that the implications of dishonesty in the classroom could not be ignored, and that patient safety and outcomes must be considered (Woith et al., 2012). McClung and Schneider (2018) noted that nursing student opinions regarding unethical behavior vary from that of faculty, in both classroom and clinical environments. Students may not link the threat of plagiarism to clinical documentation. The study conclusions are pertinent to nursing faculty and students and indicate the necessity of addressing what is ethical behavior. In doing so, students are less likely to be confused about issues, such as plagiarism, that involve academic honesty and ethical practice (McClung and Schneider, 2018).

There are several ways a nurse can plagiarize in the clinical environment and potentially jeopardize his or her reputation as a professional. For example, using generic nursing notes for every patient is a related issue of false documentation. Another example, a nurse tasked to write policies and procedures can easily copy the digital information from other hospitals without adequately citing the material. Plagiarism seen in nursing clinical documentation or paperwork has some inherent concerns to ethical, legal, professional, and/or financial penalties. The consequences could be detrimental not only to the nurse, but to the clinical facility as well. This may include accusations of professional misconduct, job dismissal, removal of licensure, and/or copyright infringement (Smith, 2016a). Considering the detrimental impact that plagiarism can impose on both the nurse and/or facility, echoes the critical topic surrounding plagiarism education in nursing.

The ethical and legal implications of false documentation by using general nursing notes for every patient is a related concern. Electronic health records may also create an environment that lends itself to one size fits all documentation that can be duplicated from patient to patient. Instilling the importance of documenting each patient encounter as true and accurate is critical. Many of the same unintentional acts of plagiarism occurring in the classroom setting can be an issue for students in the clinical setting, involving documentation such as health assessments, health histories, care plans, and concept maps.

With the lack of knowledge involving plagiarism among nursing students, educators may consider the implementation of learning activities, particularly in the first semesters of a nursing program. Concerning clinical issues involving plagiarism, practicum courses in the first year of a nursing program offer an excellent time and setting to discuss the pitfalls of plagiarism in the clinical environment. Threading activities in practicum coursework will allow students an opportunity to understand the link

between plagiarism and ethical practice (Smedley et al., 2015). Students may then better understand why plagiarism is important to the profession of nursing. Individual and group activities may be utilized to present information to students. Examples of plagiarism in practice, followed by group discussion is one teaching method. Students may review sample documentation on a patient and then provide documentation in their own words of a similar patient to practice documentation skills. Similar versions of care plans and concept maps can be shared as examples of how easy it is to duplicate work unintentionally while providing pointers on how to prevent this from occurring in the practice setting.

Further examples of activities that explore plagiarism in clinical practice may include the review of SOAP (subjective, objective, assessment, and plan) notes and nursing progress notes. Comparison of students' SOAP notes on different patients will allow students to visualize whether they provide individualized and personal charting on their patients or if it is a 'one size fits all' charting style. As students progress through a nursing program SOAP notes may easily and unintentionally become more of a standard form than individualized documentation. Non-individualized patient charting may also be recognized in nursing progress notes when brought to the attention of upperclassmen through activities such as pretend chart audits. Peer chart audits would allow students to review each other's charting and look for self-plagiarism, detect false charting of items that were not actually done, and discover charting that lacks distinction from patient to patient.

Students in their last semester of nursing school may engage in activities of analyzing their fellow classmates charting from a legal document standpoint. Educators may create a scenario in which nursing notes are involved in legal proceedings. This type of activity would involve understanding the importance of the honest and concise manner in which their documentation is written. This type of activity is a good way to remind upcoming graduates of the importance of ethical practice as it pertains to documentation.

3. Conclusions

The act of plagiarism has evolved into an important ethical issue in the nursing classroom. Certainly, literature continues to convey the significance and impact of plagiarism issues for students. Institutions of higher learning continue to implement policies to deter plagiarism; however, the learner's perception of plagiarism is varied as well as the educator's consistency in dealing with it. Practical solutions to the increasing problem of plagiarism involve setting clear parameters regarding plagiarism. Also important is the ability for students to link plagiarism to practice across the classroom and clinical environment. Introducing low stakes assignments early into the nursing curriculum can help foster student learning.

Honesty and ethical standards are important for nursing students to understand, including the act of plagiarism and all of its implications. This worry extends into nursing practice, and places the reputation of nursing as being one of the most trusted professions at risk. The impact plagiarism has on higher education is critical and nursing educators understand if not addressed then unethical behavior may carry over into nursing practice.

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