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Improve academic standards with Turnitin: Antiplagiarism service becomes a hot favourite in Asia

It's never been easier to copy somebody's work and pass it off as your own. This is especially true in academia. Students, researchers and staff have fast access to billions of pages on the public web. A growing number can also access subscription databases including countless pages of full text journal articles and eBook texts.

We all cut and paste. It's a reason why the web exists: to make exchange of information simple and fast and to encourage learning. But knowing how to use what we copy and how to present it are issues which must be addressed constantly. The temptation to slip paragraphs or pages into term papers without referencing them, or paraphrasing notes made from literature searches, is an easy option when deadlines loom. Students, especially, need guidance on copyright, referencing and academic standards. In the past, teachers and lecturers have relied on instinct, a keen eye for style and their knowledge of key texts to spot 'borrowing' in their students' work. But in this age of internet publishing, verifying the originality of class assignments and dissertations has become next to impossible.

Enter online services dedicated to checking originality and reporting on potential instances of plagiarism. Among the most popular is Turnitin from the iParadigms company.

Designed to detect unreferenced copying in students' academic papers, Turnitin is becoming a standard tool for schools and universities in the Asia-Pacific region. This online Sherlock Holmes uses complex algorithms to compare students' texts with over 9 billion web pages, 10,000 newspapers and scholarly journals and thousands of books including literary classics.

The National University of Singapore, NUS, was an early convert to antiplagiarism services. "We did a review and study of four plagiarism prevention solutions in late 2002 and 2003," says Mr. Ravi Chandran, Director of the Centre for Instructional Technology, CIT, "and found that Turnitin was already being used in a number of universities and being mentioned in websites and articles. So we added it to our review of software.

"NUS wanted reliability, accuracy and speed in detection, good and extensive coverage of articles and, of course, ease of use, navigation and online help guides," added Mr. Chandran. "Pricing was also important as we wanted to open the service to all our staff and students."

The demand for an automated service was also growing at the Qingdao MTI International School, QMIS, in China. Staff needed a tool to understand the magnitude of copying in their students' work. As Raul Harri, a teacher at QMIS says, "We decided to use Turnitin for the anti-plagiarism feature."

Check student work for improper citation

Turnitin allows educators at NUS and QMIS to check students' work for improper citation or potential

plagiarism by comparing it against continuously updated databases using the industry's most advanced search technology. Every Originality Report provides instructors with the opportunity to teach their students proper citation methods as well as to safeguard their students' academic integrity.

In addition to the open web and subscription databases, Turnitin, with the industry's largest database of student papers, 50 million and counting, is the best source for detecting purchased papers, cheat sites, and student collusion. Over 50 percent of unoriginal work comes from other student papers.

Similarly, at QMIS, all secondary students are required to turn in every written assignment through Turnitin. "We have used it to teach students academic integrity and to stress the high importance we place on it," said Mr. Harri.

"At NUS, Turnitin is used to check originality and to deter plagiarism by raising students' awareness through the use of educational resources," says Mr Chandran. "Teachers generally create Turnitin accounts for their classes, provide the Class ID and password to their students and instruct them to submit their papers online for checking. Based on the Originality Reports, which in most cases are generated within 30 minutes, teachers are in a position to take action, if required."

In addition to the Originality Reports, Turnitin offers a Digital Assessment Suite. Educators can grade student work by adding editorial highlights, inline comments and editing marks directly onto the paper. Customizable grading rubrics can be created and implemented within minutes. The performance of students can also be tracked with statistics and graphs to identify areas of concern and improvement. Integration of the Digital Assessment Suite with popular Learning Management Systems such as Blackboard and Moodle is possible.

Turnitin continues to evolve as new features are often suggested by users. Singapore being a multi-cultural country would like to see support for Asian languages. Options to add multiple teachers to a Turnitin class to enable co-teachers and assistants to review submissions would also be useful. A fully functional peer editing system is a feature QMIS would value because when students do peer editing they do not have access to the editing palettes that teachers do.

Also on the wish list says Mr. Chandran "is an API to enable customers like us to directly write to specific parts of the applications. This will allow for better integration as users will only see one interface."

But both users agree that Turnitin has become an indispensable instructional service for their teachers and students. As Raul Harri puts it, "Generally speaking, Turnitin is a very useful tool!" For more details visit www.turnitin.com.