What's the Deal with Turnitin?

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What It Is and Why You Should Care: A Quick Overview

Turnitin is the best known, and one of the longest running, of today's commercially available plagiarism detection services (although the company advertises itself these days as a "Digital Assessment Suite"). Essentially, educators (and students) at subscribing institutions can submit written work to the site to have it "tested" for duplicated strings of words— "matches" between submitted text and both text accessible on the web and the text of all previously submitted papers, which are archived in an immense database. Submitted papers are returned to educators (or students) with "matched" text highlighted and information provided about the matching material. The company's sales brochure offers the following brief introduction to its services:

> Turnitin allows educators to check students' work for improper citation or potential plagiarism by comparing it against continuously updated databases using the industry's most advanced search technology. Every Originality Report provides instructors with the opportunity to teach their students proper citation methods as well as to safeguard their students' academic integrity. (Turnitin.com, n.d.)

Syracuse University is one of many universities, colleges, and high schools internationally who subscribe to the service. Depending on their departments, curricula, and the individual decisions made by their cooperating instructors, TAs may opt to use the service—or may be required to. Because its adoption and

use remain somewhat controversial, it is a good idea for teachers and TAs to have some familiarity with Turnitin whether or not they will be using it.[1]

The Plagiarism Detection Controversy: Pros, Cons, and Lawyers

At first glance, plagiarism detection services might seem like a godsend to frustrated professors and busy TAs. Even when their more problematic attributes are brought to light, the value they can offer as a timesaving device and source-use checker remains significant. Anyone who has ever tried to Google-search suspicious word string after suspicious word string to find the one instance in which a dishonest writer was careless enough not to replace enough words with synonyms knows what a time-consuming process "plagiarism detection" can be when practiced on a case-by-case basis, and instructors of large sections often simply lack the time to follow up on every questionable sentence that crosses their desks.

The use of a plagiarism detection service can thus serve two highly beneficial purposes for such instructors: in the short term, it can enable them to check out every concern they have, not just the few they have time for, so that they can more accurately distinguish between students who *have* done the work correctly and those who have not. In the long term, such an option makes it feasible for them to continue to assign and grade pedagogically valuable research papers and other written work, instead of relying on such dubious assessment tools as easily scanned multiple choice tests, to gauge student progress.

Additionally, most plagiarism detection services can be used to check for language-matching in working drafts, not only final papers, and so can be put to use to help teach citation and paraphrasing practices (see the next section for more on how). Unfortunately, however, these benefits alone do not tell the whole story.

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The most frequently cited objection to a school's adoption and use of such a service is that it conveys to student writers an institutional expectation of their criminality. By telling students we will be checking all papers for plagiarism, we are essentially calling them all cheaters before they have even begun to write, and treating them as if they are "guilty until proven innocent" by the returned results of electronic surveillance. Although proponents of the service argue that honest students have nothing to fear from such surveillance, others worry about the damage such an

emphasis on policing can do to the climate of trust and exchange they feel should characterize an institution of learning.

Another key objection is the concern that allowing teachers to develop a reliance on such quick-fix services will act as a disincentive for teachers to develop and implement sounder, more time-consuming pedagogical practices. A far better way to prevent plagiarism, some argue, is by *teaching ethical writing*: instructing students in disciplinary conventions and expectations, textual ethics, cultural ideas about authorship, responsible critical research, and the rationales and practices of correct citation and source attribution. Additionally, opponents of the service point out that unique, creatively designed writing assignments tend to generate unique, creative responses, while open-ended, generic, or recycled assignments beg students to turn in bought, borrowed, or recycled responses.[2]

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Also fundamental to the controversial nature of plagiarism detection services today is the recurring question of whether or not the services' use of and replication of students' papers to fill their databases and compare with others constitutes a violation of students' educational privacy or intellectual property rights. In one recent dispute, high school students in Virginia and Arizona filed a joint lawsuit against Turnitin, claiming that the service did not have the right to archive their intellectual property without their permission. Turnitin's legal representatives reportedly claim that its archival practices—saving all submitted papers to be screened for matches against future submissions—fall under the "fair use" designation of legal reproduction of material for educational purposes.[3] The students have disagreed, noting that the addition of their work to the database serves the purpose of a corporation's monetary gain.[4] Accordingly, although as yet none of these services have been deemed illegal, some educators worry that, by using such tools, they may be exposing themselves or their institutions to bad press or even a lawsuit from students or their parents.

A final—for many the most convincing—strike against plagiarism detection services is the degree to which they simply don't work. By and large, these

computer algorithms, no matter how well they are designed, *cannot detect plagiarism*—and not just because we can't always agree on its definitions.[5] All these services can detect in the papers they screen, as noted above, are identical sequences of text.[6] Plagiarism detection services cannot detect uncited, and thereby plagiarized, ideas that have been summarized, paraphrased, or translated. They cannot detect copy-and-paste plagiarism that students have extensively altered with a thesaurus. They also cannot—nor will they ever be able to—identify whether a paper has been written by a student's roommate, boyfriend, or hired ghostwriter, purchased from a "custom research" paper mill, or recycled for the first time from an offline archive. The only chance teachers have of identifying these types of plagiarism once they have occurred is to be familiar enough with students' writing to recognize a difference when they see it.

Pedagogy, Policing, and Property Rights: So, What Should You Do?

If you decide to use Turnitin in your classes, or if the decision to do so has been made for you, consider the advice below for how to do so in a way that is fair to both you and your students. The following are among the "Recommendations for Academic Integrity and the Use of Plagiarism Detection Services" published by the Intellectual Property Caucus of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC-IP), under the subheading of instructors' "Roles and Responsibilities":

> In cases where a given institution, college, department, or individual faculty member is committed to using plagiarism detection services, we urge [instructors] to adopt and share practices for responsible, ethical use. At a minimum, such practices include notifying students at the beginning of the term that the [Turnitin] service will be used; providing an opt-out clause; inviting students to submit drafts to the service before turning in final text; and conducting research to discover whether the service is accomplishing what instructors want it to. (CCCC-IP, n.d.)

As the language at the beginning of the above recommendation suggests (and as the rest of the document you may view by visiting the CCCC-IP page, cited in the references below, makes clear), the CCCC-IP does not actively endorse the use of such services, and advises that those who do use them take care. The Academic Integrity Office (AIO) at Syracuse University agrees with the CCCC-IP about the value of "responsible, ethical use," and to that end "strongly recommends" that, if you use Turnitin, you "give students a written statement regarding how you plan to utilize it in your classes." Helpfully, the AIO offers

the following suggested language as a "sample statement that you may use or revise to fit your needs":

> This class will be using Turnitin, a plagiarism prevention system. The ease of using the Internet has made it very easy for students to "cut and paste" material into papers that they are writing without proper citation. I will submit all/some papers that you write in this class to Turnitin, a service that identifies "matched text." I will then interpret the originality report, based on your writing capability and writing style. In this class, you will also be given the opportunity to submit your own papers to Turnitin to check that all sources you have used are properly acknowledged and cited. Note that all submitted papers will be included as source documents in the Turnitin.com reference database, solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of such papers. (Syracuse University, n.d.)

You might not have the option of allowing students to opt out, or to conduct research on the degree to which the service meets your or your department's desired goals. But in addition to making sure your students understand what you will use the service for and why, you will probably have the opportunity to allow or require students to submit drafts—not just final papers, or in lieu of submitting final papers at all—to the service, so that they can see for themselves whether or not their citation attempts are adequate. If the only "matching" text the site finds is properly bound by quotation marks and its source clearly noted, then students will know that they have successfully avoided at least one type of (often accidental) plagiarism. Through such use, the service can be a way to help students identify problematic citation or source-use practices of their own that they might not be aware of, and can thus be employed as a pedagogical aid rather than merely a policing tool.

No plagiarism detection service, however, should be used—or could ever be effective—as a replacement for good assignment design, clearly communicated expectations, clear skills instruction, varied measures of assessment, and familiarity with students' work: the common denominators of good teaching.

Notes

1. More information about the service itself, as well as usage suggestions and the corporation's official response to controversial topics, is available at http://www.Turnitin.com.

2. For more on how teachers can write assignments that are difficult to plagiarize, see Rebecca Moore Howard's "The Search for a Cure: Understanding the 'Plagiarism Epidemic,'" particularly section 2, "Teachers' roles and responses in Internet plagiarism," available at http://www.mhhe.com/socscience/english/tc/howard/HowardModule03.htm

3. According to the service's "Copyright and Privacy" datasheet, "the documents prepared by Turnitin's legal team from Foley and Lardner" are available at the following link, which was inactive at the time of this writing: http://www.turnitin.com/static/legal

4. News reports about this case are widely available online; see, for example, coverage by *The Washington Post*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, or George Mason University's *The Broadside Online.*

5. For example, plagiarism detection services can only detect one of the five types of plagiarism SUNY Geneseo identifies in its quick reference guide for students, available at http://www.geneseo.edu/~brainard/plagiarismtypes.htm.

6. When Turnitin was first released, the software had no way to distinguish between identical sequences that had been properly cited and those that had not been cited at all, nor between students replicating material from others' papers and students replicating material from successive drafts of their *own* papers. Although today's more sophisticated services can recognize quotation marks and block-quote formatting, and with them allow teachers an option to screen only the not-quoted parts of a paper, allowing for fewer "false-positive" identifications of "plagiarized" work, there remains no way for the machine to detect any forms of plagiarism *other* than cut-and-paste copying.

Works Cited

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