



JISC RSC Scotland South & West Case Study @ University of the West of Scotland

UWS UNIVERSITY OF THE
WEST of SCOTLAND Case study written by Neil McPherson, Lecturer in Sociology.

Developing academic engagement and confidence in students through the use of Turnitin® originality checking and plagiarism prevention software

Introduction

At the University of the West of Scotland, academics from a number of disciplines have implemented the use of Turnitin® originality checking and plagiarism prevention software. While there are those who are yet to be convinced fully regarding the role and potential of Turnitin, the UWS Learning, Teaching and Assessment Board have stated an institutional commitment to make the software available to students on all modules where text-based plagiarism is a potential issue as of academic session 2010/11. The purpose of this short discussion is to outline my experience of using Turnitin and to highlight some of the benefits that can be achieved, for both lecturers and students, by implementing the software as a pedagogical tool.

I first employed Turnitin in academic session 2008/2009 after becoming aware of its potential in developing students' paraphrasing, summarising and referencing techniques at an early stage in their academic careers. I began by introducing the software in two modules that I coordinate, one at level 7 (Year 1) and the other at level 10 (Year 4). The initial considerations of how to set up and employ Turnitin demanded a little time at the planning and preparation stages, but the potential of the software was immediately obvious.

The Set Up Process

The first concern was how to set up Turnitin within the institutional virtual learning environment (VLE). The set up process was straightforward, as Turnitin software is integrated with the Blackboard VLE used by UWS (Turnitin is also functional within other VLEs, such as WebCT and Moodle). Turnitin assignment submission sites are created within the module site on the VLE. They are straightforward to set up, with Turnitin assisting the lecturer to build each assignment submission site through a step-by-step process that is easy to follow. This system allows the lecturer to identify and format the particular way in which he or she wishes Turnitin to process the assignment.

On the insertion of a Turnitin submission site, the initial screen asks the lecturer to identify the type of assessment from the following choices: paper assignment, peer mark assignment and revision assignment. On choosing the appropriate assignment category, the second screen asks the lecturer to identify when the assignment will be made available to students, when submission will be possible, and when marks and feedback will be posted (this is also the date when the member of staff can identify which piece of work relates to which student if anonymous marking has been enabled) (see Fig. 1).

new assignment

general

assignment title *

point value

dates

start date *

Feb 22 2010

at 4:52 PM

due date *

Mar 1 2010

at 11:59 PM

post date *

Mar 2 2010

at 12:00 AM

NOTE: For assignments with Anonymous Marking enabled, the post date determines when grades are posted to the Blackboard Gradebook and when the author names are made available. Otherwise, in Blackboard, the post date relates to the availability of GradeMark papers only and has no bearing on when grades are posted to the Blackboard Gradebook.

more options

Fig. 1

Following this, by clicking on the 'more options' tab, a screen is opened that allows the lecturer to provide instructions to the student regarding the assignment set; it also identifies the particular set of feedback statements available if electronic marking is to be employed. Additionally, it allows the lecturer to identify whether or not an originality report will be generated, and, if so, at what stage (see Fig. 2).

close options

Enter special instructions

Would you like to select a QuickMark set?

no

Generate Originality Reports for submissions?

yes

no

Generate Originality Reports for student submissions

immediately (can overwrite reports until due date)

Fig. 2

At this point, the lecturer can also decide whether to exclude small matches (and if so, how many words constitute small matches), whether to let the student see the originality report, whether to allow late submissions (late submissions are colour coded by Turnitin to highlight submission after the assignment deadline set), and whether anonymous marking is to be applied (see Fig. 3).

Exclude bibliographic materials from Similarity Index for all papers in this assignment?
Bibliographic materials can also be included and excluded when viewing the Originality Report. This setting cannot be modified after the first paper has been submitted.

yes
 no

Exclude quoted materials from Similarity Index for all papers in this assignment?
Quoted materials can also be included and excluded when viewing the Originality Report. This setting cannot be modified after the first paper has been submitted.

yes
 no

Exclude small matches?
 yes
 no

Allow students to see Originality Reports?
 yes
 no

Allow submissions after the due date?
 yes
 no

Enable anonymous marking?
 yes
 no

Fig. 3

Finally, Turnitin provides lecturers with the choice of repository in which the student paper is to be stored, if at all, and allows the identification of the material sources that the student paper will be compared against (see Fig. 4). Initially this can seem quite daunting, but following the identification and definition of a particular set of options, Turnitin will remember the setting for future assignments.

Submit papers to:

institution paper repository

Search options:

student paper repository

institution paper repository

current and archived internet

periodicals, journals, & publications

Fig. 4

UWS assessment regulations state a clear policy on late submission and anonymous marking and Turnitin can be set to reflect this. The date at which students can access their feedback and mark can also be set in line with institutional requirements.

Other significant decisions that can be made by the lecturer include whether to allow students to upload the assignment one time only or enable them to update their work until the date of submission, whether to allow students to see the originality report produced for their work, and whether the similarity index should highlight directly quoted material or bibliographic material. Following the identification of the format

required for a particular assignment, a Turnitin-enabled submission site can be created on the module site on the VLE in a few minutes.

Introducing Turnitin to Students

The second concern was how to communicate to students both the rationale behind the use of Turnitin and the potential of the software to help them develop their academic writing techniques and skills. It was clear that it was extremely important to explain to students that Turnitin was being employed in a preventative rather than a punitive capacity in order to ensure that they did not perceive the introduction of the software as an attempt to 'catch them out', but as a tool that they could use to their benefit. Interestingly, the first year students did not consider this to be an issue, while the fourth year students requested more details regarding the use of Turnitin (this was arguably due to the fact that the fourth year students had not used the software in previous years and were interested to find out why it was being implemented at that stage). After the potential of Turnitin was explained and the preventative aspects of the software highlighted, the students were quickly satisfied that Turnitin was being employed to their benefit. In my experience, time spent at this stage of the process is extremely important, as students, especially first year students, can at times be overwhelmed by academic assessment and the use of electronic technologies, and are often unsure of the pedagogical purpose of particular exercises and technologies.

Benefits of Using Turnitin

From a lecturer's point of view, Turnitin is a powerful electronic technology with which to help students develop their academic writing skills while at the same time ensuring that they are more aware of poor academic practice and the concept of plagiarism. This helps students avoid suggestions of plagiarism and allows lecturers to be more certain that plagiarism has not occurred. The time saved searching for the source of any questionable or suspect material in written assignments alone would be enough to promote the use of Turnitin among lecturing staff. However, Turnitin is much more than plagiarism detection software. Available within the Turnitin system is an electronic marking tool called Grademark, which allows feedback to be saved and used on multiple assignments: this can save a great deal of time when similar comments are being made over and over again in assignment feedback. The Turnitin system also allows the creation of rubrics to facilitate quick marking while promoting consistency; it also offers the potential to create Quickmark sets, which allows the sharing of feedback responses among markers. All of these tools offer the potential to improve feedback without significantly increasing the time that staff spend marking assignments; indeed, Turnitin can reduce time spent in this capacity through increased efficiency and consistency in marking. Through its advanced integration with VLEs, Turnitin is now fully functional in the whole process of academic assessment, from submission to marking to feedback, with its flexibility allowing it to be tailored to support an extensive range of assignment requirements. As a result of my positive experiences with Turnitin, I have now extended the use of the software to all modules that I have extended involvement with on the Social Studies and Social Sciences programmes at UWS. The results I have witnessed have been more than encouraging, and the time spent in collating, marking and providing feedback on assignments reduced dramatically. This has been achieved while extending my confidence in relation to issues of student plagiarism and academic development in the area of written assignment. However, what has been most encouraging is the enthusiastic way in which students have embraced the technology, which is evident from the feedback received from students who have used Turnitin.

Student Engagement with Turnitin

Quantitative and qualitative feedback, gathered from two cohorts of level seven Sociology students as part of preliminary research into the impact of Turnitin on student performance, has highlighted a number of issues relating to student perception and experience of the use of the software. Firstly, in quantitative feedback collected at the end of modules in which Turnitin was used, students noted that although they were initially unsure of what the software could offer them, the potential benefits quickly became clear following active engagement with Turnitin. The feedback was wholly positive and those who had made more limited use of the software in the first instance stated a commitment to make greater use of it in future. Students felt that their understanding of Turnitin increased greatly following the 'hands-on' experience of submitting the initial assessment. Students regarded the software as accessible, the uploading process as straightforward, and the reports generated by Turnitin as clear and informative. When asked whether they would like to see Turnitin used more extensively, all students answered in the affirmative.

Qualitative feedback from students was also positive and raised a number of significant issues. Firstly, students felt that after having used Turnitin for the first time, they had a much clearer understanding of the potential benefit it offered in terms of developing understanding of the requirements of academic assessment at the level of higher education. At the same time, they felt that Turnitin assisted them in the development of the structure and content of written work. They felt that it provided a 'safety net' in their early assignments, as they were not entirely sure of what constituted plagiarism and felt anxious about plagiarising unintentionally, even when the concept of plagiarism had been discussed in some depth prior to the submission of assignments. Students felt that the opportunity to upload and review work allowed them to be sure that their paraphrasing, summarising and referencing techniques were appropriate; they also stated that it helped them to reflect on their work as a whole prior to submission. Furthermore, they noted that it was useful to upload sections of their work as they went along in order to make sure they were on the right track, as well as to help them to develop a clearer understanding of the software, which built their confidence in both areas.

Students felt that the reports provided by Turnitin were accessible and clear, and liked the way in which areas of similarity were colour coded and linked to the document with which a similarity was identified (see Fig. 5). Students also noted that the software highlighted any mistakes in direct quotes, which allowed them to correct the mistake, and in some cases to identify a misunderstanding in their use of the quote – this ability to double check direct quotes was highlighted as a significant benefit. They also noted that the similarities identified by Turnitin in direct quotes often lead them to discover sources of relevant material that they had not come across before.

Interestingly, students highlighted the benefit of the detective aspect of Turnitin, stating that they were pleased that students who attempted to plagiarise would be identified. Students perceived Turnitin as constituting a technology that would benefit dedicated students while at the same time discourage and restrict the potential of less dedicated students to 'cheat'. This was a view echoed by a number of students. Students were also enthusiastic about the electronic submission and feedback aspects of Turnitin. They regarded the electronic submission process as straightforward and liked the fact that they could upload and access their work remotely. They also highlighted the benefits of electronic feedback, noting the ease of access and the fact that they no longer had to struggle to read lecturers' handwriting. Some students stated that they felt that the electronic delivery of their mark also offered the privacy that is not possible in the

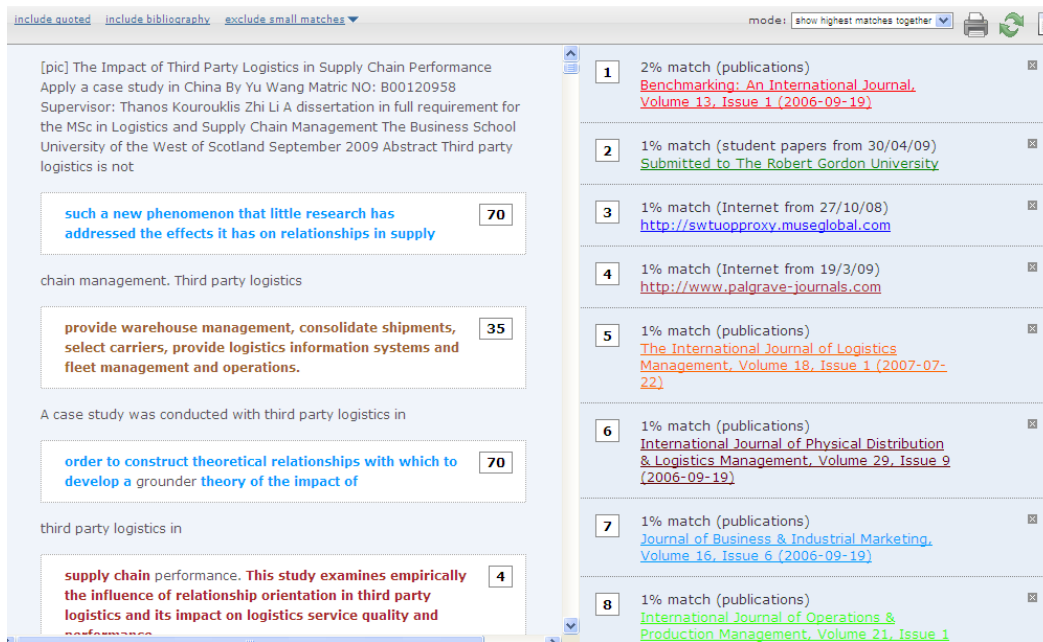


Fig. 5

‘anonymous’ posting of marks on notice boards, where students are able to identify each other’s marks due to the fact that although names are removed, class lists remain in alphabetical order. Students also felt that the form of the electronic feedback was clear, allowing an overview of comments and pinpointing specific issues directly in the text. They stated that it would be easier for them to store their marked assignments and feedback in this form, especially as they developed their ePortfolios. For future students using Turnitin for the first time, the students suggested an extended discussion of Turnitin’s similarity index. Although they felt that they had understood the way in which Turnitin marked similarity, discussion in the student body had led to some students conflating the similarity index with a plagiarism score, which had caused some students who had a legitimate high similarity score to question their work. They also felt that a more in-depth discussion of plagiarism could be provided at the point of introduction of Turnitin. When asked about the extension of student access to Turnitin across other modules, and if other lecturers should introduce the software, the feeling of the students was perhaps summed up by the student who replied, “Why wouldn’t they?”

Conclusion

With UWS stating an institutional commitment to make Turnitin available on all modules where text-based plagiarism is a potential issue, students who have had experience of using Turnitin and identified its potential as a technical and pedagogical tool will now be able to extend their engagement with the technology. And their experience of Turnitin will hopefully be replicated in those who will be using it for the first time. In my opinion, this is an entirely positive move by UWS, and one that both lecturers and students should thoroughly embrace.