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Is there a place for “plagiarism detection software” in an academic library?

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Abstract

Many colleges and universities use Turnitin, SafeAssign, and other “plagiarism detection” software to detect, and deter, academic dishonesty. Since 2005, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries have provided students direct access to SafeAssign and Turnitin as teaching tools to help them identify improper citation of sources. Students appreciate having free access to these products when similar software can be cost-prohibitive. However, Turnitin commonly finds false positives in student papers, and students may find Turnitin’s originality reports difficult to understand. Therefore, it is unclear how helpful it is to offer this library service to students, versus focusing on teaching proper citation of sources.

Keywords: Plagiarism detection, academic libraries, academic integrity, plagiarism

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Turnitin is the best-known “plagiarism detection” (better described as “text matching”) program used by institutions of higher education. Turnitin checks submitted papers against a vast, growing database of content, which currently includes millions of scholarly articles from over a thousand publishers, 91 billion current and archived web pages, and 1.4 billion student papers (Turnitin, 2021). This makes it easy for class instructors to see whether a student has copied large quantities of text from an existing source, such a journal article, a website, or another student’s paper that was previously submitted to Turnitin.

While this type of software may sound appealing to instructors and educational administrators, it has many nuances and pitfalls that keep it from being as effective as one would hope. A Google search brings up numerous articles and videos on “how to cheat Turnitin,” “how to beat Turnitin,” and “how to trick Turnitin.” Instead of encouraging students to avoid plagiarism, it seems that Turnitin is often seen as just another obstacle to get around when trying to get a good grade on an essay. In spite of its flaws, Turnitin has the potential to be a useful teaching tool to help students learn about proper attribution of words and ideas. If a student can submit a paper to Turnitin and review the resulting originality report, they can look for instances of matching text and determine whether they were properly cited. This use of Turnitin for educational, not punitive, purposes can make it a helpful tool for a college or university library to offer alongside other plagiarism prevention and citation resources.

Turnitin at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) offers Turnitin as an option for instructors to use within the Canvas LMS (Learning Management System). The UNL Libraries offer students separate access to Turnitin, in order to help them address potential plagiarism/citation concerns before submitting the paper to their class instructor. Some other universities offer a similar service for students, whether through the university library (Lycoming College, Syracuse University, UMass Chan Medical School, UC San Francisco) or through another office (University of Maryland Global Campus, University of Pennsylvania).

The UNL Libraries began offering our original iteration of this service in 2005. At that time, the campus was using the Blackboard LMS's built-in plagiarism detection software, Safe Assignment (later renamed SafeAssign). The Libraries' Safe Assignment Service allowed students to test their paper for potential plagiarism before submitting it to their instructor. We set up the software to submit documents in "draft mode" (meaning that they were not saved to the Safe Assignment database) to receive an originality report. The software was not particularly user-friendly; it would only accept one submission per student, so students had to email a library staff member to delete the previous submission each time they wanted to upload a new draft. According to a former UNL Libraries faculty member, this service "gave us a perfect opportunity for teaching students about the subtleties of citing sources and plagiarism" (T. Bicknell-Holmes, personal communication, November 19, 2021).

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln began using Turnitin when it switched from Blackboard to the Canvas LMS in 2016. As part of this transition process, the Libraries were asked to compare Turnitin's functionality to that of both SafeAssign and another software package called VeriCite, which has since been acquired by Turnitin. Turnitin seemed to be more user-friendly than VeriCite, along with being the best-known plagiarism detection software used by institutions of higher education. The UNL administration considered implementing VeriCite as the default plagiarism detection service due to its lower cost, but they ultimately chose to follow our recommendation to avoid VeriCite since its web interface frequently lagged and timed out, and it did not offer a draft mode like Turnitin does. Once UNL implemented Canvas and Turnitin, we switched our Safe Assignment/SafeAssign service to Turnitin service. Turnitin's interface was an improvement over SafeAssign, as students could now submit multiple papers to the Libraries Turnitin account without any mediation by library staff.

How UNL students use Turnitin through the UNL Libraries

The UNL Libraries have set up a Canvas "course" called Libraries Turnitin Service. To access Turnitin, students must fill out an online form asking to be added to the course. Once added, they can upload documents to an "assignment" and receive the originality reports once

Turnitin has processed them. The course is set up to keep assignments in “draft mode,” meaning that the submitted papers are not saved to Turnitin’s database of student papers. We started with a single “assignment” but after a few hundred submissions, the software started lagging. To fix this, we started creating a new assignment for each month, and since then we have noticed no lagging problems.

Our Canvas course also includes instructions on how to use Turnitin, along with our terms and conditions for students’ use of the service. We originally did not monitor students’ Turnitin submissions very closely, but after a while, I, as the Libraries Turnitin Service administrator, began noticing some issues with instructors signing up for the service in order to check their students’ papers. This is not what we intended the Libraries Turnitin Service for, so we implemented two changes to the process: the signup form now asks if the user is a student, staff, or faculty member, and I periodically click through recently submitted papers to look for any obvious improper usage. If a staff or faculty member fills out the form, I email them asking about their intended use of the software. If they want to use it to check their own writing, I will add them to the course, but if they say that they want to check a student’s work, I direct them to use the Quick Submit option that Turnitin provides to instructors.

Another red flag I look for is whether there is a name on the submitted paper that does not match the Turnitin user’s name. If I happen to see potential misuse, I will message the user through Canvas to remind them that Turnitin is only for checking their own writing and no one else’s. Often I get an apologetic reply from a student saying that they were checking a paper for a friend; in these cases, I encourage them to have their friend sign up for their own account. Other times, it appears that a user has run an originality report on an entire journal article that doesn’t have their name on it; I believe most, if not all, of these cases involve a faculty member or graduate student who is peer-reviewing articles for a journal, which is definitely not a use we intended for the UNL Libraries Turnitin Service. In these cases, I remind the user of our policies and suggest that they check with the journal to ask whether the journal already conducts plagiarism checking on submitted papers.

Downsides of Turnitin

Turnitin, SafeAssign, and similar software ingest student papers into their databases so that different papers can be compared to one another for possible plagiarism. While this is necessary for the software to work as well as it does, it can be viewed as an invasion of students' privacy and author rights. Students should be made aware that their assignments are being submitted to Turnitin, but they typically do not have a choice in whether their papers are saved in the database. Furthermore, it is difficult to remove papers from the Turnitin database once they have been submitted: Turnitin's website says that "all requests for paper deletions from our database must be submitted in writing by the institutional Turnitin Administrator" (Turnitin Support Center, 2021).

Due to the privacy issue, some schools (for example, University of Massachusetts Amherst) require that instructors who use Turnitin include a notice in their syllabi explaining that course assignments will be checked against and saved in Turnitin's database. UNL used to require this with SafeAssign (UNL Faculty Senate, 2007), and finally updated this policy in 2020 to reflect the switch to Turnitin (UNL Faculty Senate Executive Committee, 2020).

Furthermore, a computer program cannot actually detect plagiarism. All that it can do is notify the user of matching text—only a human reader can determine whether actual plagiarism has taken place. Additionally, studies performed in 2007 and 2015 found that Google searches of short phrases from papers found plagiarized material more accurately than Turnitin did (Straumsheim, 2015).

Another problem with Turnitin is user confusion regarding its originality reports. Turnitin's originality report highlights text within the submitted paper that matches text found within its large content database. The highlighted matching text is not always a word-for-word copy; Turnitin will also highlight sentences that have words in a similar order and spacing, even if there is non-matching text between the matching words. The report also provides a numerical score indicating what percentage of the submitted document matches content in its database.

Students often ask what is a "good Turnitin score"—my response is that there is not one. The existence of a "good Turnitin score" seems to

be a common misconception; I have even spoken with writers who are trying to get a manuscript below a certain matching percentage before submitting it for publication. The reality is more nuanced; matching text does not always equal plagiarism, and in fact there are many situations that lead to false positives and a rather high similarity score. These include (1) when the paper contains numerous direct quotes, even if they are properly cited; (2) when the paper contains commonly used phrases (such as field-specific terminology, names of authors or academic institutions, or standardized language such as “a thesis submitted to [insert university name]”); (3) when the paper contains standardized language deliberately copied from another work for legitimate reasons—for example, if someone is replicating a scientific study and is describing the same methods used in a previously published paper; (4) when the student has submitted an earlier draft of the paper as a class assignment, meaning that most/all of the text is already in Turnitin’s database and will show up as a match; or (5) ironically, when the paper contains many well-formatted citations in the Works Cited/References/Bibliography section, and these sources have been cited by other students whose papers are stored in the Turnitin database.

Another issue is a potential misunderstanding of what the purpose of Turnitin even is. While looking through papers submitted to the Libraries Turnitin Service, I have noticed that many students have uploaded personal documents such as resumes, CVs, and cover letters. I am not sure what these students are trying to accomplish; it seems unlikely that someone conscientious enough to use the library Turnitin account would accidentally plagiarize while writing personal documents. It also seems unlikely that Turnitin’s database would contain many similar documents that might have matching text. Additionally, these documents could be flagged with false positives due to the reasons listed above, in particular, commonly used phrases and proper nouns.

Turnitin’s scholarly sibling—iThenticate

In 2017, UNL began a pilot project offering faculty and staff access to iThenticate, which is a similar product to Turnitin and owned by the

same company. The main difference is that iThenticate, which is marketed to academic researchers and publishers, does not save any submitted papers to its database, and it does not check documents against Turnitin's database of student papers. The university's subscription allowed a limited number of credits (uses), leading the UNL Libraries to implement some restrictions on how it could be used: the person submitting the paper must be the first author or corresponding author, and the paper must be close to ready for publication. In most cases, we did not allow an author to submit multiple versions of the same paper. Unlike Turnitin, our institutional iThenticate account required all submissions to be mediated: an author had to email us the paper, and we would email them the resulting originality report in return. While we originally envisioned that a librarian would meet individually with each author to go over the originality report, it turned out that our users were generally not interested in this offer and were happy to receive the report via email. While iThenticate has an interactive originality report interface very similar to Turnitin's, the mediated nature of iThenticate meant that I could email users only a PDF copy of the originality report, which we felt was less useful than the full interactive report.

In 2021, the UNL Libraries decided to cease participating in the UNL's iThenticate service, due to low usage and believing that it would be better handled by other university offices. While we had anticipated too many people using iThenticate and using up all our credits, we only had a few dozen papers submitted during the time we offered it. Now, responsibility for iThenticate lies with the UNL Office of Research and Economic Development and associate deans for various departments at UNL. The UNL Libraries still allow scholarly authors to check their own work with Turnitin, which is a better option in my opinion since it is an unmediated service with unlimited submissions, and the interface is practically the same as iThenticate's.

Self-serve alternatives to Turnitin

There are many "plagiarism detection" services available that are marketed to individuals. In fact, iThenticate has an individual subscription option, starting at a hefty \$100 per submission. Turnitin previously offered an individual subscription as well, branded as WriteCheck, but

this was discontinued on June 30, 2020 (Turnitin, n.d.). Turnitin's announcement that WriteCheck was shutting down cited the fact that students could easily use Turnitin within their own assignment workflow for Turnitin-enabled courses. This seems like an odd decision, considering that (1) not all schools use Turnitin, and (2) students may want the flexibility to check other types of writing, such as personal statements, that would not be part of an established university course.

Turnitin is still targeting the individual student market through third parties—for example, a website called Scribbr says that it is “powered by elements of Turnitin's Similarity Checker.” At the time of writing, it costs a minimum of \$19.95 per use, depending on paper length. The online proofreading service Grammarly also offers a plagiarism check feature as part of its Grammarly Premium subscription (which costs \$12–30 per month depending on subscription length), and while it does not mention Turnitin, its ability to compare papers to ProQuest's content and billions of web pages makes me wonder if there is a possible connection there.

A somewhat different online service is Copyscape. The website seems to have a good reputation among online content creators, but the information provided on Copyscape's site is quite sparse. I created a Copyscape account to see if it would give me any additional information, but it did not. It does not say how much each search costs, but the minimum amount of “credits” you can buy is \$5. It is intended more for web content creators than for academic users, so I assume it only searches for plagiarism of openly available web content. A similar site I found that uses a credits-based system with little explanatory content is PlagScan. An internet search found several other sites purporting to check papers for potential plagiarism, but they all seemed disreputable or did not work when I pasted text into them.

As librarians, we should be especially aware of companies that intend to violate users' privacy. Viper Plagiarism Checker is an online tool with an egregiously predatory privacy policy:

When you scan your essay for free, we'll take your essay and add it to our database so that future scans that you or other people make can be compared to it. Nobody has access to this database, so if part of your essay matches another essay, other people cannot see your work—they only

see a percentage match. Three months after your scan, we will automatically add your essay to our student database, where it will be published on one of our study sites to allow other students to use it as an example of how to write an essay. Most students don't mind helping other students by offering their work as an example— they're finished with the essay and it's of no value to them. (Viper, n.d.)

Needless to say, Viper is a site we should steer students far away from. While Turnitin and SafeAssign are also problematic for taking submitted content and storing it in their databases without explicit permission from the student, at least they are not reusing that content on the open Web.

Conclusion

Turnitin is a well-known software tool used to find potential plagiarism in student essays. While this sort of tool can be valuable for identifying blatant plagiarism, it can also cause confusion and anxiety for students who simply need help citing their sources. Turnitin and similar products can help students find copied text that they have not properly cited or paraphrased, but they can also provide a false sense of security (since Turnitin doesn't contain every book/article/website ever published) or lead to misunderstandings (such as students repeatedly tweaking their writing to get the "plagiarism percentage" as low as possible). I do not think that Turnitin is necessary or particularly useful for academic libraries to offer their users. It makes more sense to teach students how to properly cite and attribute information, leading them to feel confident in their research abilities and trust themselves not to plagiarize.



The Author

Anna Wigtil is a Research Specialist at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries. She has a BA in Music from the College of Saint Benedict, an MA in Library and Information Studies from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and most recently, an MM in Music History from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

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