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Taking on Turnitin: Tutors Advocating Change

by Renee Brown, Brian Fallon, Jessica Lott, Elizabeth Matthews, and Elizabeth Mintie

Like many writing centers, ours trained us to respond to writers whose papers might involve plagiarism; we learned to show students how to use various paraphrasing techniques and how to cite sources. In staff meetings, we talked about why it was more important to understand the causes of students' plagiarism than to judge them for it. Then one day, a student walked into our writing center and said that she had submitted a paper to her professor online, as required, only to learn a little later that her paper had been reported to her professor as plagiarized. Visibly upset, this student asked that we help her with this paper so that she could resubmit it and avoid failing the course. She also showed us this statement in the course syllabus: “Students agree that by taking this course all required papers/reports/tests may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to Turnitin.com for the detection of plagiarism.” This was the boilerplate language recommended to pro-

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In our institution, we chose to use Turnitin.com, a web-based plagiarism detection service, in their courses (Sherwood). Before our tutors had time to decide how best to respond to this experience, other panicked students came in with similar stories. We felt helpless to do anything for these students because we understood so little about Turnitin or their professors' literacy expectations and values.

Were the students really plagiarizing? Could Turnitin point the finger at them and cause them to fail the course? How does Turnitin work? The answers to these questions, we discovered, were not to be found easily. Our director, Ben Raffa, suggested that we investigate and then share what we learned with others at the university and in the writing center community.

As both students and tutors, we had concerns about the Turnitin software being used at our university. It was easy for us to identify with students who felt helpless when dealing with a software program that could seal their fates. We found it harder to identify with the values of their professors and of the Turnitin officials who made students use the program without providing important background information and without helping them to interpret the results. As we began to learn more about the program—more, actually, than we suspected even the faculty knew—we had to confront another question: How much should tutors tell students about Turnitin? If we decided to say nothing, we were tacitly supporting the way Turnitin was being used. If we told what we had learned, we were entering a realm of discourse that we might not be able to sustain and could even get in trouble. With some encouragement, we decided to keep investigating and to go wherever our search led us.

We began our mission with two goals: What did our writing center staff need to know about Turnitin? and, How could tutors help students who must deal with Turnitin and the professors who require it? As we delved into these questions, we felt a growing sense that we were looking at very different values and expectations when it comes to student writing than we had learned during our training and our combined years of experience. We combed through websites and talked to students and faculty, collecting evidence that was sometimes technical, frequently changing, and often confusing. Our aim was to learn as much as we could about Turnitin and how it affects our peers so that we could tell students, faculty, and others in the writing center community what we had learned and how it might affect them. Although the students who visited the writing center were concerned about Turnitin prompted our inquiry, we felt that our findings were best used when we considered the pitfalls and possibilities for tutoring involved. As a foundation for the work we embarked on, we held to some notions about plagiarism, writing centers, and tutors that we feel are important for grounding this discussion.

Plagiarism, tutors, writing centers: A complicated trio

Our research began with the practical challenge of what to say to students who brought papers to us that had been identified by Turnitin as containing plagiarized material. In some cases, students had received papers back from their professors because Turnitin had flagged them as plagiarized, and they were now being asked to correct plagiarized passages and submit revised versions. These students came to our writing center and said, “Here’s what Turnitin said I plagiarized, so how do I fix it?” In other cases, students were about to submit their finished papers to Turnitin, as they were required to do, and were worried that the program would accuse them of plagiarism. This challenge, though, soon led us in a number of directions that would help us to offer the best advice possible to students and to discover what kinds of roles we as tutors and the writing center play in campus conversations on plagiarism. In order to find the right words to say to students who visit with Turnitin concerns, we had to understand plagiarism better, the stance writing center literature takes on plagiarism, and what kinds of institutional roles tutors can play.

As students, we began to feel that our own perceptions on plagiarism, mainly that it is academic dishonesty, were problematic because what Turnitin had flagged as plagiarism didn’t seem to suggest that students were intentionally being dishonest. With the help of our assistant director, we looked to composition studies for some answers and considered some of Rebecca Moore Howard’s thoughts on plagiarism. Through an exploration of her work, we began to expand our understanding of plagiarism by taking into account Howard’s attention to patchwriting in her *Standing in the Shadow of Giants: Plagiarists, Authors, Collaborators*. Students are often criminalized for being patchwriters, Howard argues, when, in actuality, even the most professional writers are merely sophisticated patchwriters. She establishes a pedagogical space for patchwriting, which she refers to as, “a process of evaluating a source text, selecting passages pertinent to the patchwriter’s purposes, and transporting those passages to the patchwriter’s new context” (xviii). Furthermore, Howard, elsewhere, calls for the replacement of plagiarism with the categories of fraud, citation, and repetition (“Sexuality, Textuality” 488). In addition to Howard, Kurt Bouman has strongly suggested that differences in cultural and academic expectations can lead some students, particularly international students, to make choices that would be deemed wrong by an American academic audience. Given what we learned from our initial exploration into discussions of plagiarism in com-
position studies and what we've witnessed from students with Turnitin concerns, we have decided to reserve the term fraudulent plagiarism for instances in which there is, beyond a doubt, true intent by writers to submit work that is not their own. We have made this decision primarily because any discussion on plagiarism should not automatically assume that any text that imitates another text or lacks originality is a result of a criminal act.

With a better sense of how experts in the field define plagiarism, we began to think carefully about what the writing center's stance is when it comes to plagiarism. As we noted at the beginning of this article, an issue for us as tutors centered on what we would say to a student whom we knew was plagiarizing. Luckily for us, this scenario has not happened very often, but we still had to consider what kinds of positions we could possibly take on this issue. Would we establish a set of procedures like tutors Jennifer Herrick and Mark Niquette did in their "Ethics in the Writing Lab: Tutoring under the Honor Code"? Would we casually take a walk with the writer and describe to them what's at stake by choosing to plagiarize? As our research developed, we realized that we had to take a step beyond our training, that our response to such a situation had to be informed by what scholars were saying about the writing center's tempestuous past and present relationship to plagiarism. In their "Plagiarism, Rhetorical Theory, and the Writing Center: New Approaches, New Locations," Linda Shamooin and Deborah H. Burns provided not only a history of this relationship, but some answers to the questions we had about how the writing center might approach the issue of plagiarism in general.

According to Shamooin and Burns, the writing center literature mainly focuses on defending our institutional spaces against accusations that writers receive too much help when they visit. They present three responses to charges of plagiarism that the writing center literature has provided: "[W]e recount the nature of the writing process, we explain the importance of feedback for all writers, and we offer pointers about how peer tutors can negotiate the border between the 'legitimate' practice of giving advice and the 'illegitimate' practice of writing too much on the paper" (184). However, Shamooin and Burns are quick to point out the philosophical discrepancies inherent in these three responses when they are measured against our beliefs about writing and the realities we face while tutoring. The perspective they ultimately endorse is a social-rhetorical one that "would make interpellation more conscious because it articulates the constructed nature of subject matter, of disciplinary thinking and questioning, of the related features of the discourse (including paper features), and of the values and expectations of a specific reader or audience" (191). In line with their recommendation to approach tutoring from this perspective, we believe that our job as tutors is to help students come to new meanings, understandings, and ideas through their writing and to do so while situating themselves in the kinds of disciplinary conversations their teachers expect of them.

This is not an easy task, but what we've learned about plagiarism, particularly in Howard's explanation of patchwriting, tells us that complicated plagiarism issues most likely happen in the writing center more frequently than we may have thought. That is, if all writers are essentially patchwriters and if students are particularly prone to having their patchwriting critiqued as cheating, then we, as tutors, have a dilemma on our hands every time we work with students who are already under suspicion for plagiarizing. Since our job entails walking the line between what type of writing is expected in the student's discipline and how the student is prepared to meet those expectations, we may find ourselves wandering into disciplinary conversations about plagiarism that aren't so pretty. In taking this approach, how we respond to plagiarism cannot be framed in terms of ethics or a misconception of writing center practice, as Shamooin and Burns suggest, because a social-rhetorical approach to writing center pedagogy "views the issue of plagiarism as a social and rhetorical construct, and rather than side step the issue of plagiarism by claiming to build a fence around collaboration and tutoring, such a writing center inserts itself into a conversation about the rhetorical and social nature of the disciplines" (192). We are left to ponder how tutors, as the main practitioners in our writing centers, might insert themselves into such a conversation, especially now that Turnitin has presented us with new challenges to our tutoring and to our institutional positions.

Of course, the time we spent researching Turnitin was extensive, and we had the opportunity to present our findings both locally and nationally, but the persistent issue of who is really listening to us, the tutors, kept nagging us throughout this project. During our first presentation to the English faculty here at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP), we became aware that showing professors what Turnitin is all about and how it is influencing their teaching could potentially put us in the political hot seat. How would they respond to us, their students, but also their other students' tutors? At the end of the day, the information we had to share was well received and the faculty in our audience were there because they wanted to hear what we had to say, but this was the first time we had to ask ourselves about the potential risks involved in becoming advocates for students who have had bad Turnitin experiences. In considering a political and pedagogical space for our research, we found it necessary to step outside the traditional roles of writing center tutors in order to make claims about how Turnitin was influencing teaching on
our campus. Thinking about Shamoorn and Burn's social-rhetorical approach to writing center work led us to the conclusion that there was, or at least should be, an arena for tutors to discuss campus-wide issues that affect tutoring. In Harvey Kail and John Trimbur's "The Politics of Peer Tutoring," they argue that, ""[l]ocating the sources of knowledge in the social fabric rather than in the power lines of generation and transmission offers a way to talk about peer tutoring that goes beyond the operational model of plugging tutors into the grid" (207). We began to consider the kind of knowledge we could bring to the social fabric of our institution and other ways that Kail and Trimbur's statement informs our situation almost twenty years after they originally made it.

We are not interested in being plugged into the Turnitin grid just because some faculty and administrators on our campus have chosen to use the program. Instead, we would like to offer up our voice along with the voices of students who have been informed about this decision as a way to cautiously approach what Turnitin means for learning and teaching on our campus. Although the debates about peer tutoring may have focused on collaborative learning in the university, we have reinterpreted our goals in line with Kail and Trimbur in that ""[t]he experience of co-learning changes students and helps them to see that the power ascribed to the faculty depends on the students' own sense of powerlessness and [the faculty's] need for omnipotent authority" (209). What we came to recognize at our writing center is that we had an opportunity to inform students about what Turnitin does and how their teachers are using it so they could make informed decisions on how to approach their professors and engage their own texts. If we took the time, together, with students to pose problems with what Turnitin said they plagiarized and explained why it had said so, then we'd be doing productive work in our writing center rather than working to just fix the supposed problem areas of flagged texts. We would, in a sense, have to forgo how the institution intended to use Turnitin and help students in these situations to see the choices they have, to feel more confident in how they use sources, and to identify themselves as writers who intricately manipulate and synthesize texts for their own purposes.

With this complex nexus of plagiarism, writing centers, and tutor roles as a base, we will now turn our attention to how Turnitin works from technological, legal, and ethical perspectives; how students seem to be responding to the increasing use of plagiarism detection services; and how Turnitin limits pedagogical options and opportunities. Finally, we will offer some perspectives on what tutors can do both in their sessions and on their campuses to have their voices heard in a discussion on plagiarism detection services.

How Turnitin works

Understanding how Turnitin functions and the purposes for which it is used by an institution proved vital to any discussion we had about the program. We should note, however, that Turnitin updates the information it provides online regularly, and has done so since we first began our research. The information provided from Turnitin's website in this article was collected in March 2006. Likewise, the information we present throughout this section is also influenced by the kinds of programming parameters set for our institution, which means that different institutions can customize aspects of the program for their own purposes. What we present in this piece demonstrates the issues that we have dealt with here at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) with our new subscription to Turnitin.

For starters, we found that the corporation behind Turnitin claims to have an educational purpose. In fact, banners on their website tout that they are "focused on education" ("Products and Services"). Turnitin's website hosts an online interface where students can submit work to professors, comment on their peers' work, and review their grades. Although these services are similar to those provided by other educational resources such as WebCT and Blackboard, Turnitin is unique because as "the standard in online plagiarism prevention," Turnitin also claims to "help educators and students take full advantage of the internet's educational potential" by scanning every paper submitted for "measurable rates of plagiarism" ("Plagiarism Prevention").

Bill Marsh's "Turnitin.com and the Scriptural Enterprise of Plagiarism Detection" offers a thorough description of how Turnitin operates, specifically dealing with the way Turnitin "maps identity, codes writing, and manages transgression in the service of broader, historically entrenched values of authorial propriety and educational achievement" (427-428). Our analysis echoes much of the work done by Marsh, and we recommend his article for those who are investigating Turnitin, but we have included our observations since they were not only the results of researching the Turnitin web site but also our own experimentation with the program.

Turnitin's capacity to detect plagiarism is actually based on the matches it makes between similar sequences of text ("Product Tour"). When students or professors submit work on Turnitin's interface, proprietary algorithms convert the text into what Turnitin calls a "digital fingerprint," a unique sequence of code that has meaning only within Turnitin's technological interface. Turnitin's web crawlers compare these "fingerprints" to the 4.5 billion student papers and archived websites Turnitin claims to have in its proprietary database. The database then retains a copy of the
“fingerprint” to compare against future student submissions. When the code sequence of a submitted paper matches a file within Turnitin’s database, Turnitin highlights the matching text and creates a link to the source in its database. The instructor receives an originality report with a color-coded Similarity Index that shows the total percentage of text in the submitted document that matched text from sources in the database. (Again, see Marsh’s article for a thorough explanation of Turnitin’s scriptural similarity and originality reports).

Once a paper is submitted to Turnitin, its “fingerprint” remains in the proprietary database indefinitely (“Product Tour”). This feature distinguishes Turnitin from other plagiarism prevention programs, such as Essay Verification Engine and IntegriGuard, because other programs do not maintain a database of student work. Turnitin claims that retaining these fingerprints does not infringe upon students’ copyrights because the proprietary algorithms it applies convert the text into a new product, the fingerprint, even though they convert it back to its original format to produce originality reports (“Legal Document”). Turnitin’s lawyers explain this sleight of hand as follows: “The fingerprint is merely a digital code, which relays the unprotectable factual information that certain pre-defined content is present in the work...the fingerprint does not include any of the work’s actual contents, and is therefore neither a copy nor a true derivative of the original text” (“Legal Document”). In other words, according to Turnitin’s legal team, the code products of Turnitin’s algorithms contain information about the text rather than the actual text, just as a physical fingerprint contains information about a finger rather than the actual finger. This analogy is questionable, however. A student’s text can, and is, reconstructed from Turnitin’s “digital fingerprint,” whereas a physical fingerprint cannot be reconstructed from a fingerprint.

This reconstruction of text poses an ethical dilemma pertaining to students’ ownership of their work, as well as a privacy issue. Tutors in our writing center found that students who are enrolled in classes using Turnitin are not always aware that the database retains a fingerprint of their work. When we experimented with the program in December 2005, we created a fictional student and then later submitted a small portion of an actual paper that was written for a graduate-level criminology course in April. When we obtained consent to use the paper, we asked the writer whether her professor used Turnitin. She replied that to the best of her knowledge, none of her work had ever been submitted to Turnitin; she had never even heard of the program. However, this was not the case because her professor had submitted her work to Turnitin without her knowledge, and, in submitting her paper for our experiment, we had unwittingly alerted her professor to the possibility that she might be attempting to submit the same paper for another course. To prevent his misconception, we contacted the professor to explain that we had used the student’s paper with permission as part of our research on Turnitin.

In this situation, the originality report flagged 24% of the student’s text as matching a document within the database. After selecting Turnitin’s option to obtain more information, we received an e-mail message stating that the professor from the course in which the matching paper had been submitted granted permission for Turnitin to send us the original paper from which our submission had ostensibly been “plagiarized.” Turnitin forwarded us a copy of the entire paper, including the personal information the writer had included in her heading, specifically her full name and course number. In many courses students are required to put their identification numbers, e-mail addresses, and even contact numbers on their papers; we had now discovered that this student information can be forwarded by Turnitin to third parties as long as the original professor—not the student author—grants permission. We had not only obtained the student’s entire original paper without her knowledge or permission, but also her full name and course number.

In addition, Turnitin claims to save professors time (“Plagiarism Prevention”). Instructors who use the program still must look at Turnitin’s report of the student’s paper because this report does not distinguish between properly and improperly cited information. While the option exists to omit marking material within quotation marks and in the bibliography, Turnitin cannot verify that citations are formatted correctly or that students have quoted correctly. As we have noted, Turnitin does not detect only copy-and-paste plagiarism from within its database; the instructor must still check for copy-and-paste plagiarism from outside of the Turnitin database. Turnitin, however, is not clear about these limitations in the scope of its database, simply stating that it uses “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” (“Plagiarism Prevention”). Furthermore, since Turnitin detects only this type of plagiarism, professors must scrutinize papers for other types of plagiarism on their own. Therefore, the timesaving claim made by Turnitin is dubious.

The more we delved into the institutional aspects of Turnitin, the greater our concerns became. The money that institutions use to pay for the license to use Turnitin can come from various sources, depending on the institution. At our university, the funds come from the technology fee that all students are required to pay. This fee is meant to enhance student learning, provide equitable access, and make
graduates competitive in the workplace ("Pennsylvania"). Turnitin charges between $4,000 and $10,000 a year for the use of their program, depending on the institution's enrollment. Bigger schools pay more for the service because it is expected that they will submit more papers to the program. In 2004-05, with approximately 13,500 students, our university paid $8,100. Meanwhile, Turnitin is a for-profit company that charges licensing fees to institutions that want access to their program. Turnitin's parent company, iParadigms, had 3,500 member institutions in 2004 and earned $10 million in annual revenue (Dottinga).

iParadigms reports that it receives over 20,000 papers on a peak day from users in 51 countries ("About"). iParadigms' other services include iThenticate, a commercial version of Turnitin; plagiarism.org, a website that provides information about online plagiarism and Turnitin; and Research Resources, a website about plagiarism and the Internet ("Products"). Turnitin, backed by its ever-expanding proprietary database, is the star of iParadigms' corporate agenda. Every new subscription not only generates revenue for the company through licensing fees; it also increases the size of its proprietary database and thus the market value of its product. Student papers remain in the database even after students graduate or schools cancel their subscriptions, so that every paper that enters the database puts iParadigms a step ahead of aspiring competitors. iParadigms' CEO Tom Barrie boasts, "In very short order, we'll have it all wrapped up. We'll become the next generation's spell checker...There will be no room for anybody else, not even a Microsoft, to provide a similar type of service because we will have the database" (Masur).

"Having the database" is crucial to Turnitin's business model, which depends upon adding value to its product by continuously expanding the amount of original work it collects from students and other sources and then holds forever. Each sales transaction to a college or university then creates a dependent economic relationship between Turnitin and the university, leaving institutions that might want to choose a different software company to decide between losing access to all of their students' papers and renewing their licenses with Turnitin.

Furthermore, the legal issues surrounding Turnitin concern the Copyright Law and the Fair Use Law. The Copyright Law covers items such as literary works, musical compositions, musical records, screenplays, and works of art. Items not eligible for protection under the Copyright Law are ideas, facts, titles, names, short phrases, and blank forms. The Fair Use Law determines whether the use made of a work is fair, and several factors are considered in this decision. One is the purpose and character of the use, such as whether the item in question is being used for commercial or nonprofit purposes. Another is the nature of the copyrighted work and includes the amount and substantiality of the portion of the work in question relative to the copyrighted work as a whole. Finally, there is the effect of the use upon the potential market for or value of the copyrighted work. Turnitin argues that the purpose of the digital fingerprint is to enable the evaluation of works for plagiarism; the purpose of the work itself is to express an idea or information for an academic purpose. Therefore, the purposes of use are not prohibited under the Fair Use Law. This also means that the use of the students' work will not affect its potential market value.

As of December 2005, there was no clear legal precedent for the situation created by Turnitin. Turnitin, however, markets itself largely as an educational tool. It is conceivable that Turnitin attempts to use its affiliations with educational institutions to gain leniency in copyright and fair use laws. Programs affiliated with educational pursuits often argue that special circumstances are required to fulfill their educational mission. Actions that are used to advance that goal are often able to infringe on possible copyrights and are justified because the purpose is the greater goal of education. Turnitin proclaims to be working for education, and the company claims that it should be able to make use of these legal leniencies; others contest the view that Turnitin has the educational system in its best interests.

On its website, Turnitin publishes a statement by its law firm, Foley & Lardner, to reassure readers that Turnitin infringes on no copyrights ("Legal Document"). The statement claims that using Turnitin "does not pose a significant risk of infringement of any copyright in written works submitted to Turnitin for evaluation." Perhaps in anticipation of questions about the violation of copyright laws, Turnitin defends their program on their website in a section called "Legal Document," where they pose a series of questions. The first one asks: "Does Turnitin infringe on student's [sic] copyrights to their work?" Their response to this question is as follows:

Determining whether a copyright exists in a particular work or is infringed by a particular use of the work is difficult[...]. [C]asual analysis of these issues will not suffice, especially when the use in question is novel, as is the Turnitin system for plagiarism detection. For that reason, iParadigms[...] sought expert legal advice before launching the Turnitin system, and have continued to do so during its operation. Based on extensive analysis of all aspects of the Turnitin system, we have concluded that its use does not pose a significant risk of infringe-
ment of any copyright in written works submitted to Turnitin for evaluation. ("Legal Document")

Readers of this response may agree with us that it is vague and evasive, relying mainly on reassurances that the company has received expert legal advice and conducted an extensive analysis, but offering no supporting evidence. The evasiveness continues on page three of their legal document, when Turnitin poses the question, "Is Turnitin’s use of student work ethical?" They respond first by noting:

Each faculty user of the Turnitin system must decide whether the advantages of detecting plagiarism quickly and efficiently, coupled with the ability for peers to efficiently and anonymously review each others’ work, is outweighed by any reservations the faculty user may have about how Turnitin accomplishes those goals. ("Legal Document")

This statement seems to ignore the question of using students’ original work and focuses instead on the convenience afforded to faculty, suggesting that students will simply have to defer to their instructors’ wishes about handling their work. Students’ rights are often subordinated to the decisions of teachers and administrators, and Turnitin may believe it has the backing of most legal opinions. The question of whether or not it is ethical for Turnitin (and the faculty and institutions who subscribe to it) to use students’ work in the way that Turnitin seems to encourage is left unanswered. The "Legal Document" goes on to state:

In that respect, we believe it helpful to bear in mind that academic institutions and their teachers are not only entitled, but obliged, to award grades to student work based on student input, rather than the intellectual contribution of others. Students should know that not only the content, but also the integrity of their work is subject to evaluation.

Once again, we see Turnitin shifting the focus of the question to what they believe students must do, namely, maintain the integrity of their work. The integrity of students’ work is precisely what is at stake, however, when Turnitin encourages faculty to require that all students submit their work to Turnitin’s proprietary database and holds these works there indefinitely, even sending out copies of the students’ work with personal, identifying information to those who wish to examine it, as we found in our research.

Student perceptions on Turnitin

What do students think about Turnitin? In addition to the panicked writers we met with and the students whose frustration we’ve discussed thus far, we visited an online conversation forum called “Students Hate Turnitin.com.” Some of the posts were supportive. One student wrote, "I think the concept of Turnitin is good—as somebody who doesn’t plagiarize then I’ve got nothing to worry about. What I don’t like though is the thought of my work being kept on file for future comparison.” Another student believed that if people were against Turnitin, it must be because they themselves plagiarize. “Why else would anyone complain about such a service?” she asked. Also surprising was the seemingly low regard students had for their own work. At least three posts indicated feelings of surrender, suggesting that the moment they submit their papers, the work is no longer theirs. After all, they said, the papers were never copyrighted or protected in any way, and whatever the professors decide to do with the papers is fine with them; this, they felt, was the “cost” of the grade they received in return. On the other hand, there were two responses expressing dislike for Turnitin. One student wondered what happened if “[a] student isn’t comfortable with their assignment being put through this system?” Another student observed the long-term effects of submitting work and “how the information can/will be used.”

Students who deliberately choose to plagiarize are often well aware of Turnitin’s shortcomings. Some of our tutors who are English education majors doing their student teaching had the opportunity to speak with a number of the high school students in their classes about their thoughts on Turnitin. One fifteen year-old student told us that due to “the paper mill plagiarism problem,” his high school required students to submit all papers through Turnitin. We asked if the requirement had stopped students from downloading papers, and he laughed. He explained:

Really, it’s so worthless. Everyone knows how it catches you, so it’s easy to figure out how not to get caught. All you have to do is move things around in a sentence to change the order, or put in some extra words, or put in words that mean the same thing. They say a lot of times it fixes the paper up, actually, because those papers you get online aren’t so good when it comes to grammar or using vocabulary. (Anonymous)

So perhaps, after all, Turnitin leads some students to edit their plagiarism more carefully, even as it poses little obstacle for determined plagiarists.

We wonder whether students realize the full extent of the obstacles Turnitin creates. Consider students who feel attached to their work, whether it is creative or research based. Do they understand how Turnitin benefits financially from having their work in the database? Or, do they realize that their work is easily reproduced whenever a paper is submitted that matches what they’ve written? We found few who expressed serious reservations about Turnitin and what it might mean for them in the future. Those who favored Turnitin seemed to do so because they respected
those who do not plagiarize and wanted people who do to get caught. There were occasional complaints on student blogs about the unauthorized retention of student work, but they were relatively mild.

If these scant complaints have failed to get much attention, a 2004 court case involving a student at McGill University in Montreal seems to be having an impact. College sophomore Jesse Rosenfeld failed his assignments when he refused his professor’s instructions to submit his work to Turnitin, citing “ethical and political problem[s]” with the system (Grinberg). “I was having to prove I didn’t plagiarize even before my paper was looked at by my professor,” Rosenfeld stated. A Canadian court sided with the student, and many authorities agreed with his position. Ian Boyko, national chairman of the Canadian Federation of Students, stated, “Of the 20 Canadian universities currently using the site, not one consulted with students in the decision-making process when signing on with Turnitin.com... that in itself shows a lack of respect for students’ rights” (qtd. in Grinberg). Boyko further states that students, as authors, should be able to decide where their work goes, period, especially considering that the company makes money from the submissions. This last piece of evidence may be the most damaging to the credibility of Turnitin, which bases the legality of its operation on its purported educational mission.

Tom Barrie, founder and president of Turnitin, had strong reactions to the accusations: “This is the first time since our inception in 1998, since millions of papers have gone through our site, that this issue has come up...we are following the letter of the law, and not one of the 3,000 universities who use our service would have signed contracts with us if we weren’t” (qtd. in Grinberg). He also disputes that Turnitin withholds student work. Because the papers are imprinted digitally into the system, rather than in written form, he says there is no need for concern. “We don’t harm the free-market value of the work—a student can take their Macbeth essay to the market and make millions,” argues Barrie. But the claim is at least debatable because once a work is in the database, its content is available to others, even unscrupulous users who could claim the work as their own and take it to the market. Whether the input of the saved work is manifested digitally or otherwise seems beside the point if it is being stored against the will of the writers who crafted it.

Given the responses we’ve provided from students and the scenarios offered that led to poor solutions to plagiarism issues in student writing, we do not believe the program actually helps to solve the problem of plagiarism. Boyko argues that it does not: “We see the use of sites like Turnitin.com as means of cutting con-

ners...we think they are a poor substitute for trained individuals” (qtd. in Grinberg). Most teachers feel an obligation that goes beyond producing graduates who have simply met the requirements; writing teachers and tutors, in particular, believe that each student’s experience with writing is at least as important as the ability to follow the rules of writing. And yet the sheer power of electronic solutions is hard to match. Turnitin’s president says there is little choice but to rely on a digital solution because “[h]uman beings cannot detect plagiarism...unless you apply a digital solution, it’s impossible. We have 13 seven-foot, computer racks to determine if a student has lifted one line in an essay from the internet” (qtd. in Grinberg).

Turnitin does make a compelling argument when it observes that human brains do not have the capacity to scan billions of pages to detect every instance of plagiarism; on the other hand, detection is not a simple matter of matching. Whether or not a student has plagiarized requires knowledge of the student, the assignment, and other factors for which human judgment trumps computer power. The controversy over Turnitin will likely continue, and it is bound to find its way back to the courtroom, and much more research is needed on how students perceive and are being informed on Turnitin at their schools. For now, we’d like to take the controversy to spaces where writing is taught, learned, and done.

Some pedagogical limitations of Turnitin

In a typical session dealing with the topic of plagiarism, tutors at most writing centers try first to understand what students do and don’t know about the topic. They explain what plagiarism is and how to avoid improperly using the words, ideas, and research of others. The session might last thirty minutes to an hour. The tutor and writer review when information should be cited, how to handle direct quotes, and how to acknowledge someone else’s words or ideas. Tutors show students how to do relatively easy things like using signal phrases and harder ones like creating summaries and paraphrases. While we may not always be experts on the pedagogy of teaching citation, tutors have developed effective skills for teaching skills related to the use of sources. Sometimes we ask writers to read the original source aloud, and then we use this as a basis for teachable moments, as when a writer struggles to read passages he or she did not write. Sometimes tutors remove the original text by minimizing the computer screen or turning over the paper and asking the writer to recap what he or she has just read. Tutors write or have the student write notes based on what the student is able to remember. These strategies, which Howard advocates in her work on helping students to learn paraphrasing
skills, provide students the opportunity to expand how they think about incorporating sources into their own writing (“Plagiarisms” 801).

At the same time, tutors are trained to steer students away from certain practices. Tutors generally do not teach students to use the computer’s thesaurus as a paraphrasing tool. We do not encourage them simply to substitute words like “splendid” for words like “great” to create an acceptable paraphrase. Avoiding the thesaurus becomes problematic once students understand how Turnitin defines and detects “plagiarism,” however. While most people would agree that a thesaurus can be helpful, it becomes downright essential to using Turnitin when writing something that involves a set of standard or agreed upon terms that professional writers repeat without quoting or citing. We discovered this as we spoke to students who were required to submit papers to Turnitin and had figured out that a thesaurus was almost essential. We wrote and submitted a passage to Turnitin (in December 2005) that used standard terms to define a concept: “Freud discussed hidden emotions and drives as a person’s libido, a type of psychic energy.” When we made minimal changes to the sentence—“Freud talks about concealed emotions and drives as a person’s libido, a kind of psychic energy”—and resubmitted it, Turnitin did not recognize the text as plagiarized. Similarly, we found that changing the syntax of the sentence could also outwit the software. “As defined by Freud, the id is the psychic energy that...” was not flagged as being plagiarized from the original, “The id, as defined by Freud, is the psychic energy that...”

Turnitin is marketed as a campus-wide “technological solution,” so various departments in schools, colleges, and universities across the nation ask students to submit their papers to their instructors through the program. Many instructors use Turnitin to compare “textual similarity,” meaning identical or nearly identical strings of words and phrases, which they believe is a key step in the detection of plagiarism (Sherwood). Considering only textual similarity as a way to identify plagiarism is a limited way of looking at the problem, however, and causes distress for students who seek to learn the appropriate discourse practices of their field of study and the writing center tutors trying to support them. In our writing center, we have met several students who were writing field-specific papers in the sciences and social sciences. These papers relied heavily on precise definitions and standard vocabulary. In a paper on Attention Deficit Disorder that one of our tutors wrote in December 2005, the three types of ADD, as defined by the DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association), a widely accepted psychological manual for diagnosing disorders, were listed. The section of text that Turnitin flagged as plagiarized was, “the DSM-IV: predominantly inattentive, predominantly hyperactive-impulsive, and combined.” This string of words matches other strings of words that exist with high frequency in cyberspace because these are the precise names of the subcategories of the disorder ADD, in the order in which they appear in the DSM-IV. The paper was not plagiarized, but the terminology being used was too specific for the software to interpret intelligently. Tutors and students will continue to struggle through sessions with papers like this one because concerned students have determined that they must change the order in which the subcategories are described in order to circumvent the identical binary coding that Turnitin matches and marks for “textual similarity.” Should students have to change what they know is right because their institution’s computer software does not?

Even when students deliberately copy text from another source, Turnitin does not consistently identify this type of fraudulent plagiarism. Kurt Bouman points out that there are many levels of plagiarism. There is a clear difference, for example, between a student who inadvertently paraphrases a source incorrectly and a student who fraudulently downloads a paper from a paper mill and submits it as his or her own writing. Since Turnitin cannot distinguish a student’s intent as it scans the paper, the program often marks appropriate paraphrasing as inappropriate and lets inappropriate paraphrasing slide. As part of our investigation, we conducted a test to determine whether we could submit a plagiarized text without being detected by Turnitin. We began with a text from DigitalTermPapers.com, an online paper mill. We were able to view, on the mill’s website, the first 150 words of a sample essay written on The House on Mango Street, and so we copied and pasted this publicly available text into a word processor and submitted the document to Turnitin in February 2005. Surprisingly, the originality report came back with only the first sentence flagged and a similarity index of 10%. When we clicked on the highlighted text to see what Turnitin had matched to our text, it displayed a page of nonsensical strings of words and sentences from an obscure website. An instructor evaluating the originality report would not have been able to determine that we had directly copied the text from a publicly available Internet paper mill, even though that is the type of website Turnitin claims to target with its web crawlers.

Most paper mills require accounts and passwords, thereby placing them beyond the reach of Turnitin’s web crawlers. Turnitin claims that this is not a significant weakness of their program since it retains a copy of every paper submitted within its database. As soon as an instructor submits a paper purchased from a paper mill, that paper can be compared to future submissions (“Turnitin Virtual Tour”). In response to this, paper mills have begun to offer custom-written papers that are guaranteed not to be detected by services such as Turnitin. The website EssayMall.com adver-
tises “original, well-balanced, and thoughtfully-written custom essays” which are checked by a “licensed plagiarism detection program to ensure one hundred percent originality and authenticity of work” (“Custom Essay Value”). Prices range from $11.79 per 330-word page with five days’ notice to a steep $29.79 per page for twelve hours’ notice; however, the company assures prospective buyers that the quality of its products, coupled with its originality and confidentiality guarantees, is worth the price. As long as the company is true to its guarantees, students who fraudulently plagiarize through custom paper mills such as EssayMall.com are safe from Turnitin detection.

Thus, we question Turnitin’s ability to be a campus-wide “technological solution” to plagiarism, which brings us to even more serious questions about the program’s pedagogical limitations. From the information we’ve presented here, the program itself is in no way a panacea for plagiarism issues. From our discussion throughout this section, we would like to point out two major differences between students who accidentally plagiarize and those who, as in the cases of students who buy papers off the Internet, fraudulently plagiarize. Believing that Turnitin will function as a “cure all” detracts our attention from asking why or how students plagiarize and places an emphasis on what they plagiarize. The danger in such a focus is that the teaching of proper paraphrasing may be overlooked for the simplest solutions to preventing plagiarism that we’ve demonstrated, such as using the thesaurus function in Word. This approach may not happen in composition classrooms, but we wonder about those students with whom we met who were simply required to fix the problems rather than being told how to paraphrase and cite properly. Turnitin offered no advice to these students on how they might begin to cite and paraphrase properly. Furthermore, in our more extreme example of fraudulent plagiarism, Turnitin failed to catch the work that was purchased from paper mills. The question for us, then, is whether or not Turnitin actually has any pedagogical purposes on its own? A teacher can surely use the program to some pedagogical ends, but what does it say about the pedagogical claims being offered by Turnitin when the program is more than likely going to flag issues of accidental plagiarism and totally miss cases of severe fraud? The point is that we cannot and should not forget about the kinds of responsibilities we have to young writers as tutors and teachers just because we now have the ability to compare cases of textual similarity.

What’s a tutor to do? Some thoughts on practice and advocacy

Back in the comfort of our own writing center, we pondered one more question: To what extent can the writing center change the momentum when an institution has decided to adopt a program like Turnitin? At the very least, tutors and directors can try to make their faculty aware of the limitations of Turnitin and the need to interpret its reports carefully.

Tutors who begin to learn about Turnitin software soon confront the question of what to tell others. To what extent, for example, should tutors become a political voice for or against the program? Arguably, knowing more precisely what Turnitin can and cannot do could strengthen its support among faculty, students, and perhaps even tutors. Some might say that it is helpful to know that Turnitin cannot determine fraudulent from inadvertent plagiarism, and that it cannot even be counted on to help detect fraudulent plagiarism. And then there is the cost. Is it appropriate for tutors who learn the price their institutions pay for a Turnitin license to share this information with their peers? Are the stakes in this debate higher if Turnitin is funded entirely through student fees?

At times, we felt it was our duty to take what we had learned, and the discourse we had developed to articulate it, and become politically active on our campus. The more students who go to their professors and complain about Turnitin, we reasoned, the more likely the professors would be to unite and to ask the university to curtail its use or at least to request better training measures that critique the use and implications of Turnitin. On the other hand, many of the students using Turnitin are first- or second-year undergraduates. Is it appropriate for their tutors to increase the anxiety level of these students by telling of potential horror stories about the “plagiarism detector”? At our university, as in many others, tutors are employees of the school. As university employees—and without tenure—do we have license to speak against an institutional practice? If we were to publicly oppose Turnitin, how might this impact the writing center and the broad support our center enjoys from faculty and administrators? Would we reduce ourselves to “bitching buddies,” willing to bash professors who use Turnitin and possibly creating the misconception that we believe plagiarism should be tolerated?

What we found in our own tutoring was a space for honest discussions about the program and approaches to dealing with a professor who may not be entirely aware of how the program works. Initially, during sessions that dealt with Turnitin issues, we told students everything we had learned about the program; we told them as we have addressed earlier, how it works and what this means for the work that they are doing. There was something empowering about these conversations because stu-
students were given the kind of information they needed to address seriously how they were being implicated in the mix between their writing, their teachers’ beliefs about plagiarism, and the use of the program. We shared the stories and the information we had collected not to strike fear in the hearts of anxious students but to give them a sense of what they’re really dealing with and the kinds of options they had. As we saw more students with similar issues, our Turnitin information blitzes turned into focused pieces of advice that worked well for students at our university.

In efforts to be both honest and supportive to students, we first told them that it was important to speak with their professors about the situation. Beyond teaching students how to properly paraphrase and cite, the students here needed to know that it was ok to ask professors questions to point out that Turnitin was flagging parts of their papers that they had merely cited or in which discipline specific discourse was being used that would represent common knowledge in their field. In addition to trying to open up lines of communication between students and teachers, we also encouraged students to share their stories about Turnitin with other students, to let others know that there’s much more than meets the eye with this program and that students have a stake in how this program is being used because it affects them both scholastically and financially at our institution. Our approach, in a nutshell, was to create avenues for discussions on Turnitin that tutors and other students could take in discussing problems of plagiarism and plagiarism detection services with faculty and other members of the University community.

As for us, we dealt with the questions we articulated earlier about the political implications of our exposé of Turnitin, our outreach to faculty, and our relationship to other students with the utmost seriousness. With our initial questions about the program and how it was used answered, we decided to become intellectually engaged with what we had learned. We presented our findings to faculty and students at our institution, and in doing so, we posed ethical, legal, and financial problems with the program that prompted faculty to think carefully about how to use Turnitin in their classes. In addition to the outreach we did locally, we brought what we had learned to the IWCA/NCPTW conference in Minneapolis, where we heard even more stories about Turnitin, both positive and negative, that have helped shape our current approaches to the Turnitin dilemma on our own campus. We would recommend that other tutors do the same—to find out more about how things on their campuses work and to become engaged in conversations about various campus issues at both local and national levels. As tutors, we see a lot that other people at our institutions either take for granted or barely recognize, but we do have the ability and opportunity to speak up on those often glanced over issues and to reach out to fellow students and our faculty.

Coming back to our own research, we think that writing centers have a greater obligation to the Turnitin debate, however, which begins by acknowledging that many students are never taught what plagiarism is or how to avoid it. Many high school teachers decide that citation skills can be taught in college, while many college teachers outside of English departments decide it is not their responsibility to teach writing. For students who have had little or no instruction on how to cite sources, Turnitin is not the answer. Writing center staff should press their faculty and administration to offer all students the opportunity to learn how to document their sources before they require them to use Turnitin. Second, writing center staff should promote in-service education for all instructors who use Turnitin so that they are familiar with the program and learn to use it in limited, pedagogically sound ways. And, finally, we believe that all members of the writing center community need to keep up with technological innovations related to plagiarism detection so that faculty can be warned against and tutors can be prepared to deal with programs that are potentially detrimental to the educational process in composition.

NOTES

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WORKS CITED


someone to Watch Over Me:  
Reflection and Authority in the Writing Center  

by Michael Mattison  

I know I could always be good  
To one who'll watch over me.  

—George Gershwin  

The exercise of discipline presupposes a mechanism that coerces by means of observation.  

—Michel Foucault  

Journaling/Journeying  

In the fall of 2003, I found myself in my department chair’s office, curious as to what had prompted his invitation. It was my first semester as a faculty member and Director of the Writing Center, so perhaps this was a standard sit-down meeting for all new faculty, a mid-semester check-in to see how things were going. Perhaps it was a chance for the chair to offer some advice on how to cope with finals week, or (even more valuable) to share some fishing tips.  

Instead, my chair opened our conversation on a disturbing note.  

“A couple of your consultants came in to see me because they were worried that you were spying on them.”  

There was no accusation on his part, no raised eyebrow or sidelong glance, but my mind whirled about, wondering what in the heck he was talking about and how I would be accused of spying and what this meant to my position and why all of a sudden the office felt so warm.  

“Spying on them?” I said.  

About the Author  

Michael Mattison is Director of the Writing Center and Assistant Professor of English at Boise State University, where he spends a good amount of time pondering the view of the mountains from his window. He is also at work on a book about writing centers and Bob Dylan.