Beyond plagiarism: utilising Turnitin as a tool to develop students' academic voice.

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Abstract

Academic integrity is of primary concern to Australian universities. Turnitin has become the text matching software of choice across the higher education sector to assist universities to police their academic honesty policies. Whilst Turnitin can now integrate with many popular eLearning platforms with added assessment tools, it is still predominantly viewed by both educators and students as a plagiarism detection tool. This initiative argues that by viewing Turnitin in this way, we miss the opportunity to use this rapidly progressing technology as an invaluable tool to help students to write with academic integrity and, in turn, develop their authorial voice. We draw on research from a trial with international graduate coursework students in their first year at The Australian National University undertaking a preparatory course. This research informed our collaborative and integrated approach to support students' learning through a suite of resources and teaching activities for staff and students.

Introduction and literature review

Teaching transitioning students about academic integrity and enabling them to find their authorial voice is a prime concern to educators in the higher education sector. Increasingly the text matching software Turnitin has become the platform of choice to detect plagiarism and assist universities to uphold their academic honesty policies. Learning writing skills and understanding academic integrity is a challenge for many transitioning students, particularly second language and alternate pathway students. Perhaps we have been viewing Turnitin in the wrong way – are we missing an opportunity to harness this technology to enable students to learn to write with academic integrity? The aim of this initiative is to develop a holistic approach to integrate Turnitin to teach students to develop their authorial voice with academic integrity.

Turnitin is now used widely across the higher education sector in Australia. There is no uniformity in the way it is used however, with some universities such as The Australian National University (ANU), The University of Melbourne, and The University of South Australia integrating it into their eLearning platforms and others including The University of Western Australia directly using the Turnitin website. Turnitin is primarily marketed as a "plagiarism" tool (Turnitin 2015). It is not surprising then that many universities view Turnitin as a tool to enhance their academic honesty policies and many academics view it as a tool to catch plagiarism.

There is strong evidence that using Turnitin can have a positive effect on helping students understand how to write with academic integrity (Kostka & Ebsworth, 2014; Rees & Emerson, 2009; Stapleton, 2012; Ledwith & Rísquez, 2008). Research also shows that there are risks if Turnitin is not used constructively. These risks relate to student attitudes and educators' approaches. Some authors explain that students are likely to be anxious and negative about

using Turnitin due to a not unexpected suspicion that it "is being used for detection and punishment" (Williams, 2007, p. 353), and unfamiliarity with its functions (Dahl, 2007). These authors argue that such attitudes can lead to reluctance to use Turnitin to its full potential as an instructive tool. Particularly vulnerable to both apprehensive attitudes and inexperience with Turnitin are incoming international students who may be unfamiliar with Western practices of academic integrity (Stapleton, 2012; Kostka & Ebsworth, 2014).

This has led to critics contending that Turnitin can in fact lead to poor academic integrity practices. Marsh (2004), for example, suggests that the use of Turnitin detracts from students' ability to focus on developing their own authorial identity. Others warn that students' access to originality reports "may encourage tweaking the word composition rather than encourage careful citing of references" (Warn, 2006, p. 202). This turn to paraphrasing with a lack of appropriate citation in order to reduce the text match percentage indicates that students need thorough education around academic integrity.

If the underlying goal of Turnitin is to reduce plagiarism and improve academic integrity we argue that fully embedded and integrated support around its use is likely to produce a better outcome than viewing it merely as "anti-plagiarism" software. Furthermore, we argue that better outcomes for students can be gained if universities do not use Turnitin to catch students out, but rather as a useful tool for teaching students to improve their academic writing and develop their individual authorial voice.

To achieve these aims, this initiative has used a research, practice based approach to develop support systems, practical resources, and constructive education about Turnitin, particularly for students who are new to the software and are new to the Australian higher education context. Our initiative contributes to the growing development of strategies and resources to teach the use of Turnitin as an instructive tool for developing academic integrity. A number of studies have found that active learning, collaboration, formative and scaffolded assessment, and ongoing discussion is needed for students to most effectively learn how to write with academic integrity (McLafferty & Foust, 2004; Rees & Emerson, 2009; McGowan, 2005; Warn, 2006; Dahl, 2007). Importantly, our initiative responds to the need to take a collaborative approach between academic, technical and support staff. We seek to develop active-learning resources to help students learn about academic integrity and about how to use Turnitin to strengthen their identity as scholars.

Description of the initiative

Over a two year period between 2013 and 2014, ANU introduced and rolled out the text-matching software, Turnitin, embedding it into the eLearning platform Moodle. From mid-2014, all courses were given access to the tool. As a result, most, if not all, existing ANU students and all incoming students are adapting to using Turnitin. During the introduction of this university wide approach, Academic Skills and Learning Centre worked with the ANU Online team to develop resources for both academics and students. This collaboration highlighted the need for continued cooperation for ongoing training and resource development.

In order to evaluate our approach, we conducted a research project with our incoming Australia Awards students attending the Introductory Academic Program (IAP). This cohort of transitioning students provided us with the ideal opportunity to test out our new approach to integrating Turnitin into our teaching of academic integrity and academic writing. This initiative started from these early stages and grew to a wider collection of workshops and teaching resources designed for both academics and students as described in more detail below.

Informing academics about Turnitin as a learning tool

Our continued relationship with ANU Online presented us with an opportunity to collaborate to provide dual training in both the technical and academic aspects of Turnitin. Our key message in this training is that academics can harness certain aspects of Turnitin to help their students develop their writing skills. We also emphasise the importance of understanding Turnitin text match percentages and Originality Reports. If an academic views Turnitin in this way, we contend that they are much more likely to:

- Set up their assignments in such a way that allows students to view multiple Originality Reports. This is particularly useful for incoming students who are familiarising themselves with Turnitin and writing with academic integrity.
- Interpret the Originality Report correctly by understanding how the matches work and what they might mean.
- Not assign a particular percentage as a goal for their assignments.

Informing students about Turnitin as a learning tool and evaluating the initiative

IAP

These students participate in a five week academic skills program which provides us with an excellent opportunity to research the effectiveness of our teaching and resources on Turnitin. In order to evaluate our resources and methods, we survey two cohorts of IAP students from the summer and winter sessions to find out their previous experiences with Turnitin, their concerns about using it, the methods of our teaching that they find most useful, and the aspects with which they need further assistance. We use this feedback to further develop our teaching by reflecting on the results obtained from the first cohort and modifying our teaching accordingly for the Winter IAP. Teaching of Turnitin is conducted at a series of stages during the program. The students have an opportunity to practice the skills by submitting pieces of work through Turnitin which we then discuss with them in one-on-one consultations working closely with them to interpret the Turnitin report and discuss where it indicates that their writing may need improvement. This also provides an opportunity to point out how to interpret all the matches on the report and make informed decisions about what needs to change. Based on our assessment of student work throughout the course, we evaluate the difficulties they face with academic integrity and revise our resources and instruction to pinpoint these areas of difficulty.

Orientation week

Additional to the IAP program mentioned above, the other opportunity to work with incoming students is during Orientation Week where we run a number of academic learning workshops that regularly attract around 1,800 students. We embed Turnitin into our workshops on Academic Integrity and Referencing. In each of these workshops the emphasis is on how to use Turnitin to assist with academic writing. A post-Orientation Week survey enables us to use students' feedback to evaluate and revise the workshops.

The teaching activities and resources in the IAP and Orientation week are designed to achieve the following:

- Address students' concerns and anxieties around the use of Turnitin, especially if they have had poor exposure to it in the past.

- Teach students how to correctly interpret the Originality Report in the context of understanding academic writing, particularly around paraphrasing, summarising and correct quoting and referencing.
- Encourage them to use Turnitin, to help them improve their writing by submitting drafts early so they have time to edit.

One-on-one tutorials to give individualised support

During our one-on-one appointments we provide students with the opportunity to use Turnitin in a controlled environment. This means that they can submit their assignments either before or during the consultation without their work being stored on the Turnitin database. The Learning Adviser can discuss the Originality Report directly with the student to help them interpret any matches that occur. Any issues with their writing can be identified and discussed to assist the student in developing their writing skills. We take notes on these tutorials that help us to evaluate and revise the instructions as necessary for future tutorials. This evaluation also provides close insight into students' concerns and areas of difficulty that we then address in the IAP and Orientation Week workshops.

Resources to support learning

We have developed a range of resources on our website that academics and students can access. These resources supplement our teaching activities and provide ongoing support. They emphasise the same points as raised in our workshops. We evaluate the effectiveness of these resources based on the feedback from the IAP surveys, post-Orientation Week surveys, and tutorials as explained above. Based on this evaluation, we revise these resources for future use.

Impact

Our initiative aims not only to impact positively on students at ANU learning about academic writing, but also to change the way in which academics, students and the university community view the usage of Turnitin. With our revision and further development of resources for incoming international and domestic students, their transition into tertiary Australian academic writing and academic integrity will be made smoother. Our collaboration with ANU Online will enable clarification and communication of methods to help university-wide academic staff use the software as a learning tool and reach beyond its role as a plagiarism detector. Through this discussion with staff and students, we intend to shift the overemphasised perception that students intentionally plagiarise to an understanding of students' learning needs and methods to help them develop academic integrity. Our development of online resources will be available to educators and students throughout the sector. In conjunction, we aim to disseminate our findings as widely as possible throughout the sector. In doing so, we aim to contribute to a growing shift in the ways students utilise and educators perceive plagiarism software. The resources and teaching methods we develop and disseminate will thereby facilitate instructive and supportive practices across the sector.

Questions and issues to discuss:

- How has your university implemented Turnitin or similar software?
- What kind of resources do you currently use to help students understand academic integrity? How effective are they?
- What challenges have you or your students experienced with using Turnitin?
- To what extent do you think Turnitin can be used to help develop authorial voice?

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