

Teaching Culturally and Linguistically Diverse International Students in Open and/or
Online Learning Environments: A Research Symposium

**Proactive not Punitive: Strategies to Prevent Plagiarism and
Promote International Student Success**

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Abstract

Post-secondary faculty are experiencing a rise in instances of plagiarism in student assignments and are looking for resources to help with both the reduction and the detection of plagiarism. International students are particularly vulnerable due to confusing policies and lack of awareness of educational practices in North American institutions, with many institutions focusing on punitive measures to deter academic misconduct. Alternatively, we explored a method that considers international students' role in maintaining their academic integrity and places emphasis on student learning, curricular modifications, and good citizenship. We conducted a collaborative year-long pilot project with international business students in the implementation of Turnitin similarity software. We share lessons learned from the shift to online learning that allowed our institution to move toward strategies that help international students prevent plagiarism instead of punishing them after it happens.

Keywords: academic integrity, international students, similarity software, Turnitin

Introduction

The academic integrity committee was formed as a response to faculty concerns to ensure student success. The committee applied action research in education to address plagiarism proactively, as well as to be culturally responsive, and brought members from various departments to discuss and implement a solution. The project was user-centred and provided two solutions: running a pilot for similarity software (Turnitin) and an online academic integrity course. This paper focuses on Turnitin only.

The School of Business on the Moose Jaw Campus was selected for the pilot project for several reasons: high incidences of plagiarism and a robust number of written assignments that work with similarity software. The demographics of the School of Business at the Moose Jaw campus revealed that in 2019-2020 there were 843 students enrolled, of which 71% (n=600) students were international who held a student visa (Saskatchewan Polytechnic, n.d., p. 3). The pilot group consisted of 607 students (term one), 472 students (term two), and 34 faculty (terms one and two). Students were selected because their programs aligned with the pilot study period.

A focus in faculty training was based on interviews that our colleague, Selinda England, had conducted with a sampling of our international students to determine what plagiarism looks like in their home countries (England, 2019). Our goal was to break assumptions and expectations that faculty had of students to innately know western academic cultural practices regarding plagiarism and to shift instructors toward using similarity software to help students write and cite.

While our initial focus was on international students, we quickly realized that the entire student body would benefit from the discussion on integrity. Integrative social contract theory (Gregory, 2020) provided a foundation of our work, which states that exit and voice are key concepts. Academic writing assumes that students will submit their own work, and if the student plagiarizes, they have violated the social contract. Students must enter this contract voluntarily and be permitted to exit at any point (Gregory, 2020). Instructors also uphold this contract by defining plagiarism and enforcing policy. Faculty were transparent in their use of Turnitin by disclosing their intent in the course syllabus. Respecting the ethical use of information, social contract theory was put into practice in our pilot project by giving students the choice to opt-out of using Turnitin. This created a mutually respectful environment between faculty and students.

Literature Review

Research literature provided a foundation for the design of the pilot, as well as informed decisions. We continued to develop the literature review and reflect upon our data as it related to the research in the field of teaching international students and the effects that COVID-19 had on our educational efforts.

Student perspectives on academic integrity depend largely on their culture, country of origin, and their primary/secondary education, which may include differing views on textual ownership, authorship, working collaboratively with peers, and rote memorization (Amsberry, 2009; Baird & Dooley, 2014; Henderson & Whitelaw, 2013; Song-Turner, 2008; Winrow, 2015). To complicate this issue, North American institutions for higher education offer no common definition of plagiarism; they lack a standard system to help prepare students for what to expect in their studies (Henderson & Whitelaw, 2013; Winrow, 2015), nor do they handle academic misconduct cases consistently. International students face a plethora of challenges, including

language barriers, cultural differences, and basic needs fulfillment upon arrival to their new country. Allegations of plagiarism can have a significant impact on these students, such as bringing shame to their families, potential loss of a student study permit, and financial issues. The possibility of appealing a decision is an incredibly stressful situation, as the student may not have adequate language skills (Baird & Dooley, 2014). Further struggles include the lack of critical analysis to make a strong argument and the recognition that citing sources is vital (Song-Turner, 2008). Instructors can help mitigate cultural differences by setting clear expectations, discussing the concept of academic integrity often, and increasing their own awareness of intercultural perspectives (Haitch, 2016). Instructors can also explore alternative forms of assessment and use instances of misconduct to create learning opportunities for students.

Previous research revealed that students who chose online learning environments tend not to cheat as they are mature, typically returning to school after significant work experience, and are engaged in their studies (Eaton, 2020). The disruption caused by COVID-19 and the shift to remote emergency online learning saw many students with no motivation or engagement during the initial period of the pandemic, as the learning environment was not chosen, preferred or voluntary (Eaton, 2020). Daniels, Goegan and Parker (2021) state that their study “highlight[s]...the change in learning conditions had a meaningful impact on students’ achievement goals and their self-reported engagement” (p. 311). These authors note that grades are thought to be the markers of success, however, learning skills and gaining knowledge, along with student satisfaction, also denote student success (Daniels et al., 2021). Instructors struggled during the pandemic, as many had only taught in-person classes before and were forced to quickly adapt to a new learning environment. While the pandemic created a reasonable scenario for an increase in plagiarism cases (Sopcak, 2020), instructors can minimize misconduct by providing choice and autonomy in written assignments (Daniels et al. 2020), creating frequent low-stakes assessments along with being explicit about expectations (Nearing, 2020).

Methods

Our research aimed to discover if using Turnitin as a proactive learning tool for students would lower the number of plagiarism cases that the institution experienced and improve student writing and citation skills. The user settings chosen allowed our students to submit their work to Turnitin, which reviews the student work and compares it against its own database of student papers and digital resources to produce a highlighted report with a similarity percentage. Students could then view the similarity report and adjust accordingly to improve their paraphrasing or citations as indicated. Users could re-submit their assignments up to three times for a report, and subsequently, once every 24 hours for an additional report (if needed). Our implementation required a unified interdepartmental approach to the set-up, training, and ongoing support by Learning Technologies (LT), the Instructional and Leadership Development Centre (ILDC), Learning Services and Library Services. Faculty and students were provided with mandatory training to ensure consistency and a clear understanding of the software capabilities.

This pilot project utilized a mixed-methods approach of both quantitative and qualitative data sources for monitoring the faculty and student user understanding, progress, and satisfaction with Turnitin. The first questionnaire conducted was the ‘Have You Ever?’, based on Don McCabe’s (n.d.) academic integrity survey, which asked students (n=302) if they have ever participated in a variety of academic misconduct scenarios with the hopes of making the definition of plagiarism less ambiguous. During the pilot, Qualtrics survey software was utilized

to administer an assessment at the beginning and the end of each semester to gauge faculty (term one n= 27, term two n=16) and student (term one, n=422; term two, n=185) satisfaction with the software, and to gather feedback for changes.

In addition, this pilot held a faculty focus group (n=7) to get a feel for their concerns regarding plagiarism and informal feedback, and trends were gathered from committee meetings and team members who worked directly with the faculty and students using the software. Turnitin also provides back-end usage reports that the researchers used to monitor usage and stage student interventions when needed.

Results

We found three notable results from the ‘Have You Ever?’ survey. Students felt it was okay to (1) work with other students on an individual assignment (30.46%), (2) let another student copy their completed work (41.86%), and (3) copy sentences directly from a source without a citation (39.66%). When reflecting on the implication of these acts, students indicated the following percentages for how serious they felt the aforementioned scenarios were: (1) 46.85% and (2) 64.64% and (3) 61.13%. The results displayed consistencies with data from previous interviews of international students who came from cultures where it is common to share information and solve problems by helping each other (England, 2019).

In the surveys, faculty saw an overall improvement in the quality of student work; especially, critical analysis skills and paraphrasing, consistent use of references, and in-text citations. In addition, instructors noted a reduction in workload as they no longer had to manually check for similarity in papers. That said, a frequent instructor complaint was that students would aim for a zero percent similarity score, which students believed to be desirable. In these cases, the quality of the submission was poor because students would synonym switch with no respect to the contextual use of that word, which made it difficult for faculty to understand. Instead, we emphasized there is no perfect percentage and that students should be checking their work for proper paraphrasing and citations to achieve their ‘best score.’ Overall, faculty stated that they experienced less academic integrity violations when using the software, and in cases where they did have to report a violation, Turnitin provided them with a report. At the end of the first term there were zero academic integrity violations. However, in term two, after midterms, with COVID-19 interference and the move to online learning, there were over 50 cases of academic integrity violations.

In comparison, students stated they liked Turnitin because it gave them opportunities to check and correct their own work, and a sense of protection for their own intellectual property. For students, two dominant complaints were: (1) the limit of three instant reports, and (2) Turnitin should provide more accurate and predictive writing features to replace the manual editing process. However, these grievances reinforced our need for training and support services for students where we emphasized doing assignments early and learning editing skills in lieu of a reliance on software (i.e., Grammarly) to make corrections for them. Overwhelmingly, both faculty and students voted for the continued use of Turnitin.

Discussion and Conclusion

The cornerstone of this project was being responsive to user feedback. We honed the recommendations for faculty by offering flexible submission options to encourage students to

learn editing skills. We found that mandatory training and intensive interdepartmental support for both faculty and students were critical to our project's success, as it promoted fair and equitable usage of the software.

The pandemic was a major disruption that changed the way we taught and supported students and faculty. As the pandemic unfolded, all learners faced numerous issues, such as being stuck at home, cut off from institutional assistance, facing financial stress and having fewer personal interactions with instructors. Some of the ways that we prepared for an additional year of pandemic remote learning with Turnitin included creating consistently weekly workshops for students and faculty (Turnitin Tuesdays) and a drop-in Zoom room to field student questions. In this remote learning situation, Turnitin became a valuable self-service tool for students to evaluate their work outside of normal operating hours; for international students, these options became valuable for those attending from their home country.

Based on the results of our pilot project, we renewed our subscription to Turnitin and commenced a full-scale adoption by the institution. Doing so will provide our learners with expanded tools to improve academic writing practices, and information related to academic integrity. With faculty, we aim to foster dialogue centered on academic integrity, provide support, and minimize workload. Future research will include an environmental scan of Canadian polytechnics that use similarity software and/or have administered academic integrity preventative measures to align ourselves with current Canadian post-secondary practices.

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