



Students Dread the “P” Word: Is Turnitin® Good for Plagiarism Detection and Feedback?

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This paper is based on a presentation made at NADE 2016, in Anaheim, California, entitled “Turnitin—An Extraordinary Teaching and Feedback Tool in the Writing Classroom” which discussed the value and benefits of using Turnitin (TII), a subscription-based software/website available to universities that serves as an audio-visual feedback tool, a plagiarism checker, and a self-monitoring tool to assist in creating correct citation and producing original work by students in all courses requiring writing and research. TII is a valuable resource, not only as a plagiarism checker, but also as an extraordinary tool for giving comprehensive feedback on papers, including audio feedback. Students consistently report how much they value the feedback they receive using TII. This paper will discuss the use of TII to grade effectively including the use of comment banks and Quick Marks, incorporating custom rubrics, and providing audio feedback. Narrative experience of students and faculty using TII at Kaplan University will also be discussed.

At the NADE conference at Anaheim, in March 2016, I gave a presentation about an extraordinary resource—Turnitin, a tool that is not only a plagiarism checker, but that also serves as an efficient and time-saving tool for giving comprehensive feedback on papers, including audio feedback. Students consistently report how much they value the feedback they receive using Turnitin (TII). TII is a subscription-based software from an internet software product launched by iParadigms, a web company based in Oakland, California. It is widely used in the United States and the United Kingdom, and more recently in Asia, Africa, and Europe. This paper will discuss the value of using TII to grade effectively including the use comment banks, Quick Marks, custom rubrics, and audio feedback. Narrative experience of students and faculty using TII at Kaplan University, where classes are sometimes large, will also be discussed.

The Value of Turnitin as a Plagiarism Checker

In teaching first-year composition students the necessity and use of citation, I would be confronted with their trepidation at learning how to avoid the dreaded “P” word: plagiarism. Every term I would wrestle with the onslaught of incorrect attempts at paraphrasing and citation in student papers. Once I discovered TII, I had found a way to

quickly and painlessly teach students to self-monitor for plagiarism. Kaplan University (KU) has a large, diverse student body comprised of working adults; parents with young children; men and women in the military; and baby boomers seeking degrees for a career change—a step up the employment ladder—or for personal gratification.

At KU, students submit their papers to an assignment drop-box where they are automatically fed into the TII website, a service to which KU subscribes. At the company website, student papers are immediately checked against a large database of 60 billion webpages, 600+ student papers, 154 + million journal articles, periodicals, and books (“By the numbers,” n.d.). An immediate originality report is generated for each paper where similarity is flagged by comparison with any of the foregoing documents. Plagiarism generally ranges from unintentional plagiarism where some incorrect and improper attempts at citation are made, to papers where passages or even whole papers are cut and pasted from other sources. TII has conducted a comprehensive survey “ranking the types of plagiarism by intent and then provides data on the prevalence and problematic nature of type based on the feedback from 879 survey respondents” (“Preventing Plagiarism,” n.d.).

Turnitin’s Function to Self-Detect Plagiarism:

When students submit their essays to TII, it automatically generates an originality report by matching their work against the aforementioned web sources, journal articles, books and student papers. TII then provides a similarity percentage and flags troublesome areas with incorrect or no citation or too many quotations. Students can immediately correct the deficiencies in their papers and resubmit for a lower similarity percentage. My practice before grading is to check all student papers and delete multiple submissions, retaining only those papers with the lowest similarity percentage. This function enables students to self-monitor for plagiarism and teaches them the value of effective paraphrasing, quotation, and citation.

Some researchers, such as Claire Penketh and Chris Beaumont (2014), discuss the potential for plagiarism

detection software to operate as a “change artifact” in writing development and suggest that it is less beneficial in checking for plagiarism in student writing than Turnitin would have us believe. Experience at KU has proved otherwise. Initially, students resist the idea of submitting their work to be analyzed by plagiarizing-detection software claiming that this presumes their guilt in plagiarizing and even that there are potential privacy violations by the use of this software. However, when students discover that they can use the software as a self-monitoring tool to detect plagiarism, they accept and even welcome the process. They find that they can compare originality reports that are generated for their drafts, and then turn in a final version of their papers where they have revised paraphrasing, in-text citation, and reference page citations. Each paper is categorized by a green (acceptable), yellow (problematic), and red (severely problematic) zone by TII, alerting students to pay heed to specific similarity percentages, with the intention to bring their work into the green zone and aim for the lowest similarity percentage possible. Some similarity may still ensue because citations in their bibliographies may be flagged. In this case, students are assured that their papers although bearing a higher similarity percentage would still be acceptable. As a result, KU faculty and students are satisfied with the service provided by TII.

However, what may be problematic is the point indicated by Foster (2002): “What makes it effective—but also controversial—is that it [TII] keeps the papers that colleges submit for inspection, in order to enlarge its database” (para. 4). Foster also mentions (para. 7) that in the earlier part of this decade, this practice was thought to infringe on copyright laws and some universities like University of California, Berkeley, deliberately chose to not use TII as plagiarism-detection software for their students’ academic work (2002). In spite of this, TII has become an efficient and time-saving feedback tool that has been widely appreciated by educators and students.

Turnitin as a Comprehensive and Time-Saving Feedback Tool

At Kaplan University, where I consistently teach large composition classes ranging from 30 to 35 students, I would invariably find my fingers bone-tired from repeatedly typing the same comments on student papers—until I discovered the value of Turnitin. Giving consistent high-quality and holistic feedback to students in large classes is every instructor’s challenge. With TII, faculty can use the Grademark feature to create and save banks of comments and use these as “QuickMarks” by just pointing and clicking within the text of a paper. Custom comments can also be prepared for thesis development, the quality

of the argument, and other comments specific to each assignment. Rubrics can also be created and saved for each assignment. And, perhaps most valuable of all, TII allows instructors to provide audio feedback, which in writing-heavy classes is a boon. It saves the instructor endless typing or the proffering of repetitive formulaic comments. With audio comments of three to five minutes per paper (they can be longer or shorter in duration), it is possible to holistically cover the strengths and weaknesses of the paper. Finally, the use of the rubric tailored to the assignment allows students to see the breakdown of sub-categories and note how the grade was derived. English instructors teaching advanced composition often note that it is easier to give feedback on grammar, punctuation, mechanics, but it is more labor-intensive to provide feedback on rhetoric, argumentation, logical fallacies, and holistic issues in student work.

While this is the case, the development of a student’s argument—paucity of credible research, threadbare content, insufficient development of a topic, other rhetorical flaws, and the appearance of logical fallacies—are the areas for which students most value feedback. Audio feedback can be particularly valuable in providing comments in classes ranging from developmental writing to subjects of the sciences and the humanities. Emily Buckley and Lisa Cowap (2013) point out that in their experience at a university in the United Kingdom, the use of TII has positive benefits for students; however, their “staff” experienced some “technical difficulties” in the use of this software. They still extol the virtues of TII as a “formative feedback tool,” and I believe that it functions well in providing both summative and formative feedback, especially for students writing final research papers in advanced composition courses. TII provides the ease of one platform to check for plagiarism, provide audio-visual feedback, and save banks of grading rubrics and comments, making it simpler to use than just downloading student papers and inserting comments in Microsoft Word. It saves instructors time in uploading and downloading papers and any time saved can be spent in providing better quality feedback.

Turnitin as a Tool for Assessing Student Learning Outcomes

Such feedback also helps with assessment of student learning outcomes. At KU, every unit of learning in a course is tied to both unit and course outcomes, making every step of the students’ progress accounted for. For example, in College Composition I and II, each unit has outcomes that are tied to four or five course learning outcomes against which students are measured for the major course assignments. In advanced composition, CM

220, which I teach, these assignments include a capstone final paper with an annotated bibliography, a multimedia project using PowerPoint or Prezi, or students may create an advertising brochure in which they demonstrate their ability to problem solve using digital media. Faculty are trained in being able to assign a score from a scale of one to five for each course learning outcome, with “introductory” being level one to “mastery” being level five. Faculty must complete course learning outcomes for certain projects in each course, in addition to providing students with graded feedback. Course learning outcomes are explained to students and highlighted in each week’s seminar and learning materials, to make clear to them how each unit’s outcomes are related to the course outcomes. Course outcomes are shared with students in addition to their grades and written feedback for assignments. The comments bank and customized rubric features of TII make it possible to integrate the grading and feedback process with the rating of learning outcomes.

Since the adoption of TII at Kaplan University, I have given presentations to fellow faculty to encourage more instructors to adopt it as a feedback tool. At KU, it is being used as a plagiarism checker, but instructors can choose to use it for providing feedback. For ease and efficiency, it is to be recommended. Also, as students receive comprehensive feedback, rarely is a grade contested, thus ensuring peace of mind and satisfaction to the instructor and students that their work is well received. On student surveys, students consistently point out to receiving excellent feedback, making educators feel their time is also being well spent.

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