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# A Case of Miscommunication? Obstacles to the Effective Implementation of a Plagiarism Detection System in a Multicultural University

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## Abstract

The issue of Plagiarism has besieged universities worldwide and proactive preventive measures implemented include the use of plagiarism detection systems like TurnItIn. This paper explores the use and potential misuse of TurnItIn by the students of a Western University in the Middle East that hosts a diverse academic community comprising 70 different nationalities. Preliminary findings show that the use of TurnItIn has generated a whole new approach towards plagiarism. Student interviews revealed that they seemed to have developed a false sense of competence based solely on TurnItIn results. Text matching was often misinterpreted to mean plagiarism and the focus of students when submitting assignments was preventing text matching on TurnItIn. These and other similar findings led to the conclusion that there has been a lack of accurate communication about plagiarism and the use of TurnItIn. An in-depth analysis of these issues may help to develop strategies to overcome the obstacles to the effective use of plagiarism detection systems. This may also lead to a re-evaluation of the current system.

## **Introduction**

As an instructor for the past three years to entry level students at the off shore campus of a Western university in the Middle East, I have had the opportunity to educate all ‘new’ students about the issue of plagiarism. Students are taught the skills needed to avoid plagiarism and also the penalties incurred if caught plagiarizing. However, the incidences of plagiarism continued to be remarkably high and TurnItIn was first used in early 2005 in a subject that I taught to help students to prevent plagiarising. The results were encouraging and this led to making compulsory the use of TurnItIn in most subjects since Autumn 2005. Since then the number of plagiarism cases reported has dropped by more than 50%.

Although TurnItIn has contributed towards a decrease in plagiarised assignments, it has led to misconceptions about the use of the system and has highlighted the lack of understanding that students have about plagiarism and referencing in general. This is mainly because of students’ educational and cultural backgrounds. Having come from high schools that favour rote learning and memorization from textbooks students find it acceptable to copy from books and other sources. Culturally, most of the students are from non-English speaking backgrounds and often find it difficult to express themselves, thus they resort to copying. It was therefore found necessary to develop a more systematic institution-wide process for enhancing students’ understanding and awareness about referencing and plagiarism. The Plagiarism and Referencing Interactive Student Module (**PRISM**) an interactive online based independent learning module about plagiarism and referencing for students was proposed. The project has been approved by the parent university and preliminary work for the same has been carried out.

The key misconceptions students have about the use of TurnItIn were identified and these are presented in this paper. Solutions to the problems identified are also suggested, along with the need to use the system as a pedagogical tool.

### **Plagiarism - a global issue**

There has been an alarming increase in recent years in the incidences of plagiarism in educational institutions, publishing houses, news agencies and other institutions where creativity/ingenuity, competition, research and individual contribution are correlated. World-wide freshmen students, budding writers, accomplished academicians, established authors and popular statesmen have been charged with misappropriating other's work. Educational institutions have been singled out for strong criticism by the public and the media as they are expected to strengthen the moral fabric of society and also since most major educational establishments survive on public funds. The exposure of multiple incidences of plagiarism in institutions of higher learning has furthered the view that academic standards are falling world wide concurrent with a global erosion of values. The commercialisation of education which has led to the attrition of academic integrity among staff and students and the popularity and accessibility of the world wide web are blamed for abetting this 'crime'. In short, plagiarism by students is a major issue that is hounding mass higher education today.

Educational institutions have been forced to take strong action against these charges as the implications are many and sometimes threaten their existence. Academic and administrative measures have been implemented to curb instances of plagiarism.

Academic initiatives including revised curricula and assessment methods, teaching of study skills and extensive coaching on referencing have been supported by policies that implement strict punitive measures. Of late, technology too is being used extensively and effectively as a preventive measure.

### **Plagiarism detection software**

Numerous products and services, both fee based and free, which perform different functions are available to detect plagiarism. The ‘Technical Review of Plagiarism Detection Software Report’ (Bull et al, 2000) prepared for the Joint Information Systems Committee by the academics of the University of Luton reviewed five products under a number of criteria including reliability, technical requirements, ease of use, and costs for institutions. The report states that “some software programs and services are designed to detect material cut and pasted from the Internet, while others detect instances of identical or very similar submissions. Some services have the facility to compile databases and so build-up a repertoire of assignments and material that has been purchased from paper-mills and essay-banks.” These programs perform multiple functions and detect different types of plagiarism. Plagiarism detection systems like TurnItIn, edutie.com, EVE2, CopyCatchGold, WordCheck, MOSS and JPlag ( to detect software plagiarism) have been used by major universities around the world.

Plagiarism detection software is becoming more and more popular and has been credited for the decrease in instances of plagiarism (Martin, 2005). Perceptions of students and staff towards the use of technology based solutions have been the subject of extensive research and analysis. These studies conclude that the academic community highly favours the implementation of plagiarism detection software (James et al, 2002).

## **TurnItIn**

TurnItIn is the most popular plagiarism detection service among the academic community mainly due to the ease of implementation and the clarity of reports generated. iParadigms, the company behind TurnItIn, was founded by researchers at the University of California at Berkeley in 1996 to monitor the recycling of research papers in their classes. The interest of their colleagues motivated them to team up with other teachers, mathematicians, and computer scientists to form the world's first internet-based plagiarism detection service - Plagiarism.org. It is now known as TurnItIn and iThenticate both of which are widely used and trusted services for preventing the spread of plagiarism. The comprehensive nature of the product is clear from its coverage of different possible sources of plagiarism. "Every paper submitted is returned in the form of a customized Originality Report. Results are based on exhaustive searches of billions of pages from both current and archived instances of the internet, millions of student papers previously submitted to TurnItIn, and commercial databases of journal articles and periodicals" (TurnItIn, 2006). The 'Technical Review of Plagiarism Detection Software Report' (Bull et al, 2000) which compared TurnItIn with four other plagiarism detection software rated TurnItIn the best software with the maximum range of functions (cut paste, paper mills and collusion). Testimonials of the benefits of TurnItIn are aplenty. Success stories posted on the service provider's website represent major schools and colleges. Relevant research has also been conducted to evaluate the system.

## **Evaluation of TurnItIn**

Several studies have been conducted to evaluate plagiarism detection software including TurnItIn. In Australia, a project by the Victorian Vice-Chancellors' Committee trialled TurnItIn as part of a study on the extent of plagiarism at six Victorian Universities and recommended its use. The Joint Information Systems Committee funded by the UK Further and Higher Education Funding Councils advocated the use of TurnItIn in all colleges and universities in the UK after rigorous reviews of several plagiarism detection services (Symons, 2003). The selected client list posted by TurnItIn .com on its web page includes several North American and Canadian institutions. This is in spite of legal issues mainly regarding copyright that has ensnared many American universities using plagiarism detection software.

The ubiquitous use of TurnItIn is testimony of its benefits. Over the past years several studies have been conducted to gauge the merits of the system. Most studies conclude that the benefits for the academic community are many including deterring plagiarism, supporting academic staff, giving incentive to improve citation, having potential to raise academic standards and the like (Savage, 2004; Frazer et al, 2004). The disadvantages cited include comments that using TurnItIn is time consuming, it does not distinguish between cited and un-cited material, students can initiate legal action over intellectual property rights, electronic copies of whole texts are not accessed by TurnItIn, students may send different papers to the teacher and to TurnItIn, and concerns about cost (Frazer et al ,2004; Savage, 2004). Most users are satisfied with the system and some even testify that it “performed flawlessly and met all expectations” (Martin, 2005). Many academic

institutions that have proactive measures in place to minimise plagiarism have subscribed to TurnItIn.

### **Context**

As else where in the world, plagiarism, has been a major concern for universities in the United Arab Emirates too. Preventive measures including enhancing study skills, honing referencing and research skills and severe punitive measures have been practiced. In some government run institutions students are expelled after the first instance if caught plagiarising and precluded entry to other tertiary education centres. Most major universities and some higher secondary schools in the UAE subscribe to TurnItIn.

This study is based on the use of TurnItIn in the offshore campus of an Australian University located in the United Arab Emirates. The author is a faculty member of The College of Business Studies and teaches the subjects Introduction to University Life, Literary Skills and Business Communications. The first two are General Education Subjects made mandatory for all freshmen students by the Ministry of Higher Education. Business Communications is a first year optional subject for Business and IT students. Introduction to University Life and Literary Skills are study-skills based subjects developed to help high school students in the transition to University Life. The focus is on developing independent research and writing skills. As part of it, tutorials on plagiarism awareness and avoidance are conducted to initiate students. Most students enrolled are unaware of plagiarism and correct referencing. The student body is highly diverse and represents different educational cultures and over 70 nationalities. Some students have attended primary and secondary schools where English is not the medium of instruction. Compulsory attendance of tutorials on plagiarism and information

disseminated in the first lecture of every subject ensure that these students start off at a somewhat identical level. All subject outlines have detailed sections on plagiarism and the use of TurnItIn. Information on assessments in the same document includes TurnItIn submission requirements. A generic cover sheet including attestation that the work is the student's own and information about plagiarism as a serious offence is to be handed in with every written assignment. Educative measures are backed by administrative ones. Students can be expelled from the university for the second offence in a case of severe plagiarism and records of offences are maintained in the student file.

To supplement all these initiatives The Project for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching (PELT) was established in January 2005. Its aim was to improve student learning and to promote staff development. PELT runs regular workshops for students on topics like 'How to Avoid Plagiarism in the Future' and 'Using Referencing and TurnItIn to Avoid Plagiarism'. Staff training sessions covered university policies and procedures on academic integrity, assessment design strategies to minimise plagiarism and the implementation of TurnItIn.

In spite of the preventive measures a number of cases of plagiarism were noted. Large classes made it difficult for teachers to detect plagiarism. Turnitn was launched in 2004 and trialled in two subjects including Business Communications. The trial was successful and both staff and students found it a necessary preventive measure. In early 2005, it was made mandatory that all written assignments except tests and exams must be submitted to TurnItIn in all undergraduate and postgraduate subjects. Though the initial response of staff and students did not always favour the software, repeated use has familiarized them with TurnItIn.

## **Problems encountered**

TurnItIn has now been used for two years to assess the originality of assignments submitted in the subjects I have been teaching. An evaluation of the efficacy of TurnItIn is thus timely. Cases of plagiarism have been reduced considerably though staff are now more aware and alert to instances of plagiarism by students. Students seem to have cultivated better study skills and referencing skills. However, it was observed that students seemed to have developed a false sense of competency based solely on TurnItIn results. Many first year students misinterpreted text matching to mean plagiarism and the focus was on preventing text matching through literal paraphrasing and poor summarising. As TurnItIn matches strings of eight words it is easy to cheat the system. As first time users of TurnItIn honest students who found instances of text matching in TurnItIn reports were appalled to be 'caught' for plagiarism. Teachers of first session subjects spend a lot of time quelling the fear of students. Conversations with students also revealed that most students believed that the acceptable percentage of plagiarism was 20%. It was thus deemed necessary to conduct further research about this trend.

## **Methodology**

Both quantitative and qualitative data were used for the study. The sample consisted of 48 first semester students and 55 first year students who had volunteered to participate. A majority of freshmen students was using the software for the first time. All of them were aware of plagiarism and the methods of avoiding it including summarising, paraphrasing, in text citing and referencing. A questionnaire consisting of closed and open ended questions was used. Students were instructed to indicate their views on a 5-

point Likert scale. Survey questions covered the themes of perceptions of TurnItIn as a prevention/detection tool, a pedagogical tool and evaluation of the functions of the software. An additional section was added to survey students who had been charged with plagiarism in the past. The survey was completed anonymously and was not compulsory. Qualitative data were collected through two focus group discussions and a student interview. The first focus group consisted of freshmen students who were using TurnItIn for the first time. It was a mixed ability group. The second focus group interview was with a group of first year students who had used TurnItIn several times. An interview was also conducted with a student who was charged with plagiarism in the previous session. This student had consistently gained distinction grades.

## Data Analysis

### Questionnaires

A questionnaire with several open ended and a few closed questions was used to receive feedback from students about their perceptions of TurnItIn. A summary of the results of this questionnaire is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1 Analysis of questionnaire

Student Perceptions of TurnItIn		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree
1	TurnItIn is a plagiarism detection software	1	6	11	48	36
2	Using TurnItIn helps to improve academic competence	6	16	17	49	14
3	Using TurnItIn helps to avoid cases of unintentional plagiarism	3	20	16	44	17
4	The text matching facility on TurnItIn is useful	4	22	22	43	9
5	The percentage value of text	3	9	16	58	14

	matching given is useful					
6	Text matching always leads to plagiarism	18	40	17	16	8
7	Some instances of plagiarism have not been detected by TurnItIn	3	22	34	29	4
8	False reports about sources used have been generated by TurnItIn	4	16	43	26	10
9	TurnItIn matches text with all material on the web	3	7	19	52	19

Students' perception of TurnItIn as a detection rather than a prevention tool is a cause for concern as 83% of student responses were in agreement with this. However, they seemed to agree that the software had pedagogical benefits as 62% agreed or strongly agreed that it would improve academic competence and 61 % agreed/strongly agreed that TurnItIn helped to avoid unintentional plagiarism. In comparison, a study by academics at Flinders University, Australia on student perceptions of a trial of TurnItIn “found that 46% students felt the software would assist them to avoid unintentional plagiarism. 33% students were also concerned that plagiarism would be detected when it was unintentional or coincidental” (Green et al, 2005). It must be borne in mind here that academic competence was related by students to low percentage of text matching and in turn to better grades in the focus group interviews. Only 52% agreed that the text matching facility is useful probably because they equate text matching with plagiarism strengthening their view of TurnItIn as a detection software. Though 35% of students opined that some instances of plagiarism had not been detected by TurnItIn, 71% were under the false impression that TurnItIn matches their assignments with all material submitted on the web.

The answers to the four nominal questions are analysed below in Table 2. The results are divided into responses of the whole sample group, responses of freshmen students and responses of 100 level students. It should be noted that many third year students were enrolled in the 100 level course.

Table 2 Responses to nominal questions

Responses	Results		
	Whole group	freshmen students	100 level students
Priority when handing assignments is avoiding text matching and plagiarism	21%	26%	20%
Paraphrasing /summarising used to avoid text matching not plagiarism	34%	40%	9%
The acceptable percentage of plagiarism is 20%	72%	75%	71%
It is important to avoid text matching rather than plagiarism	11%	4%	17%

It is clear that a number of students have been misguided about the advantages and use of TurnItIn so much so that their priority when handing in assignments has been to avoid text matching and plagiarism rather than doing a good job. Though most first year were aware that paraphrasing /summarising is used to avoid plagiarism and not text matching, responses given during the focus group interview with this sample group showed an excessive dependence on “rephrasing” which hindered deep learning. The most important issue that has surfaced in the survey is about the acceptable percentage of “plagiarism”. This is mainly because students equate text matching with plagiarism and because they believe that teachers rely heavily on the colour coded originality reports. This issue is discussed in detail in the interview section. Only a minority openly equated text matching with plagiarism but a subconscious relation between the two has been nurtured in students’ minds.

To the open ended question about their experiences with TurnItIn most students pointed out that text matching was a major concern. Comments included;

not useful because University name reference list etc always indicate some level of matched text

bad since I had some level of plagiarism considering that I did not plagiarise. The text matching was all from the reference list

Text matches common words which increases percentage of plagiarism

matched text was my own

Abnormal plagiarism results for no reason

Always at least 1% plagiarism

Unintentional text matching can lead to false cases of plagiarism

Never had more than 14% plagiarism

Frustrating when text matched

Text I wrote matched - unfair leads to increase in plagiarism

Once I had 1% textmatching which scared me a bit

All these comments indicate that there has been a serious miscommunication about the use of TurnItIn and the evaluation of the originality reports. This has lead to the misconception in student minds equating text matching with plagiarism. Comments like “I am always scared to submit to TurnItIn” show the undue stress that students endure due to miscommunication. Anxiety about the software and the result it generates is definitely not going to encourage deep learning.

Other negative comments included:

gives similarities with sites not used

and

generated wrong websites which I have not even looked at

Students think the defect is with the system as they are not trained to use the reports.

### **Focus group interviews**

A mixed ability group of twenty freshmen students were interviewed on condition of anonymity. The instructor acted as facilitator and a list of prepared questions was used to stimulate discussion. Notes were taken and later transcribed. Most responses were similar to that of the responses to the open question on the questionnaire and are therefore not dealt with in detail here. Comments about the software included;

frustrating that your concept has been already submitted

it is a pain as teachers use it to catch you

Remarkably, many students opined that a draft provision needs to be incorporated.

A draft [provision] is necessary as a tester and we must be allowed to  
make changes to the draft

Several students supported this view and it became clear that students thought they were not allowed to change the version submitted to TurnItIn even if it showed plagiarism.

A small group of 100 level students was interviewed on condition of anonymity to see if their responses differed from that of the first group. The instructor acted as facilitator and the same list of prepared questions was used. Notes were taken and later transcribed.

These students also conceived of TurnItIn as a plagiarism detection software. They were annoyed that even articles like 'a' and 'the' were highlighted. Their main grievance was

with teachers who counted the text matching as a an unannounced marking criteria. A 2% text matching was supposed to reflect 'good work' while if they had 30% it led to a cut in marks. And the explanation given by lecturers was "because you copied". Students' comments showed that they were adopting strategies to avoid text matching perceiving it as 'the' major problem - "we end up paraphrasing more than before"; "we rephrase the paraphrase so text matching cannot catch us"; "writing paraphrases is scary. Without TurnItIn it was easy. Now we paraphrase, reread and rephrase otherwise the percentage will increase". This has been a problem in many universities as Baskett et al (2004) point out : "Initially, most students perceived plagiarism as the reproduction of matching text, and TurnItIn proved highly effective in confronting students with the extent of this." Frazer et al (2004) quotes remarks by RMIT staff about the potential dangers of not using the software wisely. "TurnItIn does not know the difference between referenced and unreferenced material. Indeed TurnItIn actually gives increased text-matching when referencing is included because of the references themselves."

Students also commented that it was necessary to have a draft provision as "severe plagiarism is usually in group reports[work]"; "last semester our [group's] plagiarism was 15%; we can't change others work so seeing the report before submission would be advantageous." They explained that the perception of allowed percentage of plagiarism comes from the colour coding system. "...30% is the maximum plagiarism allowed ... at least get yellow colour. 25-30% is the danger line; above 30% some marks will be cut. [It is ] different from teacher to teacher ... depends on teacher's thinking -low % equals more marks"; "if it is only 5% we are happy – mentally. We cross our fingers and pray

we have done our best let our mistakes not be spotted.” Green et al (2005) analysing student concerns about the use of TurnItIn quote a student comment:

“Text matching is a far cry from my understanding of what plagiarism is. In fact, it may assist plagiarists by allowing them to reduce text matching of plagiarised notes.”

There is thus a potential problem in that students may focus their attention on avoiding detection and develop skills necessary for that in turn becoming experts in dodging the system. Frazer et al (2004) echoes this view “This is the danger with students - ie they check that they won’t get caught only and thereafter do not worry about citing fully.”

### **Student interview**

A distinction student who was charged with plagiarism in the previous session was interviewed. This student had used TurnItIn several times but was found to have plagiarised and received a zero grade in an assignment. Questions asked were about whether she accepted that she plagiarized and if so why; and also why she thought TurnItIn did not help her. Like the students in the focus group this student too pointed out the need to have a revision draft – “if we see in red or something you can avoid unintentional plagiarism. At least one draft is necessary... . It was my mistake I saw the red marking in the conclusion...I forgot to paraphrase. Without draft it helps only the teacher to understand what has been plagiarized. Giving a revised version to the teacher would be cheating...”

### **Discussion**

The need for effective solutions to these misconceptions generated mainly through miscommunication is urgent. The software has to be promoted as a prevention tool and

not a detection or policing one. Practical lessons on reading TurnItIn reports can be incorporated into the Introduction to University life course which is compulsory for all students. It is important that staff are well versed with the use of TurnItIn .Not just its implementation but the proper use of originality reports and colour coding. The stress has been on setting up assignments on TurnItIn and the technicalities behind it. Workshops on reading originality reports and correct referencing may be helpful. As RMIT academics Frazer et al (2004) point out “Staff ... departing from an educative approach could introduce a culture of conflict and generate complaints.” Academics have to be trained in using TurnItIn as a pedagogic tool that encourages a deeper approach to learning.

Academics should be made to realize the importance of conveying the right message to students. The Faculty Development site of Lehigh University offers detailed advice to staff which other institutions can use as a model. This comprehensive site points out that “well-designed assignments and **effective communication** [emphasis added] between student and instructor” are necessary to foster academic integrity (Lehigh University, 2002) . Similar instructions are echoed on the University of Southern California web site “Faculty should consider and explain to students how the use of TurnItIn’s “originality reports” by the instructor and /or by the student is meant to advance the course’s learning goals and applicable principles of academic integrity” (USC, 2005) . The importance of proper communication and education is stressed by the report on the implementation of TurnItIn in the University of Leicester, UK. “They [plagiarism rates] also show a decrease, from the pilot study, following the introduction of detailed information about TurnItIn and its use as a teaching as well as a detection tool" (Morgan, 2006) .

It is interesting to note that TurnItIn .com advertises itself as a plagiarism prevention and not a detection software. “Recognized worldwide as the standard in online plagiarism prevention, TurnItIn helps educators and students take full advantage of the internet’s educational potential” (TurnItIn, 2006). The website also gives clear guidelines on the use of the originality reports. “Although Originality Reports can be very effective at helping to identify **suspected** [emphasis added] individual cases of plagiarism, TurnItIn plagiarism prevention works even more powerfully when used as a deterrent. ... The color of the report icon indicates the overall similarity index of the paper, based on how much matching text we found. The **possible** [emphasis added] similarity indices are:

- blue (no matching text)
- green (1 word-24% matching text)
- yellow (25-49% matching text)
- orange (50-74% matching text)
- red (75-100% matching text)

**These indices do not reflect TurnItIn’s assessment of whether a paper has or has not been plagiarized. Originality Reports are simply tools to help you find sources that contain text similar to submitted papers** [emphasis added]. The decision to deem any work plagiarized must be made carefully, and only after careful examination of both the submitted paper and the suspect sources.” Academics using the software need to read the instructions on the web site closely.

Another major problem students face is the matching of referenced texts. This can be minimized by using the provision to exclude quoted and bibliographic material. The website addresses the problem efficiently “Originality Reports document all instances of matching text including quoted and bibliographic material. If quoted or bibliographic material is flagged, you can exclude it from the report. When you exclude material, the Originality Score on the report and in your inbox is updated to reflect the exclusion of matching text.” Students need to be assured that the Originality Report is not the only tool that teachers use to assess plagiarism and that teachers actually read reports. The survey conducted revealed that 37% of students believed that “instructors did not read TurnItIn reports.”

As students have pointed out provision for a draft and revision of it is necessary if prevention is to be the focus. All staff must be encouraged to use the draft provision in order to maximize the benefits of the software for students. The RMIT study (Frazer et al, 2004) on implementing TurnItIn cites a student comment “A draft submission would be useful if you genuinely forgot to reference, so that it would not be treated as plagiarism.” It will be a good learning experience for students and will help them to reference correctly and avoid cases of unintentional plagiarism.

## **Conclusion**

The benefits of using TurnItIn to deter cases of plagiarism are many. The above study shows that many of the limitations identified have stemmed from miscommunication between faculty and students about the correct use of the system. These can be overcome by educating staff and students. It would also be worthwhile to explore further the use of

TurnItIn as a pedagogical tool. Teacher-guided student evaluation of the draft version and use of the provision for peer evaluation provided by TurnItIn are potential pedagogical tools. The next part of the PRISM project would include a survey of staff to further explore the reasons for students' misconceptions about the system.

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