Putting a percentage on honesty: a pragmatic, ethics-based response to teaching in the age of Turnitin®

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This paper draws on my ongoing work on the development of a practical ethics of academic honesty. Turnitin® and similar plagiarism detection tools such as Urkund® are disruptive technologies which have fundamentally changed teaching practices within universities. Plagiarism detection software are now compulsory technologies within many Australian universities, making discussions about their use core to curricula design. The use of these technologies and interpretation of their outputs is marketed as seemingly straightforward however the reality is not necessarily so. Student assignments submitted through Turnitin® result in the production of a ‘content comparison’ score presented as a percentage which is provided to unit coordinators and sometimes students. This is useful as an indicator of potential plagiarism in an assignment but is not an indicator of plagiarism itself. This division is often confusing for both staff and students who come to rely on the percentage score as a direct indicator of the extent of plagiarism. Students find it difficult to understand what level of score is enough to tip them over the edge into plagiarism (Dahl, 2007) – a confusion shared by academic staff (Bruton and Childers, 2015). Some universities allow students to see their Turnitin® score and then re-upload their assignments with plagiarism levels reduced – a problematic practice teaching students to write to the Turnitin® score rather than principles of good academic writing (Jameson, 2009). Text matching software has also been critiqued because it has become the institutional antidote for academic dishonesty but does not address ghost writing and other types of cheating that are harder to catch (Brabazon, 2015; Bruton and Childers, 2015). From an ethical perspective it is perceived as a breach of the principle of trust and consequently several authors have called for the use of Turnitin® to be abandoned and replaced by approaches which variously refocus learning and teaching on trust, ‘authorial identity’ and skill-building (Brabazon, 2015; Townley and Parsell, 2004).

This paper uses ethical theory to reflect on my own experiences as Faculty lead for academic honesty and a review of current literature on text matching software. I propose a new ethics of academic honesty based on the concept of virtue ethics. This approach does not do away with Turnitin® but develops a more nuanced approach to its use which encourages both students and staff to draw on their own academic judgements to interpret its scores. My presentation starts a conversation by sketching out a practical approach to the implementation of this approach.

References

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