

VIEWPOINT

CAN INFORMATION LITERACY DEVELOP INTELLECTUAL HONESTY?

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I have been pondering for quite some time on the solution to intellectual dishonesty specifically that of academic dishonesty and plagiarism. By intellectual dishonesty I mean all situations that involve the intentional abandonment of honest, unbiased rational processes. Intellectual dishonesty arises in different contexts of life like in the following example situations:

- a) when one deliberately accuses someone wrongfully;
- b) looking the other way (i.e. when someone sees a wrongful act but does not do anything about it; or in cases when a research yields a particular output but is not considered/followed because of selfish reasons),
- c) claiming someone else's intellectual product to be one's own (i.e. cheating in exams, copying and pasting of other's work to make it appear as one's original work, stealing somebody else's design/work) and many more.

However, I will concentrate my discussion on the intellectual dishonesty that usually arises in written works especially in the academic setting (i.e. research outputs, assignments, reports etc). The intellectual dishonesty situations I refer to here are those of the copy-paste situations as this is where libraries are involved or affected the most because the materials used are from the library like books, magazines, electronic journals, and theses. Also, in as much as I have already limited my scope of intellectual dishonesty, it would be better then, to use the term plagiarism (although some literature sources prefer the use of academic dishonesty). It is my hope that I will be able to shed light on issues relating to the role of philosophy in librarianship which may somehow lead to a study on philosophy of librarianship.

Right now, academic libraries through the information literacy programs (either as a separate program or as part of the library orientation program) try to instill among the students the importance of citing sources of information. However, even with these programs, coupled with the discussions of plagiarism and citing of information sources in English writing classes (especially here in UP), there are still instances when students either deliberately (or not) forget to cite information sources or improperly cite information sources. It is important for libraries to take part in combating the problem of plagiarism. Acknowledging information sources keeps the integrity of the information cycle and of course the collection of the library. If a plagiarized thesis is made part of the collection, and accessed by users, it is either they believe this to be an

original and cite it as such thereby not properly acknowledging the “more original” source. Situations like these are not unique to the academic setting. A senator was once criticized for not acknowledging the source of part of his speech. The problem, I believe, is not limited to just following citation styles or acknowledging sources of information, but more importantly the problem is on the character of people especially that of honesty. It is important to train people to be honest not just in academic endeavors but in everything that they do. There have been studies on academic dishonesty and why students (and some academic staff) have committed such, and also studies relating academic dishonesty to dishonesty in the workplace (Nonis & Swift, 2001; Archibong, 2012; Jurdi, Hage and Chow, 2011; Petress, 2003). They all conclude that academic dishonesty should be condoned and that students should be better encouraged to not commit such. If we would let these dishonest students pass and let them cheat their way in the workplace then what becomes of us? It is not much of a surprise knowing that there are those in the workplace who are engaged in “kickbacks” or unscrupulous acts like *tong-pats*, under the table deals, etc. It is disheartening to look at society’s leaders nowadays who lie, cheat and steal and yet maintain their positions in society. Digressing a bit, I wonder, though, if Aristotle’s ethics, especially the virtues, were discussed early on in life, would the values that we have change?

I present the following questions as basis for discussion:

1. What, if any, has Aristotle discussed in the Nicomachean Ethics on honesty, and intellectual honesty which can be related to a discussion of academic dishonesty?
2. To what extent can information literacy instruction develop the more specific academic honesty and the more general intellectual honesty? Does information literacy have to be philosophical in nature to discuss virtue of intellectual honesty?
3. Does it necessarily follow that when the individual has intellectual honesty it is no longer difficult for him to cite sources?

On Intellectual Honesty

In the Nicomachean Ethics (Irwin translation) this is the first that passage I found which deals with honesty is in 1108a20 on the discussion of the mean and positive and negative extremes:

In truth-telling, then, let us call the intermediate person truthful, and the mean truthfulness; pretence that overstates will be boastfulness, and the person who has it boastful; pretence that understates will be self-deprecation, and the person who has it self-deprecating.

This is not specific to intellectual honesty but to truth telling in general. Arguably, this can be taken to mean that we should abide by what we arrive at when we deliberate as most likely we arrive at the truth via deliberation and this is what we should espouse.

In another passage in Book IV there is another passage on truthfulness which is in relation to dealing with others:

Someone with this character (truthfulness) seems to be a decent person. For a lover of the truth who is truthful even when nothing is at stake will be still keener to tell the truth when something is at stake, since he will avoid falsehood as shameful [when something is at stake], having already avoided it in itself [when nothing was at stake]. And this sort of person is praiseworthy (1127b5).

It is of course obvious that someone who does not avoid falsehood is not praiseworthy and therefore not encouraged. It is clear in the above passage that even when something is at stake like honor or wealth, falsehood must still be avoided. Unfortunately, those who deliberately forego falsehood because something is at stake are more prevalent nowadays. To my mind, those who are intellectually dishonest put more value on whatever is at stake rather than on the truth. For example those who are committing plagiarism may think about their grades (or honor) that is why they resort to copying someone else's work because they probably think that when someone reads their work they would be impressed with what they wrote and be given high grades. This can be considered to be what Aristotle describes as boastful:

...the boaster seems to claim qualities that win reputation, when he either lacks them altogether or has less than he claims (1127a20).

This brings to mind students who copy from the Internet to satisfy assignments or term papers. They try to put together as many as they can from so many sources to try to show that they have done so much for that particular task. It can be argued though that it depends on the type of requirement/assignment given and to what level the work was given because there are different levels of difficulty for assignments. When one is tasked to know something about the Solar System or the human body and its parts, one is not expected to give an original work, rather the information are copied from various reference sources. It can probably be forgivable if the reference sources are not cited here. After all they are not tasked to put in their original work. But then, it will still be best to acknowledge the reference sources here because of the following reasons:

- a) while they are young, they should already be taught how to acknowledge sources because this is something that they will use all through their lives;
- b) sources should still be cited to avoid the practice of plagiarism because if they are allowed before they may think that this is allowable all throughout;
- c) on the part of the teacher, he would know whether the resources are valid sources of information.

However, for higher levels especially that of the tertiary level, where assignments are not as easy as providing information about concepts but rather are more of the synthesis, analysis and evaluation type, it is necessary that the student present a delineation between what is theirs and what they have borrowed from others. In this context, it is unforgivable to not cite reference

sources because when one is required to express their own opinion or be original, they should be. If they were asked to review a film or a novel they are expected to watch the film or read the novel before they can write their own review. However, some students would rather go directly online and look for reviews of films or novels, copy these (or at least try to paraphrase these) and pass these as their own. This is a deliberate act of disregarding instructions (to provide own review), rational processes (read, analyze, evaluate) and the truth (that of one's own evaluation). Even if the students reason that they no longer have the time to work on their papers, it is still an act of dishonesty and an act of boastfulness because in the apparent lack of time they are still able to come up with said review. This brings me to another passage from Book IV:

It is not a person's capacity, but his decision, that makes him a boaster; for his state of character makes a person a boaster, just as it makes a person a liar (1127b15).

As such, those who take someone else's work and pass it as their own are boasters because they try to come up with an image of themselves as capable of producing those works (i.e. reviews, essays etc.) This is quite depressing because there are those people who do not have high regard of the truth. In this case, the students who commit plagiarism have higher regard of what others think of them based on their output. But this is a flaw in reasoning because if others will find out that the work is plagiarized then others will think otherwise. Why would they not consider this in their deliberation? They may have considered getting caught but may have tried to make sure that they will not get caught. But this makes it all the more wrong because they have deliberately committed plagiarism and they most likely know what can happen and most likely also, they have thought of what to do if they get caught. A lot of things can be said of the character of these people if this is indeed the case.

What comes to mind is the case of Mark Solis, the UP student who grabbed photos online and deliberately changed the context (i.e. title, story, location) of these photographs, submitted these to several photography competitions. When I first heard of the news I thought "What was he thinking?" This was already theft! Someone with the right thinking would not do this. Arguably the least that he could have done is replicate the image if he was really inspired by what he saw. He could have used other people, a different place, probably replicated the lighting conditions, emotions etc. Although it will not be very like the image, at least he can claim that it was his work, his own camera, his concept (although not so much an original) at least he put it together and he really was the one who took the photo. It could not be claimed that it was just a mistake because apparently he has taken so many photos from Flickr, submitted them to these competitions and made them his own. He is an educated person, from UP no less. The university has policies on cheating, plagiarism, copyright etc. English classes teach students how to properly acknowledge and cite sources. The library conducts library orientation programs and plagiarism and citing of information sources are discussed. The students are informed of the consequences of cheating and plagiarism. How could he not have considered these things? He has most likely deliberated but he chose to do otherwise. He knows the conditions, he knows the consequences and yet he still chose to do otherwise. He gave in to his desire – the desire to win the competition because the competition gives out so

much money.

It seems proper, then, to an intelligent person to be able to deliberate finely about what is good and beneficial for himself, not about some restricted area – e.g. about what promotes health or strength – but about what promotes living well in general (1140a25).

He definitely did not deliberate well because he only looked into the particulars (winning the competition) but on living well or the highest good. Solis, for that matter did not think about what better way to win a competition. He did not consider the good that he will attain if he took his own photos. He was too myopic to believe that winning a competition was all there is. This again makes me think about what virtues people have now a days. Why do they not think about the highest good? Why are they too concerned with what is immediate? What kind of virtues do the people today have? This is where the concept of habituation comes in. Truth telling, honesty, integrity and all other virtues are developed via habituation. These should be instilled while we are young or while there is still the opportunity for proper formation. It will be difficult to change or form someone if he grows up with the wrong virtues. This then brings me to my next question, whether information literacy instruction can help in the development of intellectual honesty.

On Information Literacy and Intellectual Honesty

Information literacy came out as a result of the exponential growth of information. It started however as bibliographic instruction which was anchored more on the collection of libraries. It expanded its reach later on to include all other sources of information such as news, movies etc. especially when the Internet and social networking (i.e. blog sites, Facebook, Multiply, GoogleDocs, YouTube, file sharing sites, etc.) became accessible by many. Information was no longer the monopoly of libraries and information centers because individuals can already access information everywhere as long as they have connection to the Internet. Those with expired copyrights can already be downloaded via Gutenberg.org or new books can be previewed via Amazon.com and of course some personal (and not so personal) sites freely upload and share scans or electronic copies of books, journals, magazines etc. There are also Open Access Journals which are published and accessed without any subscription fee online. News and other bits of information are shared via social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter and Multiply. They can access collections of libraries, electronic databases such as journals, magazines etc. They can also access different blog sites and free sites such as Wikipedia, WebMD etc. It was imperative for individuals to know which information to rely on and where to look for not just any information but reliable and authoritative information. Due to the proliferation of information it became convenient and useful to those who know how to use it and yet dangerous for those who cannot. As it is, information should still be processed and understood in its context. People are easily swayed by whatever comes their way and it was important to empower them by letting them know of ways to analyze and evaluate information sources. Just recently, I saw people sharing a supposed recent finding by the APA on the disorder of people taking *selfies*. Of course, those who shared this via Facebook made

comments like “Would you still want to take a *selfie* after reading this?” Even when I am not taking *selfies*, interest kicked in as to what disorder these people might have. So I clicked the site and found that the site was something like adobo.com and that the acronym APA was for American Psychiatric Association. As I knew already how to discriminate between a reputable source from what is not, I immediately dismissed the information (it was funny though). But I wonder, did those people who share the link believed in the information? Or did they share it because they found it funny?

To some extent, dealing with information requires proper deliberation in relation to living well. The information we rely on or those that we believe and accept as true has implications to our “living well.” This brings me to this passage in Book VI:

Intelligence is a state grasping the truth, involving reason, concerned with action about what is good and bad for a human being (1140b5).

I remember that time when the tsunami hit Fukushima Prefecture in Japan back in 2011 and there was a threat of radioactive contamination of both air and water here in the Philippines. Because of fear, there were those who did not leave their houses (and sort of sealed their houses with duct tape – though unverified) and a lot of people bought Betadine antiseptic and sort of swathed their throats with the solution to prevent their thyroids from being affected. When fear set in, all kinds of beliefs were held. (I wouldn’t be surprised if I saw some with tin foils over their heads.) All kinds of information were devoured by people as they wanted to be informed but the downside of this was that they no longer knew which to believe - either they believed everything, selected one aspect and held it to be true, or they believed nothing. I for one was on my feet the whole time that the news about the earthquake was being broadcast. I was consulting online sources about tsunamis and its reach – consulting historical accounts of earthquakes and resulting tsunamis. I thought that if the tsunami was that huge and powerful, it might reach the northern tip of the Philippines – where my family is. My mom at that time was travelling from La Union to Laoag and knowing that the National Highway was near the coastline, I couldn’t stop from wanting to know more – just to be sure that the tsunami will not reach the place. There were predictions, however, that if and when the waves reach the Philippines, it will not be as destructive as the one in Japan because it will have been dissipated by some factors lying between Japan and the Philippines. This seemed reasonable and valid so this was what I accepted. In this context, instances of intellectual dishonesty would be common – for gain, someone would offer so and so types of medicine for prevention of radioactive contamination (much like the Betadine perhaps) even when the one behind the offer would know that there is no such case. If this was so, then this would somehow be in a way an expression of *pleonexia* (*greed*). People motivated by greed would most likely not reason well. Rather, they would manipulate reasoning so that it will be to their advantage. And this situation would be very much beyond the scope information literacy instruction. So it can be said that information literacy instruction can help in the promotion of intellectual honesty but within the limits of academic honesty or at least honesty in dealing with written information. Other uses of information like that of that described above as a situation of *pleonexia* would not be solved by analysis, use and evaluation of information sources. It could be that if they knew how to use information, and they were really greedy and opportunistic, they would use and manipulate information to their advantage.

Information literacy has been defined by several authors and sectors among the definitions include the following:

- capability of accessing and understanding various information sources (Lenox & Walker, 1996);
- avid reader, interested learner, thinks critically, communicates effectively, uses information responsibly, uses information technology skillfully (Loertscher, 1996);
- ability to locate information, finding meaning and understanding such and able to make creative use of these (McKenzie, 2000)
- ability to acquire and evaluate information, organize and maintain information, interpret and communicate information and use computers to process information (SCANS, 2000).

There are other formulations for the definition of information literacy as well as characteristics of an information literate individual but what is common among all these definitions is the ability to locate, understand, organize, and use information effectively. There are a lot of underlying factors in these definitions but it is safe to say that with these capabilities an individual will not be easily swayed with whatever information comes his way. Take for example an information literate individual who receives a chain email claiming that this month is lucky because it has 5 Mondays which only happens once in 800 years and that the recipient should pass it to 50 people for good luck. Who believes chain emails anyway? If an information literate person would react, he would do so in this manner:

- locate information – check the source of the email; check the calendar if it has 5 Mondays
- understand information – knows that there are 4 weeks per month, knows that the number of days per month varies, checks other months and validates that there is the possibility of having 5 Mondays (or Saturdays, or Sundays)
- use information effectively – does not forward the email because it will just proliferate wrong information

(A greedy person would probably use this information and say something like, send me a 100 Php worth of credits and you will get 500 Php worth of credits in return. He knows that there are people out there who can be easily swayed by an easy return of investment.)

I would say that these processes are similar with what one goes through when one deliberates about something. Although for Aristotle, one does not deliberate about scientific knowledge but in the context of too many information one should still deliberate not specifically about scientific knowledge but deliberate on information sources of scientific knowledge. At this point, there are many sources who claim to be authoritative or sources that claim truth about their research but complications have been quite plenty. Motivations for research outputs have been tainted by a lot of factors including selfish reasons, economics,

honor etc. Another complication is that of paradigm shifts, that the authoritativeness of a source can be compromised because of this (i.e. Ptolemaic concept of the universe vs. Copernican theory). And these should be included in one's deliberation.

When one is swamped with too many conflicting information like when one tries to organize a report or a research and comes across too many data, the feeling of exasperation easily kicks in. But for information literate individual exasperation hardly affects him. In this situation, an information literate individual would:

- locate information – find all possible information sources relating to the problem
- understand information – determine which among those collected information is helpful to understanding the topic/problem at hand (although this can also be evaluating information)
- organize information – arrange, categorize, classify, synthesize what is gathered to be useful/applicable
- use information effectively – use the organized information for decision making

Of course the situation varies from one case to another and it may be that not all the processes or activities stated therein can be readily identified. It may be that some of those activities/abilities overlap. Like in understanding and organizing information, it may be that while one is trying to comprehend information, one is also organizing information to help him comprehend/understand. There is no single formula to the process but the key here is that for one to be able to sort through the information available and be able to make a decision whether to believe in it or not.

When done correctly, information literacy instruction can habituate the students to be more critical about information, to determine whether these are the right sources, and evaluate which among the right sources can best address their information needs. Information needs are not necessarily those that are related to class activities (i.e. research, term papers, assignments, reports etc.) but also those that one needs in their everyday lives. If they are able to acquire these skills of analyzing, selecting, evaluating information sources to address information needs which can be used for decision making, it is hoped that they will do this for the rest of their lives. After all, information is important in deliberation. As stated in Book VI:

For someone who knows that light meats are digestible and healthy, but not which sorts of meats are light, will not produce health; the one who knows that bird meats are healthy will be better at producing health. And since intelligence is concerned with action it must possess both [the universal and the particular knowledge] or the [particular] more [than the universal]. Here too, however, [as in medicine] there is a ruling [science] (1141b20).

I take this to mean as information is important in deliberation. If you know so, it is important that you act so because not doing so would result to dishonesty. For example, I know that I have elevated blood sugar. Information from my physician and other sources that I have

consulted gave me points to ponder. I know that if I eat too much sweet and my blood sugar goes to much higher levels I might get sick or have complications. Therefore to lead a better life, I should follow what my physicians say because I know that he is an authoritative source of information because of his expertise brought about by years of practice. I should also follow what other information sources say because they are consistent with what my physician told me. But if I am overcome by my appetite and eat a lot of sweets, this goes against my well being. This would also make me dishonest in a way or better yet incontinent to an extent. But if I had the virtue of truthfulness and integrity, and understanding, then I would not go against what is for my well being. Because the highest good for me is to be well and not be sick. In this manner, information literacy can be related to the process of deliberation. In another sense, when I am confronted with a written assignment to evaluate a particular film, I being information literate, would know which resources to consult. Being information literate, I would also be aware that I should acknowledge whatever information sources I consult. In this manner, information literacy would hopefully enable students the necessary awareness on being honest about what we put in what we write.

As to the other objectives of information literacy, aside from being able to locate, analyze, and use information is the one which instructs us to properly cite information sources. Although this part is more or less useful in the academic setting and in all other cases when one produces written research. Arguably this is not really useful for life. It is still important because this habituates us to acknowledge those sources of information and in a way appreciate what the ones before us have done.

I would claim that information literacy instruction can be of help to avoid instances of academic dishonesty like plagiarism, but it may be beyond character change. It is thus unfortunate that when individuals have not properly developed those virtues relating to character, they would not, even if they have deliberated, aim toward the highest good. That even if reason dictates so, they will still go toward what their pleasures and appetites dictate.

This brings me to my follow-up question: whether information literacy need to be philosophical for it to impart/install intellectual honesty. Personally, I would say yes because I believe that philosophizing would be more enlightening and thereby has more chance of character changing. However, not all librarians conducting information literacy instruction have background in philosophy to know how to give information literacy the philosophical flavor it needs. That is why philosophizing should not be forced into information literacy instruction. A good approach, which is near to having philosophical in nature is Kuhlthau's (2004) approach to information search process. She acknowledges that the information search process is not merely an intellectual process but it involves the affective and physical realms as well. In her guided learning, she posts reflection questions along the way to help the students evaluate whether they are going the right direction in terms of locating, analyzing, evaluating and using information. The reflection part is somewhat near the philosophizing part although not entirely so. In another sense, injecting philosophy in information literacy can be possible by introductory discussions of virtues like honesty and some topics on ethics relating to information use. In this sense, the students will be more aware that what they are doing is not just fulfilling academic requirements and that there's more to just citing sources and being honest about it.

Intellectual honesty and citing information sources

Another question that I have posed earlier is whether an intellectually honest person would know, even without instruction that citing information sources would be important. Intellectual honesty in general could not be developed alone via information literacy. My argument earlier is that information literacy can provide a venue to enable individuals become aware of the plagiarism and how not to commit it. But in instances where a person has developed the proper virtues of character and has also developed practical wisdom and understanding (in Aristotle's context) he would be able to come to terms with the importance of being honest in citing information sources although he may need instructions on the specifics of citing information (i.e. ALA, MLA, Harvard, Chicago styles). He would be able to reflect on the fact that he is borrowing ideas from the ones who have done their work before him. He would also have reflected that making someone else's work appear to be his own is boastfulness because he would be honest in his capacities. He would not boast because he would know that boasting is not the mean.

Conclusion

Intellectual honesty is not just within the realms of the academe. As such, my proposal to cure it via information literacy is not feasible. Information literacy instruction can only be of help within the academic setting where libraries actively conduct said programs. However, it is not THE solution to the problem because intellectual honesty/dishonesty is related to virtues of character. Even when someone knows about the uses of information if he is *pleonectic*, he would use information to his own advantage.

Librarians, as they are also teachers to some extent, can take part in the learning process of individuals. Perhaps, at an earlier stage of the learning process (i.e. primary stages of education) we can be more active in developing intellectual honesty. We librarians can coordinate with the teachers so that we can be part in developing intellectual honesty among students.

The focus of information literacy instruction is usually at the tertiary level when the students are conducting research. This can be modified to suit the needs of younger information users so that they will grow up to be more responsible users of information. The development intellectual honesty should be one of the outcomes of library use.

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