Information Literacy and the Ethics of Academic Writing

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Abstract

This article proposes to conduct a thorough reflection on the concept of the ethics of academic writing in higher education, under the conceptual framework of information literacy. To support this reflection on this ethical component, we carry out a review of the literature and previously reported experiential practices regarding the use of documentation and information analysis, particularly those held in school libraries. Recognizing the need for information from the outset of their academic written work, students are proposed to develop a set of research practices and use information ethically.

Introduction

This article relates educational and pedagogical aspects in the university context to information literacy and academic libraries. Students' permanent learning needs are a social reality and one of the current challenges of academic libraries. University libraries should act in the social context that instigates life-long learning, contributing to the construction of tools that can be used not only during the academic path, but also throughout the whole life cycle.

In the major transition between the school system and the labor system, the university student needs to master a set of soft skills. Within this set, the academic library can collaborate in the promotion of information skills, seeking to develop pedagogical practices involving information literacy, namely those used in academic writing. The main purpose of this article is to demonstrate that the pedagogical action of the academic library acquires meaning through information literacy, particularly when applied to the entire scope of the concept. The study is developed around three themes: the social context that frames current learning needs; the response of information literacy to these needs in a comprehensive manner that can contribute to improving student performance; and finally, the completion of academic writing in an ethical and responsible manner, within the framework of information literacy.

In light of information literacy theories, and taking into account the experiences of different academic libraries in guiding and supporting school work, the conclusion is that it is possible to develop students' ethical components within this area.

Education, Social Change and Libraries

Over the past thirty to forty years, the visible face of education in Portugal—a southern European country—has changed dramatically. Among these changes are widespread literacy efforts and the extension of compulsory schooling. The diversification of courses and training arrangements, the implementation of pre-school education, and the massification of higher education are other examples of changes made in the Portuguese educational system. As a catalyst of the changes experienced in the Western world, the school was consolidated and integrated into the cultural system and into society, and it has faithfully depicted the diversity of these changes.

The political and economic context of expansion and growth in Western countries, with the end of the cold war and the social movements that prompted the geographical, political and cultural mobility of populations, came to reveal sociological changes that have claimed a new individual place in the social scene. At the end of the twentieth century, this person, heir to modernity, came to be the protagonist of the era of emptiness. The postmodern man whom Lipovetsky so lucidly characterized, when reflecting on the social positioning of the human person, "now performed in a detached, uncompromising, sterile manner, in search of the immediate, in response to the pleasure call and with the narcissistic individual desire for self-satisfaction" (Lipovetsky, 1988: 54, translation mine). To paraphrase the author, our culture, but also our ideology of welfare, stimulates dispersal instead of concentration, the temporary instead of the voluntary, and works for the fragmentation of the self, the annihilation of organized and synthetic psychic systems. Students' lack of attention that all teachers today complain about is nothing more than the way this new cool and agile consciousness acts, analogous to spectator awareness, captured by every-
thing and by nothing, at the same time excited and indifferent in the antipodes of voluntary consciousness.

The relevance of this description is in accordance with the multiplication of channels for obtaining, producing, and disseminating information. This multiplication had a significant impact on how individuals access information and, as a result, how libraries have looked at their role and repositioned themselves regarding their patrons and users. As receptors of this culture of excessive information, due to higher production flows and intellectual dissemination, libraries have also adapted by transforming the methods and techniques for treating documents through a technological shakeup in routine operations.

Educational issues emerge, renewed, in this scenario. The social needs regarding training have been reformulated. In college, the transition from the twentieth to the twenty-first century brought about a parallel between the gradual empowerment of students and the centralization of education in those students, encouraging their creative potential.

The Bologna process also highlighted the need for self-regulated learning, echoing the social framework favored by postmodernity. In fact, the Bologna process brings a range of measures which affect both teaching and learning that are being implemented in order to enhance the student experience. For instance, there is some progress in shifting to modularization, learning outcomes, and student-centred learning (Sorock, Smith & Davies, 2010: 7). Libraries have begun to align their teaching roles with an experiential perspective, by which each individual travels his own unique path, individually discovering research and producing scientific knowledge. Some significant changes have also influenced the skills needed to effectively empower the student and particularly the library user. These changes are visible in library practices: technological changes that confer different speeds and reading routes (increasingly hypertext); different (more virtual) ways of accessing resources and their availability; new document formats; virtual access to spaces (synchronous and asynchronous); or even the renewed modes of organization and management. This is the context for this discussion.

Information Literacy: An Answer to University Challenges

Information literacy emerges as a comprehensive problematic for school and university libraries. The more stable and recognized concept remaining appears to be that of the American Library Association (ALA, 1989):

To be information literate, a person must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information. (...) They know how to learn because they know how knowledge is organized, how to find information and how to use infor-

mation in such a way that others can learn from them. They are people prepared for lifelong learning, because they can always find the information needed for any task or decision at hand.

In this concept, the idea of information literacy is inextricably linked to the idea of learning and to the recognition of the need to be informed and to learn every day. It also underlines the importance of learning to learn for the full exercise of citizenship in the information society. The learning cycle (beginning with the recognition of the need for information and ending with an ethical and responsible use) is present in the performance of tasks and decision making throughout our lives.

In the university context, information literacy is mobilized when an individual recognizes the need for information and summons a set of competencies, skills, and abilities to apply in the research, location, selection, and use of information for personal use. This is framed in an ethical and lawful manner to resolve everyday academic issues. The autonomy achieved is only possible after an initial learning phase, either through the preparation and administration of training programs (that intentionally promote information skills learning), or within more simplified proposals that focus on the development of these skills. The realization of a comprehensive educational mission at the level of the library will contribute to educate socially capable citizens, through training and qualification of the learning competencies throughout the college course.

The exercise of full citizenship, achieved through the empowerment of the learner and through the mobilization of theoretical and practical knowledge learned, is also an underlying intention of these training practices. The university library seeks to enable students in specific skills. These specific information skills can be explained in light of Perrenoud’s theorization, when referring to these as a form of situated, specific intelligence. The author (Perrenoud, 1999: 30, translation mine) also notes that “skills are ‘a capitalized intelligence,’ a sequence of operating modes, mastered transpositions, and heuristic runs that have become routinized mental schemes or high-level plots that save time, which ‘insert’ the decision.” Thus information literacy, being a situated set of specific skills within the college student’s learning pathway, reaches a legitimacy and a mandate to pursue its goals: to enable the student to recognize a need for information, seek it, select it, evaluate it, synthesize it and present it in an academic context or personal situation, ethically and legally.

Learning and Creative Ability in Academic Work

Desirably, learning in the academic context results in intellectual creation. It is this creation that can and should be fostered in the university library. According to Natriello & Hughes (2007: 17), more than merely receiving the
Authorial Production from an Ethical Standpoint

I will not dwell on information ethics where technical and professional environment concerns predominate, as other authors have done (Bodi, 1998; Sturgis, 2009). These areas include ethics concerning the choice of documents to integrate a bibliographic collection, the form of conservation and preservation, limitations to documentation accessibility in a physical or virtual way, or even users’ privacy and use of personal data information. These areas relate to sensitive aspects that are regulated by codes of conduct or ethical guidelines for information-related professionals (librarians, archivists, journalists, data managers, among others). Nor will I dwell on the professional practice of educational actors (teachers, trainers, educators, or librarians) or on the matters of respecting diversity, different learning contexts, or other situations of pedagogical intervention. I shall not even approach a very current concern with scientific ethics (which includes bioethics, the frontiers of research, and the respect for animals in scientific research, particularly in the health sciences).

Instead, I shall dedicate myself to a more specific reflection that draws on con-cepts of education and philosophy of education, to explain the commitment, from my point of view, that is essential to authorship production in academic contexts, based on school work and therefore with academic writing.

The importance of authorial production is essential to the idea that I want to develop. On a previous occasion (Sanchez, 2013), I had the opportunity to expound on this subject, referring to the possibility of writing as a potential authority issue for the college student. On that occasion, I explained that it is from what others have said and written, and in response to a challenge posed by reading, that the student intends to say and write something that is his, in his own words. It is this movement that provides authorial possibility.

The assertion of an identity that reads and writes is supported by the need to scroll through a proposal that encourages cumulative knowledge, either by confrontation or by agreement. This interaction results in new positions, which will become, in turn, again, the condition for that renewed asynchronous dialogue.

Reflecting on these same issues, Burgess (2012) explains that “difficulties with writing are not necessarily the result of students' literacy ‘problems,’ but can be related to issues of identity.” The author argues that a negative positioning regarding their own writing, in which students are positioned in a deficient and or socially subordinate scale, results in the lack of confidence that undermines the necessary trust to develop writing practices. One of the main objectives of higher education is the recognition and development of an authorial self (Burgess, 2012) within an academic community — the authors' tribe with whom one establishes a scientific dialogue and where ideas are exchanged. These are considered partners and therefore summoned in writing. In the words of Beth Graue (2005: 916), “writing is more than description or even analysis; it is an elaborate performance of identity that connects an author and his or her work to a community.”

The recognition, respect and belonging to this community of authors will provide the need for their referencing and for the quotation of their words. I recall Sergio Niza to underline this idea (Niza, 2011: 516). In his words (translation mine), “the best way to refund a social or action skills pedagogy is through productions. It is being able to produce works. Being able to produce text. Being able to produce experiences. ... But actually going through it and not only reading but also writing it. In other words, authorship. Being an actor. Or co-author, in the sense that it is always reimbursed, because nothing in the construction of a work can be only of one.”

In academic writing studies two ideas stand out: first, the idea that doing research is essentially about writing (Van der Maren, 1996: 275); second, the idea that the writing process is in itself a learning process, that is, writing is fundamentally learning (Creme and Lea, 2006: 1).
Evaluation and the Temptation of Plagiarism

Learning at a university necessarily involves the exercise of academic writing, provided by academic work. Echevarría Martínez and Gaston Barrenechea (2013) reported that both students and teachers are aware of the establishment of a link between learning to do writing assignments and learning content. However, the intentionality of learning is compromised at various times during the work process or, more precisely, when an evaluation is anticipated.

The evaluation, an integral part of formal training at all stages of education and the form of equalization for verifying learning, introduces an inconvenient bias. It is the practice of fraud, which is systematically internalized and exercised to address and challenge the accuracy, rule, and respect for evaluative standards when faced with difficulties. Though focused on assessment in the context of exams at a university, and not particularly in academic work, the study of Domingues (2006) about the practices of “cheating” evokes some interesting ideas. It concludes that this practice of non-compliance and non-quality of learning is in itself a cause and an effect of the system, because it falls within the social order and the processes of formation, with relative leniency of the actors involved, something that is visible in the naturalization of this type of procedure, i.e., stripping them of the negative charge of a reprehensible practice and granting them systemic dimension (Domingues, 2006: 186).

This is also the case of “copy-paste” practices used in academic work, i.e., plagiarism and the use of references, phrases or texts by authors without the appropriate quotation and, in this sequence, a tendency to regard these practices with social acquiescence, materializing an intentional ignorance in relation to the illicit in an academic environment. Regarding this same issue, Chen (2011: 242) states that “whether staff take the effort to detect plagiarism cases and how they handle suspected or confirmed cases depends on the institutional policy and the level of resources at hand.” The author cites several studies that found differences and uncertainties in institutional approaches dealing with plagiarism issues, underlining that “cultural and educational experiences can impact attitudes towards plagiarism.” The contribution of the academic library in response to these situations is, I believe, related to the work practices it promotes, based on the learning processes of information literacy.

An Ethic of Academic Work Based on Information Literacy: Some Examples

The work organized by Hassenforder & Lefort (1981) alluded to the importance of teaching practice-based research in documentation. One of these examples is a project for the creation of a dossier for a history lesson, preceded by the documentary research and followed by a session-debate promoted by the students responsible for this research. The immersion in the task successfully brought about learning the concept of documentary sources in history and their exploration. As well as learning in the field, the personal satisfaction of students in achieving the objectives proposed by the teacher emerges.

Another history teacher conducted a similar exercise, proposing that the students organize themselves into groups to present a free theme to the class. This was to take no more than 30 minutes. This approach focused more on the work planning, distribution of shared tasks by members of the group and gathering learning strategies of information, such as “taking notes.” Students in the 6th grade level declared, “I like this kind of work: we are not treated like children” (Hassenforder and Lefort, 1981: 45). The completion of the school newspaper, an informative poster, an album or information file, conducting an encyclopedia entry, are examples of work involving the development of information literacy, empowering and enabling students, as indicated in the above mentioned work (Hassenforder and Lefort, 1981: 145-146), to provide individualized teaching, encourage creative work and foster communication between students and teachers. Other similar cases are reported, also with a focus on higher education. In short, the idea is that there is a role for the academic library regarding self-education: “The school library ... can play an important role in the learning and reading development of children and adults, as well as in the birth and progress of self-taught cultural itineraries” (Hassenforder, Lefort, 1981: 195).

In the special issue dedicated to the importance of research on learning — the dossier “Apprendre à chercher, chercher pour apprendre”— in the journal Cahiers Pédagogiques, a group of authors, mostly teachers in primary and secondary French schools, report their experiences and cases of success with respect to actions that involve information research. I highlight the interesting article “Copier-coller, ça s’apprend!” (Bouskella, N., Briat, V., Carbillot, M., Moutada, A., & Mulot, H. 2013: 44), in which the experience of deconstruction is described and explained by using practical research on documentation such as “copy-paste” as a step in academic work. But it does not end there; rather it constitutes a phase of information gathering:

Et si le copier-coller repris tel quel dans un travail est en effet pédagogiquement non acceptable, il peut être envisagé autrement et positivement, comme première trace du travail de sélection élaboré par l’élève, qui, rigoureusement exploitée, peut servir de trame à une construction progressive, non linéaire, de la démarche de recherche d’information élaborée par l’élève.

The scope of these actions is defined taking into account a training course in information skills, referred to in France as Pacif (parcours de formation à la culture de l’information), deployed in multiple competencies and poured into the government program to be applied at various levels of education, based on the following axes (Wavelet, 2013: 51):
Il s'agit du besoin d'information (axe 1), de la recherche d'information (axe 2), de l'évaluation de l'information (axe 3), de l'organisation des connaissances (axe 4) et de leur usage éthique (axe 5). Ces cinq dimensions complémentaires devront être développées suivant une progression équilibrée, qui ne requiert en rien une linéarité des apprentissages informationnels, mais impose qu'aucun axe ne soit perdu de vue.

These experiments, reported by teachers — key actors involved in teaching and learning — demonstrate the importance of a link between the work in the classroom and the corresponding demands, student learning, and the essential support that the academic library (school and university) has in this different way of practicing learning and teaching through the use of information in a committed, fulfilling, and ethical manner. From the point of view of libraries and what can be done there, Bodil (1998: 462) puts forward a proposal: "Placing principles such as ownership, right to privacy, social responsibility, and self-respect within the context of the philosophy of ethics may be more effective and meaningful way of changing students' behavior."

From these aspects one can contribute to the education of our sensitivity through positive examples and by contextualizing academic work, the read-write movement, which can be found in academic libraries (school and university) — an essential partnership for its realization and practice. In this regard, I cannot resist quoting Jorge de O, in the introductory chapter of the collection of writings by Sérgio Niza (2012: 36, translation mine):

> Here we are, having finally arrived at the only certainty that the school should assume as its own — that it is within production that production processes are themselves comprised. Everything we know or we can come to know is through "recontextualization." With this practice we do not experience the beauty or instrumentality of writing, but its depth.

This is also the character that information literacy may have — to give depth to academic work through academic writing in the context of the library.

Conclusion

Investigations and published studies on the ethical component in academic work and academic writing, particularly with regard to the role of school and university libraries, are still incipient. This study sought to contribute to the analysis of this reality. In a context in which social and academic pressures on students instigate the attainment of better results and, at the same time, competitiveness, the need for lifelong learning and the demands of multiple skills are valued, support and guidance provided to the student, especially at work in the library, should be a priority.

The preceding analysis of some international experiences — reporting best practices and examples of learner support — made clear that it is possible to infuse the ethical component in the teaching of information skills. The implementation of information literacy, taking into account the results presented, urges librarians to conduct a more comprehensive work, which raises the student's awareness of his authorial possibilities without skipping over ethical issues. The investigation therefore sought to contribute to the understanding of information literacy as a conceptual framework for shaping the experience of school work in academic libraries with the essential ethical component that students may develop in this context.

Notes


2. The Bologna Process is characterized by principles and tools that have been developed and implemented in the several European countries over the years. The main principles in the Bologna Declaration are based on Fector (2005: 11):
   - Facilitating the readability and comparability of qualifications; Implementing a system based essentially in two main cycles: Establishing a system of credits, such as ECTS; Developing arrangements to support the mobility of students, teachers and researchers; Promoting European cooperation in quality assurance; Promoting the European dimension in higher education (in terms of curricular development and inter-institutional cooperation).

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