Assessment practices using Turnitin

Lisa Emerson
School of English and Media Studies
MASSEY UNIVERSITY
A questions of cultural practice

- Eagerly joined in Massey University’s Turnitin trial
- Somewhat disconcerted about the views I heard around me.
- Attended University of Michigan’s conference on “Originality, imitation and plagiarism” conference in 2005.
- An experience of cultural disorientation: A story
The parallels

• The rules of tipping, like the rules of using secondary sources in academic writing appear simple but are complex
• Both require deep cultural experience and judgement based on experience as well as “the rules”
• To those who are well enculturated the process seems obvious; to those who are not enculturated, the process seems complex, subtle and opaque.
A matter of intention

- In my story a willing person still made mistakes: out of confusion and out of the simple exhaustion that comes with working in an unfamiliar cultural context.
- Imagine if a system had been put in place that could track my every move in this matter…
- And that a major error could have led to failure to achieve goals, social dishonour, and humiliation
The dangers...

• Turnitin gives us the tool to do just that.
• If we see all errors as intentional transgressions, and hand out punishments without discrimination, we are in danger of rupturing the student-teacher relationship.
• Learning to use sources takes a long time.
• Simple instructions are not sufficient
Approaches to plagiarism

• We need to be aware of the huge range of **behaviours** which are described by the simple term “plagiarism” and **motives** for plagiarism.
• Plagiarism embraces behaviours as wide as fraud and unintentional misuse of sources.
• How do we determine exact definitions?
• Motivation is a critical factor.
Approaches cont…

- We should value the student-teacher relationship above our fears of plagiarism.
- We should start from the expectation that our students are well intentioned.
- Hall (2005) the plagiarism epidemic is a crisis of cynicism.
- Start with positive expectations and know that even our best students can make mistakes.
Approaches to plagiarism cont…

- First year students do not understand about plagiarism
- We must teach students *the process* of integrating secondary sources into their work.
- We must be prepared for lapses
The possibilities…

• If we disregard positive approaches and use Turnitin only to detect and punish, we are derelict in our duties as teachers.
• BUT if we see Turnitin as a teaching tool, then learning is enhanced and supported.
• The detection device allows students to learn more quickly and more actively.
• The detection process need not be feared but seen as an opportunity to learn more, faster.
Examples

- In my science class: teach process and then use Turnitin to teach students
- Share the colour coded report and rewrite.
- Teacher-student relationship is strengthened.
- The student has learned something new.
- I don’t allow students to access the reports themselves: sharing the report gives stronger learning opportunities
Avoiding a context for plagiarism

• Plagiarism-proof assignments
• Many conventional forms of assessment encourage fraudulent behaviour. These include:
  • Using the same assessment or topics across cohorts
  • Designing assignments with discussion points located completely in easily accessible places
  • Literature reviews (even in disguise) for undergraduate students.
Examples

• An essay on the pros and cons of biofuel
  VS

• A report considering the ethical issues around biofuel and report to the Minister of Science and technology on whether NZ should invest in the production of biofuels
The distinction (Lynn Z. Bloom)

- “outsider” assignments: students just have to sum up/reshape the views of experts.
- “insider: assignments: students have to form a judgement of their own, which values the student’s ideas within the context of the ideas of others.
Reshaping the example

- You are a member of a lobby group who has been asked to make a presentation to a select committee of parliament, on whether New Zealand should consider investing in the production of biofuel. Write a speech for your presentation to the select committee which argues for or against the investment on ethical grounds. The speeches to the committee will be published in a parliamentary record, so be careful to attribute sources carefully.
The strengths of Turnitin

• I see Turnitin as a very valuable tool, however…
• Its value is entirely dependant on the attitudes and skills of the teacher.
• It detects clear cases of fraud
• It is a valuable teaching tool
• We should also consider other issues (eg assessment methods) in our task of teaching students how to use secondary sources effectively.