

Chapter 8

Anti-Plagiarism Software in an Irish University: Three Years Later

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ABSTRACT

A variety of anti-plagiarism software applications have appeared in recent years, but the pedagogical and institutional practices underpinning their use remains largely unexplored. It is essential to increase the amount of evidence-based literature that investigates the use of anti-plagiarism software in higher education. In the light of this, this chapter explores the integration of anti-plagiarism software in an Irish university since early 2006 and the progress made to date. We use data gathered from our own context to show how instructors are using this software to date, what trends emerge and what can be deduced about the adoption of the system to guide future research questions. Best practices are suggested for educators in order to help them to use anti-plagiarism software in proactive, positive, and pedagogically sound ways.

INTRODUCTION

Academic dishonesty is far from a new phenomenon, yet claims that it is on the rise are widespread and often associated to the use of the Internet (Chaky & Diekhoff, 2002; Scanlon & Neumann, 2002). Several plagiarism scandals, the proliferation of ‘paper mills’ and websites offering assignments ‘à la carte’, and the widespread use of the Internet for learning purposes have also amplified

awareness of it. The concern of higher education institutions is manifested in their websites, where students are advised on correct referencing and plagiarism avoidance, and educators are given tools and guidance to detect cheaters. A variety of free and commercial software designed to detect plagiarism from Internet sources has also appeared and has been made available to teachers as a means to deter plagiarism and detect it when happening (Turnitin, My Drop Box, Eve, WcopyFind are some of these). The plethora of educational institutions that have adopted the use

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of plagiarism prevention software indicates that its popularity is thriving.

Both practical and ethical issues can be argued for and against the use of technological solutions for the investigation of the originality of students' work. While distributors like Turnitin assert that their plagiarism prevention module can enhance teaching by 'deterring plagiarism before it happens' (from www.turnitin.com), detractors regard the service pedagogically inappropriate, untrustworthy and even unethical. For example, Carbone (2001) denounces that 'the service is not about teaching, it's about catching, it's a pedagogic placebo'. Similarly, Sutherland-Smith and Carr (2005) express their concerns that teachers could view Turnitin as a purely punitive tool. The authors report that some members of staff participating in their study felt that that 'where students were caught for plagiarism and punished, that would be the educative value of the anti-plagiarism software, as students would be unlikely to re-offend'. This approach implies a reactive attitude to the behavioural manifestations of academic dishonesty, which neglects the reasons that underpin it and the actions that may prevent it from happening. On the other hand, it is arguable that the effectiveness of plagiarism-prevention services has been assumed rather than confirmed, and only a few studies have addressed their actual impact on the student population (Baker, Thornton, & Adams, 2008; Draaijer & van Boxel, 2006; Goddard & Rudzki, 2005; Rees & Emerson, 2009). In the light of this discussion, we believe it is essential to increase the amount of evidence-based literature that investigates the use of anti-plagiarism software in higher education.

BACKGROUND

Turnitin (www.turnitin.com) is a widely used online tool which addresses academic honesty in students' work (plagiarism prevention); formative and summative feedback (online marking); and

student-centred assessment (peer review). The tool has also an important level of acceptance in Ireland, as the last conference of the Irish Educational Technology Users' Conference saw the first meeting of the Turnitin user group, with around 20 attendees from Institutions across Ireland.¹ The University of Limerick adopted the use of the software in 2005 and it has been used since 2006, with training and support provided by the Centre for Teaching and Learning. As it is the case with many other educational technologies offered by the institution, the use of the system has remained the prerogative of each lecturer, and voluntary training sessions have been organised on demand, with one-to-one support being offered on an ongoing basis. All seminars and support are underpinned by a positive, proactive attitude towards plagiarism prevention that puts student learning in the centre of the process. During this period, around 150 teachers' faculty have attended training, and one-to-one support has been provided for many more. Appendix B shows a piece of documentation distributed across the institution which gives basic information about Turnitin, warns of its limitations, gives an example case scenario and provides further resources.

Almost three years after the initial introduction of the software at the institution, the statistics collected along six semesters of use offer some insights into the patterns of use of the system. In this chapter we use data gathered from our own context to show how instructors are using this software to date, what trends emerge and what can be deduced about the adoption of the system to guide future research questions.

OUR EXPERIENCE SO FAR

According to cumulative statistics collected in April 2009, 210 instructor accounts² had been created in the system since 2006, there were 7,802 student accounts,³ 11,970 submissions had been completed, 10,144 originality reports produced,

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