Case study 3.   Stealing from oneself

A hypothetical case about self-plagiarism

Donna was preparing additional teaching materials for her students to help them better understand some new concepts in class. This new undergraduate course touched on some latest trends in the subject area and there were not many reference materials available. Despite that, Donna was very enthusiastic about this course as its subject matter coincided with her recent research interests. Donna has been working on a research article before the course commenced. As she was preparing the course materials, she figured that some of her recent findings should be useful. She decided to share a few paragraphs from her working paper on the course forum to kick-start the discussion with her students. Three months later, her manuscript was finally completed. Donna submitted her manuscript to a publisher for review. What happened next left Donna in confusion: the editor told her that her submission was rejected as they discovered plagiarised materials in major parts of her article. Donna was very certain that every sentence in her manuscript was her original work. "This is insane. Do they think I plagiarised myself?"

Reflection corner

1. Did Donna make any mistake in the process?
2. What should Donna do next?
3. What can we do to avoid getting into such situation?

Analysis: What is self-plagiarism?

The HKU Policy on Research Integrity defines self-plagiarism as the reuse of one's work without acknowledging that such work has been submitted elsewhere. Self-plagiarism is also sometimes referred to as "duplicate publication" and "textual recycling" (Roig, 2007). With the use of paragraphs published in her forum post without referencing prior use, Donna's submission of her research article constitutes an act of "textual recycling". Bruton (2014) pointed out that self-plagiarism, which includes "textual recycling", is unethical and should be objected to because of its deceptive and dishonest nature. Self-plagiarism can be easily prevented by giving proper acknowledgment, rewriting materials, and restricting the use of soon-to-be-published materials to personal purposes only. Self-plagiarism is regarded as research misconduct according to the University policy. Students should make their best effort to avoid committing self-plagiarism and consult their supervisors or teachers when in doubt.

See more:
1. HKU Policy on Research Integrity:
   http://www.rss.hku.hk/integrity/rcr/policy#Research%20Misconduct
2. Bruton, Samuel V. (2014). Self-Plagiarism and Textual Recycling: Legitimate Forms of Research Misconduct. Accountability in Research, 21(3), 176-197.
   https://doi.org/10.1080/08989621.2014.848071

3. Roig, M. (2007). Avoiding plagiarism, self-plagiarism, and other questionable writing practices: A guide to ethical writing. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/251739328_Avoiding_plagiarism_self-plagiarism_and_other_questionable_writing_practices_A_guide_to_ethical_writing