

The Moral and Pedagogical Argument Against Plagiarism-detecting Software

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There are hundreds of articles available regarding plagiarism-detecting software, but the decision to use that software comes down to one philosophical question: is it the college instructor's job to teach intellectual honesty and responsibility?

Yes it is.

Writing and thinking is about intellectual exploration. It is our fundamental responsibility to foster our students' critical thinking. Exploration can't come from a place of distrust. Intellectual freedom cannot begin from a place of fear. It is our job to teach students that they are entering a conversation about an issue or topic that has started well before them, that they are gathering the voices of others and adding their own, that their collection of research, even if their ideas have already been thought of, are unique because, as the writer, they are bringing those voices together in ways that no one else has.

It is our job to teach students how to do this, how to respect and cite others' ideas, and how to clearly show the reader that they are adding their own ideas. And it is our job to witness how our students' intellect grows through their writing by giving feedback on drafts.

Just like we may have pushed many students into silence through their fear of grammar mistakes, plagiarism-detecting software might add a new fear: fear that they have matched another's syntax, fear that a few words strung together is an exact match to someone else, and fear that they are going to be caught.

For those who say, "I'm just checking to see if you plagiarized before I read your paper. I'm more concerned with your cheating than what you have to say" you are saying they are guilty before they are innocent.

Besides these philosophical arguments, there are other reasons to be suspicious of plagiarism-detection software. First, it doesn't work well. There are false positive and false negatives. Commonly used phrases or typical academic constructions are flagged and plagiarized sections are overlooked, even if copy and pasted. We ask our students to write in an academic voice, but sounding too academic will make us suspicious.

Second, the software is expensive from ten to hundreds of thousands of dollars per year depending on the size of the college or university. Why not use that money to lower the class sizes? Why not train instructors ways to teach drafting or give assignments that are unique? Why not give instructors more time to talk to students about their writing, develop their writing, and honor their own voices?

Third, the software requires that the author's work has to be submitted before the teacher looks at it. They have to sometimes share personal information and click "I agree" upon uploading their work whether it is for the full database or the University's database. This says to the student "Let's check to see if you cheated before we discuss your ideas."

Fourth, plagiarism software such as Turnitin profits from their large database of student papers. As students are required to submit their work to the database, it's, as my colleague Joseph Harris says, "an anti-plagiarism tool that commits intellectual theft on a mass scale." The more papers they add to their database, the more they can argue the service is worth.

Some people cheat. Some students feel like plagiarism is their only option. But as an educational institution, it is our moral imperative is to create the environment for them to be comfortable as they grow intellectually; that we are looking for improvement, not perfection; that we can help them rebound from bad decisions by teaching them resilience and forgiveness. It is our job to teach them intellectual integrity, that we value what THEY have to say, and we are there to help, not punish. Especially during this pandemic climate, creating moments where we can teach resilience and earnest hard work rather than have students live in fear for every word that they write is paramount to who we should be as teachers.

There are many ways to create the environment and assignments that promote and honor students, their work, and their growth. Unique, thoughtful, and meaningful assignment design is the first step. Requiring research proposals, annotated bibliographies, early drafts, of the work, as well as conferencing with students makes it very difficult for students to plagiarize. Providing multiple opportunities for feedback, and time for peer input and requiring the writer to take the advice of their readers to revise will limit any proclivity to cheat. Create an atmosphere where students respect you, their peers, the work; make them want to do well in the class, but give them the space to grow from wrong decisions.

Those who study writing pedagogy, the scholars of the field who care about student writing and thinking, and the highly-principled faculty who teach ENGL110 are, collectively, the best at promoting academic honesty.

Works Consulted:

Council of Writing Program Administrators

http://wpacouncil.org/aws/CWPA/pt/sd/news_article/272555/PARENT/layout_details/false

Morris, Michael Sean and [Jesse Stommel](#), "A Guide for Resisting Edtech: the Case against Turnitin" <https://hybridpedagogy.org/resisting-edtech/>

Weber-Wulff, Debora. [*False Feathers: a Perspective on Academic Plagiarism*](#). Springer Media, Berlin. 2014.

Writing Across the Curriculum Clearinghouse

<https://wac.colostate.edu/resources/teaching/guides/plagiarism/>.

And if you are still not convinced read Turnitin's explanation of its "myths." They are not comforting. <https://www.turnitin.com/blog/top-15-misconceptions-about-turnitin>.