The Impact of Turnitin to the Student-Teacher Relationship

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Abstract

The relationship between student and teacher in the college composition classroom is directly effected by the implementation of a plagiarism detection service such as Turnitin. With more colleges and universities asking or mandating instructors to utilize these programs, instructors must be aware of both the pros and cons of Turnitin. The tensions of such a system come from the binaries that are created and the reliance on the stereotype that all college students would cheat, if given the opportunity. Utilizing my own experience as both a student and a faculty member required to use Turnitin, this article unpacks the Turnitin system from both perspectives. This article distinguishes the uses of the word "plagiarism" and the educational implications of both the term itself and its connotations. Using Friere's baking model and Foucault's concept of the panopticon, I analyze the positions of authority of both student and teacher in order to assess the effects of plagiarism to the composition classroom.

Keywords: Plagiarism, Turnitin, Authority, Language, Student-teacher relationship

As a first-year composition instructor I struggle with the task of teaching my students, many of whom are decades from their last formal educational setting, APA formatting and the unique manifestations of that style. Simultaneously, I struggle with the task of teaching my students APA formatting when many of them are afraid to ask questions or come to me for assistance if they do not understand the mechanical components of the requirements. As a composition instructor, I am required by my university to use the Turnitin program to evaluate my students' writing for violations of the ethical code, or, plagiarism because it was deemed by university officials to be our responsibility, as faculty, to find and deter academic dishonesty. In my experience as an instructor, I recognize Turnitin for what it does for streamlining the "checking" process, but I also appreciate it for what it does not do, it does *not* provide a black or white response. Turnitin's results come in many shades of gray (or green, yellow, and red) in order to gauge the percentage of

material that is a direct match to outside sources which include other student essays, websites, several journals and periodicals.

On the other side of this, I am also a student pursuing a doctoral degree on top of the educational experience that I already possess. As a graduate student in an MLS program (which I pursued while also teaching composition), I was *required* to submit *my own work* to Turnitin to check for plagiarism. I did well on the paper so I can assume that it was deemed "not plagiarized," though I have never seen those results. Although I require my own students to use the program without thinking twice about the ramifications of that request, I was appalled that *I* was asked to submit my own work. This glaringly distinct dichotomy of the student-teacher relationship in terms of plagiarism led me to the following socially constructed consideration of the student perspective of Turnitin on the classroom experience. First, this paper examines the implications of utilizing the Turnitin system on the student-teacher relationship by examining theories by Friere and Foucault, then this paper outlines the definition of "plagiarism" and the connotations of the term itself, this then leads into an analysis of the student and teacher perspectives on plagiarism.

Turnitin and Definitions of Plagiarism

Turnitin claims to be an online text repository by which student papers can be processed through in order to determine similarities in the text. When a student or teacher submits a document to Turnitin, after a brief waiting period they receive a document back entitled an Originality Report (iParadigms, 2009a, p.2). The Originality Report is a list of highlighted similarities between the students' text and any outside sources that it detects as a direct or close match. Turnitin "compare[s] against billions of Internet documents, archived Internet data that is no longer available on the live web, a database of institution papers submitted by faculty, and subscription repository of periodicals, journals, and publications" (iParadigms, 2009a, p.2). Yes, Turnitin openly admits to keeping student papers on file (without their consent) for future papers to be checked for similarities, but I will not address the argument of copyright infringement of the rights of the students. For further information about their narrow distinction of avoiding copyright infringement, please refer to the Turnitin website or the Brown article included in the references. Turnitin's online handbook explains the appropriate utilization of the Originality Report as:

> In terms of the Originality Report, the Turnitin Student Handbook available online warns: These indices in no way reflect Turnitin's assessment of whether a paper contains plagiarized material or improperly used material. The Originality Report provides instructors and students with a tool to more easily locate matching or similar text within the text of a submitted work. (iParadigms, 2009a, p. 2)

While that may be the information readily available in the Student Handbook, in further reading the fine print on the Turnitin website, they identify specifically that "educators and administrators struggle to promote more honest, thoughtful and legal use of information by students" (iParadigms, 2009b, Promote Original Writing Section, para. 1). Therefore, while the term "plagiarize" is relatively invisible from the Turnitin handbook, the concept of dishonesty and illegal usage of information is still prevalent, which to academics, indicates plagiarism. So, how are new composition students supposed to distinguish between a syllabus definition (which usually includes a section about being

academically dismissed) of "plagiarism" and the Turnitin (or instructors using Turnitin) definition of "plagiarism".

The vague definition of the Originality Report indicates something that is a flaw in the Turnitin system, that "quoted and bibliographic material" is also flagged as a match (iParadigm, 2009a, p. 6). That being said, Turnitin qualifies that with "Please note that the functions for excluding material are approximate, and human judgment is the final arbiter for proper quotation or bibliographic reference" (iParadigm, 2009a, 6). Therefore, on one hand, Turnitin recognizes that it is solely a "tool" for analyzing the amount of original work in a paper. It is therefore up to the responsibility of the teacher to determine if this is a case of a student actually plagiarizing, or more likely a case of a student unsure of how to cite, paraphrase, summarize, or use direct quotes. In this fine print, Turnitin encourages all teachers that use the system to evaluate the Originality Report, though some do not read or understand this aspect of the system. This is complicated by some teachers at institutions like my own who have calculated a standard percentage that is considered "okay". For instance, some at my institution have decided that for undergraduate students anything over 15% should not be considered or read until changes have been made, whereas for graduate students, anything over 5% should not be considered. This concept was brought up by some of my colleagues during a faculty meeting. Though these faculty members held strong opinions on developing and maintaining these standards for our classrooms, they were unable to offer explanation on choosing appropriate percentages. This idea was solely based on their opinion of the amount of original work should be in student papers versus the amount of cited material.

However, as a composition instructor who encourages my students to find a large number of sources, I place a higher value on the amount of citations used effectively and correctly. The application of a standard percentage calculation is addressed in the Brown article as well in that some teachers received Originality Reports with high percentages and alerted their students to their "plagiarism" without ever acknowledging the actual content of the Originality Report. Again, because Turnitin flags even correctly cited direct quotes and bibliographic material as "direct matches," it is necessary that teachers go through the results to determine what should be addressed with the student. These students with high percentages are justifiably the ones who react negatively to teacher assumptions of plagiarism.

When teachers opt to not review or do not know how to review the Originality Report, any result that is flagged could therefore be considered plagiarism. In my experience as an educator, there was no training session or introductory information to the Turnitin system; it was simply required that we submit student papers through the program. As results came back marked yellow-red with high match percentages, I realized that I needed to go through each report and determine what was "going wrong" in my class. In reviewing the results I found that my students were doing exactly what was asked of them: they found several sources to support their argument, and used quotes, paraphrasing, summarizing, and in-text citations to mark their research. This is how Brown et. al., began their process of learning about the program because several students came into their Writing Center frantic that their "paper[s] had been reported to [their] professor[s] as plagiarized" (p. 7). The translation of the implications of such a program has been tragically labeled with the misnomer "plagiarism" as it moves from

Turnitin to teacher to student, indicating that the terminology used in this classroom construction is having a negative effect on the student-teacher relationship.

In order to understand Turnitin's successful business endeavor, the concept of intentional vs. unintentional plagiarism must be discussed. Intentional plagiarism is what is addressed in university handbooks, syllabi, and stern lectures from teachers across disciplines and academic levels. St. Onge's *The melancholy anatomy of plagiarism* (1988) surveys several definitions of the term "plagiarism" including that of MLA, APA, the *OED*, several law dictionaries, and university catalogs. Though the wordings on these differ, there is a similarity throughout many of them that indicate a level of intentionality or "presenting them as your own" (St. Onge, 1988, p. 54). The assumption-based usage of the word "plagiarism" in the Turnitin system, to St. Onge, indicates a huge misstep in the communication between teacher and student because "Plagiarism is an academic capital offense, punishable by academic death for student or faculty" (1988, p. 39). Educators make this glaringly obvious in their course syllabi, often citing their own thoughts on the heinous act of plagiarism on top of a reference to the student handbook for an official university code. This section on the syllabus refers specifically to *plagiarism*, not the inevitability of students making mistakes as they navigate the writing, editing, and citation process. In reviewing terminology, again, Turnitin claims to evaluate the percentage of originality rather than the percentage of plagiarized work, though these words have been used interchangeably by both students and teachers when discussing Turnitin.

The Tensions of the Turnitin System

The integration of a plagiarism detection service like Turnitin has various complications on the social constructs of the classroom environment in terms of the student-teacher relationship. Some of the binaries that effect this relationship include: required usage vs. optional usage; assumptions that students consistently cheat vs. students do not understand concepts presented; assumptions of guilt vs. innocence; teachers should do the work to determine this vs. this is the students' responsibility of their own work.

In making paper submission to Turnitin mandatory for students, teachers or the administration assume a position of authority over students. The social dynamics of a classroom are traditionally designed as a hierarchy with the teacher being the source of "knowledge" and students being the "seekers of knowledge". Friere (1970) identifies this as the "narrative character" of school, a relationship involving "a narrating Subject (the teacher) and patient, listening objects (the students)" (p. 71). This hierarchy is further exasperated with the usage of terminology to indicate that not only are students just "*seekers of knowledge*," but now, that *they do not even know how to properly seek knowledge*. As a teacher trying to encourage my students to look outside the grade book to gauge their understanding of the material and level of success, I am counteracted by the further separation of our statuses with the addition of a mandatory technology to indicate these same shameful perspectives. As a teacher in a contemporary college environment, I strive to ensure that I provide a learning environment conducive to students' development of their unique learning identities. Such an environment includes a level of open communication in which students know that their opinions, questions, and ideas are welcome and encouraged in the classroom. This relationship is especially important for introductory writers and college learners.

For teachers who do use the Turnitin program correctly, as a tool, it is remarkably helpful to indicate where students are having difficulties understanding the introductory composition steps. Perhaps these students have forgotten to open or close a set of quotation marks or incorrectly cited their reference. For upper level undergraduate and graduate students who have had repeated experience with citations this may be less of an issue, but for students new to the restrictions of a formatting style, there can be many places to lose control of your information. The studies conducted by Rogers (2009) indicate that "Qualitative and quantitative data indicate students (A), teachers (B), and the department chair (C) feel that plagiarism detection services do stop students from plagiarizing" (p. 141).

While students were included in saying that programs like Turnitin do deter plagiarism, there still remains the underlying assumption that most students plagiarize. There is a portion of all university students that choose to plagiarize throughout their academic careers. Some find portions of articles or books and vary the wording, hoping that a teacher will not make the connection between the original work and their own. Others find websites such as www.custom-essay.net and purchase essays with a cost range of $12.55/page (student receives an essay in a week) to $45.55/page (if you need the essay within eight hours) (Custom essays Inc., 2005). Though there is a portion of students who choose to operate in this manner, the fault is in the assumption that *all*, or even most, students plagiarize their academic work. This is an assumption of guilt with no consideration of understanding student intent.

The assumption of plagiarism and the hierarchy that the Turnitin program creates between teachers and students resembles Foucault's panoptic state which "maintains its surveillance not by physical force and intimidation, but by the power of its 'discursive practices' (to use Foucault's terminology)" (Barry, 2002, p. 176). Foucault identifies multiple capabilities of this mode of authoritative supervision, one being to ensure that the subjects' behavior does not get out of line and the other is as "a laboratory of power," where authority figures (in this case, teachers) attempt modes of monitoring and enforcing behavioral standards (Foucault, 1979, p. 203). The cultural notion of the panopticon is that "The gaze is alert everywhere," a means of protection and hierarchy that is prevalent on any college campus (Foucault, 1979, p. 195).

A more specific purpose of the panopticon, of which Turnitin is applicable is as a mechanism of power in which the student "is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication" (Foucault, 1979, p. 200). When teachers opt to use Turnitin as a means of detecting unoriginal work on student papers, they essentially give Turnitin the power to decide the students' fate without ever allowing the student into this communication process. This powershift is what Indiana University of Pennsylvania Writing Center tutors Renee Brown, Brian Fallon, Jessica Lott, Elizabeth Matthews and Elizabeth Mintie (2007) witnessed within their own writing center; frantic students with a draft of a paper and a verbal or digital warning from a professor that their work had been plagiarized. The students were unaware of *what* had been plagiarized, *how* their work came up as plagiarized when they thought that they did not copy anything, and then, how to *fix* the errors because they were unaware that they had made any in the beginning. From there, Brown et. al., decided to learn more about the Turnitin system, how it was being used by their own university teachers and what

information or results were actually being transmitted to the students that caused such an immediate uproar. What they found was that a great majority of university faculty members had little to no experience with Turnitin and were therefore using it ineffectively. In discovering that, the tutors conducted a training session based on their findings. Teachers who use or administrators who encourage the use of Turnitin use this level of "invisibility," as Foucault explains, as "a guarantee of order" (1979, p. 200) which "automatizes and disindividualizes power" (1979, p. 202). This invisible order-keeping assumes student guilt and as it "disindividualizes" the traditional power structure of the student-teacher relationship, students feel uncomfortable asking questions or seeking help from their teacher-master; they instead seek help elsewhere, frantically in our Writing Centers or in court cases.

Determining Students Intentions

Blum (2009) examines plagiarism from the cultural perspective of a college campus and uses living and learning theories of a college to present a view of why students may choose to plagiarize writing. Blum examines the transitions that college-age students go through outside of the classroom such as looking at peer pressure, the opportunity to resist authority, personal development including self-esteem, and generally learning how one fits into a larger society. Blum rightfully sees the college experience as a two-fold process of learning from teachers and learning from peers,

> From their teachers, American college students gain complex factual, vocational, intellectual, and ethical knowledge, and from peers the knowledge of secret rites (beer pong, fake IDs), sexual initiation, traditions (football, dorm lore, preferred

teachers), organizations, and other practices. (Blum, 2009, p. 92)

Plagiarism, then, is to some just another right of passage, just *something* that a particular group of college friends does that is deemed socially acceptable. Though there is an outwardly distinct separation between the academic and social lives of college students, the campus environment offers a unique ground for bridging the gap of self-identification and socialization.

On the other side of this argument, though, are the students that solely do what is asked of them: they are finding sources to back up their unique argument and testing their own knowledge of formatting styles. This method of independent learning is a type of trial and error which is typically encouraged by teachers in an effort to have students conduct their own research and not have to rely on the teacher for any and all answers. Teachers, then, should not reprimand their students for their *trials*, which are understood to be faulty; which is why they are trials and part of the learning *process*. To add to complication of "what is plagiarism" come international students, those with cross-cultural experience which may lend itself to the belief that quoting someone directly or the ability to use another persons' words indicate superiority in their known academic community. These students are yet another example of those who should not be reprimanded by a computer program for their misunderstanding of sources and citations. It is the role of a teacher who opts to use Turnitin as a tool in their classroom to know and understand their students' background and knowledge base before submitting their work for checking.

Teaching Philosophy

A root of this dichotomy comes from the differences between teacher-centered and student-centered learning classrooms. The

teacher-centered classroom favors the authoritative approach, furthering the panopticon perspective that teachers have the knowledge and students are seeking that knowledge. This type of construction allows minimal room for changes or for students to make mistakes, as they inevitably will. This teacher-centered classroom assumes that there is a right or wrong, teacher vs. student, answer to questions and does not take into account the learning process, particularly in learning a type of formatting style. However, in reality, there is a great deal of middle ground where students hand in drafts, receive teacher or peer feedback, and make appropriate changes to their writing. Those types of writing exercises are built into courses with the assumption that students will not achieve perfection on their first attempt, but there will be many drafts and attempts before a final, polished document is submitted. If papers are submitted to Turnitin and that information is accepted by the teacher as the authoritative assessment of that work, then the needs and learning process of the student is ignored. Therefore, the teacher-centered classroom allows little room for the learning process necessary of all writers, especially new academic writers. The National Science Foundation (NSF) has conducted several research studies to evaluate the effectiveness of teacher-centered learning and they have determined that "there are unintended consequences of too much emphasis on teaching at the expense of learning, including graduates who are not prepared to solve real-world problems and lack the skills and motivation to continue to learn beyond their formal education" (Blumberg, 2009, p.4). Therefore, by utilizing Turnitin in this ineffective manner, teachers do not allow students to work through the learning process on their own, negatively affecting both their immediate understandings and their future potential as scholars.

The student-centered classroom, however, gives the students an opportunity to develop themselves as researchers and writers because they actively take part in all aspects of the writing process, which includes finding errors and correcting those errors. If teachers use Turnitin in its intended way, as a tool, then the information provided from Turnitin can be used by students as another means of feedback to help them to understand what in-text citations were right, what were incorrect, and what may work better as a direct quote than as a paraphrase. Blumberg (2009) identifies this level of responsibility as one of the "Five dimensions of learner-centered teaching," "Instructors should proactively assist their students to take responsibility for their own learning by creating situations that motivate students to accept this responsibility" (p. 18). This evaluative feedback is similar to the feedback that teachers *already* give their students, it is just provided through the Turnitin service. In the types of reviews where teachers make changes to student papers or offer suggestions for improvement there is no mention of plagiarism or assumptions of guilt when quotes are done incorrectly or citations are sloppy; teachers merely make those changes and explain the correct way to format them. When Turnitin is used in this manner, it creates a situation that students are able to take responsibility of their own writing process and make appropriate changes, thus evaluating their own writing based on feedback. However, without teacher recognition that this is the more effective means of using Turnitin, then it will remain that a large number of teachers use the system by maintaining a teacher-centered classroom and incorrectly assuming student guilt.

As a teacher, I attempt to make my classroom a student-centered environment to meet the needs of the current composition student and to develop their independent learning processes. I encourage my students to

use feedback (from myself, peers, and the university Writing Center) to make appropriate changes to their writing in the hopes that they will observe patterns in their writing and make appropriate changes, understanding its impact on all of their future writing.

Student and Teacher Perspective

Rogers (2009) pursues the topic of perspective noting that "Quantitative and qualitative results suggest teachers and the department chair feel the plagiarism detection service does not hinder the teacher-student relationship. Quantitative results indicate that students slightly disagree with teacher and administrative views" (para. Abstract). In this argument alone we can see the dichotomy of the student-teacher relationship in terms of plagiarism and investigate the level of separation of these opposing opinions. Further exploration of these opinions demonstrates that there are opposite and equally incorrect ideas of the purpose of Turnitin in the classroom. The article by Brown et.al. (2007) chronicles their abrupt introduction and experience with Turnitin; this includes descriptions of students being "Visibly upset" with their Turnitin experience (p. 7). To further this perspective, Brown et.al. acknowledge the lawsuit of McGill University in Montreal student Jesse Rosenfeld who filed suit after failing a course for refusing to submit his work to Turnitin (2007, p. 20). Rosenfeld cited "ethical and political problem[s] with the system… 'I was having to prove I didn't plagiarize even before my paper was looked at by my professor' (Brown, Fallon, Lott, Matthews, & Mintie, 2007, p. 20; Grinberg, 2007, para. 5). Rosenfeld brings up a valid argument, why is the presumption that students *do* plagiarize considered the norm? Turnitin, though claiming to be an education-friendly system, is a business which profits on the processing, retaining, and regurgitating of student papers. The creation of this technology

has changed the way that students write, teachers evaluate, and the way that the term "plagiarism" is used in academia. Several students, myself included, can understandably side with Rosenfeld's feelings that teachers' incorrect usage of the Turnitin results assume students consistently plagiarize.

On the other side of this coin is the perspective of the teacher. According to Turnitin.com, "Instructors also report that Turnitin saves them time, sparing them hours they'd otherwise put toward checking student works manually. This high level of satisfaction results in over 90 percent of institutions renewing their annual Turnitin subscription" (iParadigms, 2009b, para. Discover). Instructors are mandated to or opt to participate in the Turnitin technology because they may feel that it streamlines their grading process, but as Brown et. al. note in their article, "Instructors who use the program still must look at Turnitin's report of the student's paper because this report does not distinguish between properly and improperly cited information" (2007, 15). Therefore, although Turnitin claims to save teachers time by allowing them to review the content of the essay without having to spend their time assessing the possibility of plagiarized material, teachers must *still do* this work. Turnitin will highlight the direct match information, but it is still up to the discretion of the teacher to determine the correctness of citations and formatting, whether any material was actually plagiarized, and student intent.

Conclusion

In order to develop and maintain a rapport with students, teachers need to be receptive to the possibilities of student-centered learning in which students accept responsibility for their learning and teachers facilitate this development. This transcends many aspects of the teaching and learning

process, especially in terms of assessing and addressing plagiarism, whether intentional or unintentional. Part of the rapport building process must include the student-centered idea that students are in the classroom to learn and to develop their unique learning identities rather than solely to complete a course for academic credit or because it is an academic requirement. Therefore, in terms of the Turnitin system, teachers must utilize it in a similar student-centered approach. Teachers can use Turnitin's report as a means of facilitating discussion about the correct way to format direct quotes, paraphrasing, summarizing, using in-text citations, and formatting reference pages. This proactive approach does not assume that students do cheat, but rather, it recognizes draft writing as part of the writing process and adds an opportunity for receiving and using feedback. Using Turnitin in this manner, rather than solely as a means of detecting plagiarized work, maintains that rapport with students that creates a positive learning environment and student-teacher relationship.

Opportunities for further study

The above research lends itself to several possibilities for assessment of the manifestations of Turnitin in college classrooms and its impact on student-teacher relationships. A possibility for future qualitative study include interviewing faculty members at colleges where using Turnitin is required, where Turnitin is suggested, or where Turnitin is offered as an optional supplemental tool and comparing and contrasting the different faculty and student opinions and experiences with the program. In determining this, one could draw conclusions about the perceptions of Turnitin and more generally, plagiarism, in the current academic community. This has value in understanding a new perspective of the student-centered classroom as we move into a technological age of teaching.

Another opportunity for research may include the evaluation of the term "plagiarism" in academic today in order to determine how it is used by various sources such as university officials (those that write handbooks), senior faculty members, new faculty members, students, and sources outside of academia. It may be found that the term "plagiarism" is more fluid than in previous years because of the rapidly growing accessibility of online sources. This has value in assessing and understanding the value of terminology and what is considered a serious offense in the minds of all of those participants. It would be interesting to see if the term "plagiarism" has shifted away from the concept of academic suicide or if that connotation is still attached.

Yet another opportunity for future studies lies in the evaluation of what students think of and how they use their Turnitin results. Several students across universities (where Turnitin usage is required and where it is not) could be surveyed to gauge their level of interaction in the writing process and evaluate if and how they use Turnitin solely to detect plagiarized work or if they value the opportunity for automated feedback on their formatting. This, again, has value in understanding and evaluating the impact of this technology on student-centered learning environments.

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