Article: Using Turnitin To Teach Students About Plagiarism

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Why do students plagiarize?

A number of recent studies indicate that the vast majority of students admit to having cheated or plagiarized assignments at least once in their high school and college careers. In a recent review, Murdock and Anderman (2010) list a variety of reasons for this. Key among these was the instructors’ perceived commitment to their students’ learning, the more committed, the less likely students were to cheat. Similarly, plagiarism was less likely when assignments focused on helping students master a skill or concept and when they were challenging but perceived as doable. The authors also discuss a number of traits of the students themselves that can lead to cheating, including procrastination and last minute panic. In addition to these, I would add that many students are not fully aware of what plagiarism is.

What can we do to help our students avoid plagiarism?

As noted above, one of the keys to avoiding plagiarism is to make the reasons for specific assignments relevant and clear to our students. In other words we need to make it clear how developing these skills will be of advantage to them in their future careers. We also need to develop assignments that require original work. In trying to meet these goals, in Introductory Biology 152, our students are given the option of doing mentored research and writing a journal style article describing research or doing a meta-analysis of an open question in the literature. We teach them how to do a meta-analysis, but leave the choice of the questions for the meta-analyses up to the students. For both types of papers students write a proposal, a first draft and a final paper. The proposal and first draft are given formative review comments. Only the final paper is graded. We do not assume that our students know what plagiarism is. We teach them both what plagiarism is and how to avoid it. One excellent source for help with this is the Writing Center’s Writers’ Handbook section on Avoiding Plagiarism.

However, even with everything we as instructors try to do to connect with our students, make assignments relevant and make it clear what plagiarism is and how to avoid it, some students will still plagiarize. In large classes like ours (1100 plus students per year in 152) the sheer numbers of students involved can lead some to feel disenfranchised and as a result more likely to plagiarize.

How can we detect plagiarism when it occurs?

About 6 years ago, when we suspected that a paper was plagiarized, we googled unusual phrases or sentences looking for the source material. We also compared the students’ text to the articles cited in their reference lists. However, doing this effectively for a single paper could take one to several hours. This practice was also considered by some to be “unfair” because only “suspected” papers were checked. Given this, I investigated a number of different plagiarism software systems. Based on their evaluation of a number of papers I had already investigated independently I decided to contract with Turnitin (iParadigms).

What are the advantages of a plagiarism software system like Turnitin?

Turnitin checks our students’ papers against information readily available on the internet, information in Proquest, Gale and Infotrac data bases (Hill and Page, 2009). In addition, it checks them against a bank of our previously submitted student papers and those submitted by many other schools, colleges and universities. We can submit 300 or more papers in a day and get reports back on all of them within 24 hours or less. The reports indicate which parts of the paper’s text may be similar to that of other sources. As you review the areas of similarity, you can view the student text and the similar source text side by side.

How do we evaluate the Turnitin reports?

We submit each draft (proposal, first draft and final paper) of our student papers to Turnitin and do an evaluation of the similarity reports produced at each of these stages. We review each report that shows anything more than 5% similarity to other sources. These reviews go very quickly. Some reports show a high percent of similarity but may not include direct plagiarism. For example, unless excluded, all citations in the reference list of a student paper may be tagged as areas of similarity. If you are reviewing a second draft of a paper, earlier drafts by the same student author will show up as similar also. Even after you exclude these, you may still see more than 15% similarity with other sources. When you now skim the paper, you will often find that Turnitin is picking up short commonly used phrases throughout the document. These can be ignored. On the other hand, if you find significant blocks of text or a series of closely aligned phrases highlighted from a single source you need to examine these more closely and decide whether or not they constitute plagiarism of wording and/or ideas and whether proper citation has been provided.

If we find these types of similarity during our formative assessment of the proposal or first draft stages of the writing, they become “teachable moments”. We meet individually with the students to show them the reports and to help them learn how to avoid plagiarism in future drafts. In other words we use them to help our students understand what plagiarism is and how to avoid it.

What are the disadvantages of a plagiarism software system like Turnitin?

Turnitin checks your students’ papers against a vast database of internet sources and of student papers submitted from high schools, colleges and universities around the world. As a result, you will need to work with your Turnitin representative to delimit your student paper searches to a defined area of the world (in my case to Wisconsin and surrounding states). If you don’t, you may find many small percentages of similarity (representing short commonly used phrases of text) in each student paper. These may be tagged to 20, 30 or more papers. While you can exclude these when examining the papers, it does take time.
It is also unfortunate, but true, that some students will spend as much or more time trying to outsmart the system than they do writing their papers. Fortunately, these tend to be in the minority. However, in today’s internet world these students are getting help from a number of specific “cheats” available on the web. You can find some of these by searching for “How to cheat Turnitin”. You should make yourself aware of these especially if you find a large percentage of your student papers coming up with 0% similarity. Zero percent similarity means the paper has absolutely no phrases in common with anything in the Turnitin database. The likelihood of more than a few papers falling into this category naturally is low.

One other potential disadvantage has to do with cost. At present there is no campus license for Turnitin or any other plagiarism software system. The cost of a license is based on use and/or number of students. Because of the large number of students in our course (1200/semester) and the number of drafts of each paper we check, we purchased a departmental license for our course, which is relatively expensive.

**Does Turnitin catch all plagiarism?**

The obvious answer is no. The program won’t flag as similar student use of sources not available on the web. In addition, according to recent studies, it may also miss picking up similarity to a variety of professional papers available on the web. However, when tested against similar programs, Turnitin was shown to be equal to or better than the other programs in finding similarity (Hill and Page, 2009; Fiedler and Kaner, 2010).

**Is using Turnitin to store your students’ papers legal?**

A few recent lawsuits questioned the legality of warehousing student papers. One key issue was potential violation of students’ copyrights by using them for plagiarism checks by other schools (Foster, 2002; Sharon, 2010). Initial court rulings on these lawsuits have favored Turnitin (Young, 2008). If you are concerned about this, you can avoid the problem. Every time one of your students’ papers comes up similar to a paper at another school or university, Turnitin sends you an email asking whether or not you will give permission to release the paper. You can indicate no by not replying to the email.

**Should you use Turnitin or a similar anti-plagiarism software system?**

To answer this you need to ask yourself the following questions:

- Am I worried about plagiarism among my students? Have I spent more than an hour or two investigating the possibility that some of my students’ papers might be plagiarized? If the number of suspect papers is high, you may want to invest in a system like Turnitin.
- Do I want to be more even-handed in how I check papers? If I check one of my student’s papers, I check them all.
- Am I sure my students understand what plagiarism is and how to avoid it? As I noted previously, formative assessments can be used in conjunction with a program like Turnitin to help flag students who need more help understanding how to avoid plagiarism.
- Do I want to protect my students who don’t plagiarize? This is one of the key reasons for doing plagiarism checks.
- Can my course afford it? Who can I contact to find out if a campus license is being considered? To determine the cost for your specific course and number of students, you can contact iParadigms to find your local representative to discuss pricing. Regarding the possibility of a campus license, you can contact Brad Hughes as a representative of the Writing Center to indicate your interest. You can also contact DoIT to note your interest and to ask whether a campus license is under consideration.

**References**


