Proposal for Pilot use of a Text Matching Service
October 21, 2008

The Committee on Intellectual Integrity recommends that a pilot project be launched for the Spring 2009 semester to investigate the effectiveness of the availability of a Text Matching Service (TMS) such as Turnitin. The committee has investigated the issues surrounding the use of such services, including the legal issues raised during the recent lawsuit against Turnitin, and believes that the service may have the potential to be an effective educational tool. We have involved Campus Technology Services. Joe Moreau, Greg Ketcham and Nicole Decker have met and worked with the committee in its investigation.

Background

These services are often referred to as "Plagiarism Detection Services," but it is important to recognize that in actuality they do not detect plagiarism. They merely find matches to strings of words across the Internet, within various electronic scholarly publications and in some cases within databases of previously submitted papers. Part of the rationale for recommending a pilot test of a TMS is that the publicity of these services, most pointedly Turnitin's advertising, presents a picture of a tool that quickly and simply finds plagiarism within submitted papers. The truth is that an "originality report" from one of these services presents a great deal of information which must be examined by an instructor to determine what, if any, of the "matched" text constitutes possible plagiarism. We feel strongly that faculty who might choose to use a TMS product should have training in order to understand the functioning of these services and their strengths and limitations.

To be sure, as the attached originality reports demonstrate, these services can find textual matches which indicate plagiarized material. In particular, you will see that large portions of the submitted paper were taken from three web sites. This paper was the basis for a charge of plagiarism several years ago, and the instructor did locate the three prime sources of plagiarism using Google. There was, however, significant time and effort invested to locate the copied text through Google. We suspect that the use of the TMS may provide a significant savings in terms of effort on the part of the instructor to locate the possible source of suspected writing, though to be fair, many of us have also worried that in practice evaluating the TMS reports critically may actually require a similar investment of time and energy.

What the originality reports also indicate is that there are many other matches to material across the Internet. Much of that has to do with embedded quotations, the actual citations used by the student author (that is, the entries in Works Cited Lists and Bibliographies themselves), and the use of fairly common short phrases which occur in a number of sources. For example, the Turnitin originality report indicates 13 sources of text matching, ten of which constitutes 1% to 3% matches. Source number 8 is a perfect example. It shows a match to a student paper from Bryant College which is merely the use of the same citation to a paper in the *Harvard Educational Review* by Carol Gilligan. Seventy-seven percent of the matches identified have nothing to do with plagiarism on the part of the paper's author. Faculty and students who read the originality reports need to be trained to understand how to discount these spurious matches.

Further, as the attached Turnitin originality report on a submitted paper entitled "Baseball" demonstrates, a paper which is completely plagiarized from a Wikipedia article can generate a similarity index of zero percent. Careful editing on the part of the author can "fool" the TMS by

carefully adjusting the length of the copied text strings. In summary, the TMS originality reports may miss significant incidents of plagiarism as well as generate excessive matches of limited significance.

Public Discussion

The Committee notes that there is much disagreement about the usefulness of these services, even beyond the practical considerations noted above. Critics claim they set up unhealthy adversarial relations between faculty and students, ignore other common forms of cheating like ghostwriting, may encourage busy faculty to read less closely and attentively than they would otherwise (feeling safely inoculated against plagiarism concerns), and can muddy students' senses of what really constitutes an inappropriate use of sources by seeming to equate various forms of text-matching. Proponents contend that the simple existence of a supported TMS on a given campus serves to discourage potential plagiarists (whether the service really works effectively in practice or not), that TMS's speak to a level of fundamental fairness that most students value, and that giving students access to the service will help train them in what constitutes appropriate paraphrase.

The committee has been similarly divided in its own deliberations and hopes that a pilot project will help us answer these questions.

Recommended Product

After two presentations and evaluation, the Committee decided to recommend that myDropBox be used for the pilot project. However, the product's company was bought by Blackboard, Inc., and the product is no longer available.

The most reasonable remaining choice is Turnitin from iParadigms, LLC. We have an offer of use of Turnitin for the Spring 2009 semester for $500. We understand that it would be part of the suite integrated with Angel.

Policy Issues

The Committee identified a number of policy issues associated with the use of these products. We recommend the following, at least for the duration of the pilot use. These should be revisited as a result of the evaluation of the pilot.

- Faculty training should be required before use of a TMS. This training might ultimately be web-based, but faculty need to understand the strengths and limitations of the product as well as serve as a first contact in assisting students in the use of the product.
- Archiving of papers should not take place, or provisions should be made to delete the archive at the end of the semester. The legal issues in the recent court case by several high school students against Turnitin were all are tied to the use of archived papers.
- Faculty should indicate in the syllabus that the TMS product will be used during the semester. The syllabus should indicate how it will be used. If the papers are to be archived, faculty must provide an option for students who wish to opt-out of its use. Finally, we recommend against the mandatory use of the TMS in a class that is required for a major or minor. Students who object to the use of the TMS should not be forced to take a course where the TMS is mandated, at least for the duration of the pilot.

- Students should have unlimited use of the TMS for review of draft papers. This will require that students be given training in how to interpret the originality reports.
- While we recommend that faculty restrain their use of the TMS for papers that they find suspicious, we recognize that the timing of grading papers within a semester suggests the use of the product on all submitted papers. Faculty can then refer to the appropriate originality report when questions are raised in reading the submitted paper.

Pilot Project Issues

- For the pilot project, we recommend the use of the TMS only in undergraduate courses. We have not explored policy issues related to graduate studies.
- Participation in the pilot should be relatively open. Faculty must agree to (1) training and (2) participation in assessment.
- Faculty training should include discussion on how to structure writing assignments to reduce the potential for plagiarism as well as encourage faculty to be creative in the use of the TMS.
- Assessment should consist of surveys of faculty and student users as well as small focus groups to explore aspects of the use of TMS in a more open-ended manner.
- Campus Technology Services should be involved in the project to determine support resources needed for continued use. At a minimum, some training will be needed for members of the Help desk.
- We recommend that the pilot project take place over the Spring 2009 semester. In order to be successful, training will need to be developed this semester and offered during the Winter Breakout sessions.
- A final report on the pilot project should address the policy issues discussed above, and all policy issues should be referred to Academic Policies Council for their deliberations, should the recommendation of the pilot be to adopt the TMS product for general campus use.
- The Committee on Intellectual Integrity will be responsible for the pilot project.