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Globalizing Plagiarism & Writing Assessment: A Case Study of Turnitin

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This article examines the plagiarism detection service Turnitin.com's recent expansion into international writing assessment technologies. Examining Turnitin's rhetorics of plagiarism alongside scholarship on plagiarism detection illuminates Turnitin's efforts to globalize definitions of and approaches to plagiarism. If successful in advancing their positions on plagiarism, Turnitin's products could be proffered as a global model for writing assessment. The proceedings of a Czech Republic conference partially sponsored by Turnitin demonstrate troubling constructions of the "student plagiarist." They demonstrate, too, a binary model of west and nonwest that stigmatizes nonwestern institutions and students. These findings support an ongoing attention to the global cultural work of corporate plagiarism detection and assessment.

*There is nothing immutable about the cheating culture that now exists in many educational settings worldwide. On the contrary, we know the values of students can be changed when institutions invest in the right strategies. This has happened in areas related to diversity, gender relations, and substance abuse – both in the U.S. and overseas. So far, though, promoting integrity has not commanded adequate attention or resources. This session will explore key drivers of the cheating culture and outline what it will take to **dismantle that culture**. It will examine cases where **education institutions have changed how young people think and behave** – and how these lessons can be applied to promoting integrity.*

– go.turnitin.com, "3rd Annual Plagiarism Education Week" (emphasis added)

In the keynote address at the 2016 Computers and Writing conference, Jeff Grabill argued automated writing technologies need to be at the forefront of disciplinary conversations and actions within the field of composition and rhetoric. His speech marks a clear exigence: Globally, millions of students are subjected to writing technologies that writing experts did not design. Grabill argued disciplinary action is urgent because "students whose community and home languages are not mainstream are being given bad robots"; because Turnitin is the most popular writing technology deployed globally; and because so many of these programs advance "writing as a fundamentally individualized activity involving a student, a computer, and an algorithm" (2016). Popular automated assessment programs have been decried by writing experts because they "align with the narrow view of writing that was dominant in the more recent era of testing and accountability, a view that is increasingly thrown into question. New technologies... are for the most part being used to reinforce old practices" (Vojak et al., 2011, p. 99). Further, these programs fail to use technology that promotes an understanding of core concepts writing experts believe about writing: "that it is a socially-situated practice; that it is a functionally and formally diverse activity; and that it is increasingly multimodal" (Vojak et al, 2011, p. 108).

Grabill's keynote emerges in a kairotic moment in higher education, as for-profit assessment companies like Turnitin expand their global reach and begin to deploy "formative" and "summative" writing assessment programs. We adopt NCTE's definition of formative assessment: "the lived, daily embodiment of a teacher's desire to refine practice based on a keener understanding of current levels of student performance, undergirded by the teacher's knowledge of possible paths of student development within the discipline and of pedagogies that support such development" (NCTE, 2013b, p. 2). Summative assessment, then, for the purposes of our framework, refers to "final evaluative judgment" of student writing (NCTE, 2013b, p. 2). However, we should mention that Turnitin's use of these terms does not appear to align with NCTE's definitions.

Turnitin's artificial intelligence for writing assessment, a program called "adaptive technology," is now marketed as a cutting-edge product for assessing student writing. The "Turnitin Scoring Engine" website claims the platform can "Us[e] your previously-graded sample essays...[to identify] patterns to grade new writing like your own instructors would. Give the Engine a set of samples, and it will accurately score an unlimited number of new essays quickly and reliably" ("Turnitin Scoring Engine," n.d)[1]. This scoring engine offers to mimic the behavior of teachers by using algorithmic technology to analyze a teacher's prompts and grading comments to produce an evaluative response to student writing ("Features: Overview," n.d). Thus, Turnitin's "intelligent assessment" alleges to grade papers like humans can on categories of "lexical, syntactic, and stylistic features of writing, such as word choice and genre conventions. It uses these features to assess content mastery and genre awareness ("Turnitin Scoring Engine," n.d). According to Grabill, such corporate assessment programs are influencing vast student populations—as Turnitin boasts, "30 million" students—across the globe ("Homepage," n.d).

Turnitin's success in the U.S. is deeply connected to corporate influence in U.S. universities, heavy reliance on contingent labor, a culture of standardized testing, hegemonic cultural expectations about writing and authorship, and the complex web of material factors that shape writing assessment (Chatterjee & Maira, 2014; Giroux, 2007; Herrington & Moran, 2012; Vie, 2013a; Vojak et al, 2011). We have three central concerns in this article: Turnitin's institutionalized plagiarism detection, its move to writing assessment, and its global expansion. Prominent and respected organizations in the field of composition and rhetoric, including the CCCC Intellectual Property Committee [CCCC-IP], the Council of Writing Program Administrators [CWPA], and the National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE], have aligned themselves against the detrimental pedagogical practices advanced by Turnitin (CCCC-IP, 2006; CWPA, 2003; NCTE, 2013a). Of particular concern is that PDSs demonize nonnative English speakers and "unwittingly

construct international students as plagiarists” (Hayes & Introna, 2005, p. 55). This important scholarship asks the discipline to pay particular attention to the rhetorical construction of the student-plagiarist by PDSs, and the values ascribed to plagiarism, authorship, and intellectual property. Additionally, now that Turnitin offers an assessment platform, plagiarism detection technology must be understood in conjunction with such platforms, as they are now (or will be) packaged and sold together.

This move toward “scalable” assessment, as Grabill suggested, has global implications; from Turnitin’s inception, it has linked integrity, values, and honesty to its global community of users:

Turnitin.com is currently helping high school teachers and university professors everywhere bring academic integrity back into their classrooms...We encourage any educator who values academic honesty to help us take a stand against online cheating and become a member of the Turnitin.com educational community. (“About Us,” Wayback Machine, March 31, 2001)

Although the company now adopts more nuanced rhetorical approaches to sell their product, this original language is likely still familiar to those who teach, work, and study in educational institutions. This familiarity is part of its insidiousness—it situates instructors (presumed to be members of the “Turnitin.com educational community”) as preservers of ethical and moral standards, positioned antagonistically against students, and assumed to be consistent across institutions and geographic locations. This language also foreshadows the global initiatives that the company would pursue years later. In 2015, Turnitin’s website claimed that the program was “[u]sed by over 1.6 million instructors at more than 10,000 institutions in 135 countries, [and] is the world’s leading cloud-based software for evaluating student work” (“Features: Overview,” n.d). In the year since we began writing this article, the number of institutions has jumped from 10,000 to 15,000 (“Homepage,” n.d).

The company now globally markets its plagiarism detection program as an aid to overworked teachers by offering services that 1) “streamline” grading, 2) offer a solution to “deteriorating” student ethics, and 3) serve as a placement/evaluation program for newly matriculated students (Janssens & Tummers, 2015, p. 12; “What We Offer,” n.d; “Why Turnitin,” n.d). The “Global Effectiveness” page on Turnitin’s website boasts the company “impact[s] levels of unoriginal writing and promote[s] the use of online feedback globally,” and the “Third-Party Academic Research” page draws from peer-reviewed articles from all over the world (2015). The company grants “Global Innovation Awards” to educators and technology administrators “who demonstrate a commitment to academic integrity, excellence in enhancing student learning, or champion the innovative and effective use of Turnitin to support learning at their school or institution,” offering recipients “professional opportunities to become content contributors and be leaders in the Turnitin community”; the 2015 awardees were chosen from 400 nominations in 50 countries (“Global Effectiveness,” 2015).

In the context of Turnitin’s globalization, we ask which countries, regions, and peoples are being defined as having correct or incorrect values of authorship. In invoking the rhetoric of globalization, we find Scholte’s conception of globalization as internationalization, liberalization, universalization, westernization, and respatialization to be useful (2000, p. 2). We focus specifically on universalization and westernization, as these seem to be the primary features of Turnitin’s global rhetorics, where a “culture” of plagiarism requires intervention so that “integrity” can be restored worldwide through the implementation of values that are presumed to be universal but in reality reassert western hegemony. How is the student plagiarist being discursively constructed? What are the implications of these constructions as Turnitin rolls out its assessment platform?

Methods

To attend to these questions, we first offer an overview of Turnitin’s plagiarism detection software, mapping the company’s movement towards writing assessment. Then, we situate Turnitin within disciplinary critiques of plagiarism detection services (Howard, 1999; Purdy, 2005; Vie, 2013a & 2013b). Throughout, we draw from the proceedings of the biennial academic “Plagiarism Across Europe and Beyond” conference (2013, 2015), building on Poe and Inoue’s work on racial formations related to standardized test scores to ask “what writing constructs reward which group of students” (Poe & Inoue, 2012, p. 358). We conclude by extending Grabill’s call to focus collective disciplinary efforts on interrogating corporate writing assessment platforms, stressing the exigency for critical awareness of how PDSs such as Turnitin are constructing the student-plagiarist globally, with the acknowledgment that binary divisions of west/nonwest obscure the heterogeneity of both.

While we do not suggest that Turnitin’s sponsorship means direct endorsement all of the policies and ideas that were presented at these conferences, we do argue that the presentations in these proceedings align with and reflect the rhetoric the company has adopted. Thus, this article draws out linkages between PDSs and the knowledge production around plagiarism and assessment happening worldwide in sites where such programs invest money. Turnitin’s direct support of this conference is notable particularly because many presentations promote PDSs in diverse geographic regions. These arguments then lay the groundwork for plagiarism and assessment standardization via automated protocols like Turnitin’s.

Our coding and interpretation approach, because it is contextualized within disciplinary critiques of Turnitin and PDSs more broadly, can be characterized as Values Coding, wherein our orientation towards rhetorical constructions of the student-plagiarist serve as a lens of analysis (Saldaña, 2009, p. 7). Following grounded theory methods, we broke the texts into small units of information and

developed codes to describe “word[s] or short phrase[s] that symbolically assign a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 3). We categorized the list of codes into themes, then “abstract[ed] out beyond the codes and themes to the larger meaning of the data,” linking to and contextualizing the findings within existing literature (Creswell, 2012, p. 187). Finally, we classified the codes into larger themes, or “broad units of information aggregated to form a common idea” (Creswell, 2012, p. 186; methods adapted from Kannan, 2014).

Our analysis revealed three primary rhetorical strategies for advancing Turnitin—and PDSs more broadly—within the conference proceedings as services that should be implemented not only at institutional and state levels, but across the whole European Union and globally: (1) Plagiarism detection represents social improvement and formation of model, modernized, idealized, western students; (2) Plagiarism is a national concern with ramifications for citizenship, economy, and character; and (3) Approaches to plagiarism detection need to be standardized and aligned with western institutions and states; public/private partnerships and linked state policies are the best way to do so. In the following sections of this article, “Critiques of Plagiarism Detection Services” and “Turnitin, Assessment, & Globalization,” we draw from our findings.

Critiques of Plagiarism Detection Services

Scholars in composition and rhetoric have long worked to overturn the individualistic constructions of authorship and stigmatization of student-plagiarists advanced by PDSs like Turnitin. What are the implications as Turnitin expands across the globe? How do these definitions of authors and plagiarists construct different student populations and geographic regions?

Conflict surrounding plagiarism often relates to definitional tension. In this study, we adopt the CWPA’s understanding of plagiarism: “[i]n an instructional setting, plagiarism occurs when a writer deliberately uses someone else’s language, ideas, or other original (not common-knowledge) material without acknowledging its source” (2003). However, the word *plagiarism* also has quite violent connotations; its Latin roots are tied to words like “stealing” and “rape,” which links the word and its history to ideologies of property, theft, and bodily violation (Howard, 2000, pp. 479-483). Rhetorics of plagiarism are often linked to “metaphors of gender, weakness, collaboration, disease, adultery, rape, and property that communicate a fear of violating sexual as well as textual boundaries” (Howard, 2000, p. 474; for an extension of the metaphor, see also Robillard, 2009; Vidali, 2011). Scholars contend PDSs advance singular conceptions of authorship (Howard, 1999; Vie, 2013a); create an adversarial relationship between students and teachers (NCTE, 2013a); sign over intellectual property rights to the company’s database and/or force instructors to use these programs (Canzonetta, 2014, p. 39; Purdy, 2005, p. 278); and mask deeper pedagogical and political economic concerns by offering a “corporate solution” to teaching problems (Marsh, 2004, p. 428). PDSs arose as a technological response to catching violators who, according to the creators of Turnitin, were increasing with alarming rapidity as students began to do more and more research online (Vie, 2013b). Indeed, in the “Plagiarism Across Europe and Beyond” proceedings, the availability and globalization of digital information is cited as a reason for the rise of plagiarism, along with the “deteriorating ethical values of students” (Janssens & Tummers, 2015, p. 12).

This emphasis on integrity and the specter of waning values masks Turnitin’s cooptation of students’ intellectual property. Indeed, scholars and writing teachers are not the only groups to take issue with Turnitin; students and parents in the U.S. have led efforts to both petition against and sue the company, citing concerns about intellectual property. In a 2007 case, students at McLean High School in McLean, VA, and Desert Vista High School in Phoenix, AZ, filed a lawsuit against Turnitin (Zimmerman, 2007). The events that led up to the eventual filing of the lawsuit in March 2007 began in September of 2006, when a group of students at McLean High School circulated a petition to oppose the mandatory submission of their work to a newly adopted Turnitin.com: “[t]he petition, which garnered 1,190 student signatures of the approximately 1800 students that attend the school requested that the mandate to submit work to Turnitin be removed and that an ‘opt-out’ option be allowed” (Zimmerman, 2007). While students did not win the case, their work to contest Turnitin’s use of student intellectual property, and the call for the student choice to “opt-out” of Turnitin (mirroring movements to “opt-out” of standardized testing) drew attention to the negative impact of PDSs, and the corporatization of education more broadly, on students. Unfortunately, neither these lawsuits nor repeated criticisms of PDSs have impacted Turnitin’s widespread adoption by educational institutions, but the company has shifted its marketing rhetoric from “catching plagiarists” to “meet[ing] exigencies” in our field to both deflect criticism and respond to the labor crisis in higher education (Vie, 2013b).

In the current iteration of the website, the word *plagiarism* only appears on the main page twice (in smaller text than other language on the page) under subheadings; this is a departure from its early website iterations, which foreground anti-plagiarism zeal (“About Us,” Wayback Machine, March 31, 2001; “Homepage,” n.d). Despite Turnitin’s move towards broader writing assessment technologies, it still uses problematic plagiarism detection software. Its plagiarism detection “tool” can only provide students and teachers with a report containing percentages of text that corresponds to various sources on the Internet, sources in its database, and periodicals, journals and publications, and cannot infallibly identify plagiarism (“FAQ,” n.d; Purdy, 2009, pp. 65-67). With Turnitin’s increased presence in global writing assessment technology, PDSs become more problematic when we consider the effects they have on nonnative English speakers. Hayes and Introna (2005) suggest PDSs may inhibit some ELL students who are trying to participate in the writing process, but are stymied in their attempts because the detective component of the programs “limit[s] the opportunities and time that students have to learn how to write in the new western, not to mention subject specific, educational context” (p. 67). The use of PDSs at the onset of the composing process implies students have higher stakes for writing

in new cultural contexts. Without having the chance to learn about new practices in those environments, students are discouraged from taking risks, “experiment[ing],” or “observ[ing]” (p. 67).

Current PDS platforms, then, are shaping educational space so that students are castigated for departing from Edited American English (EAE) and western ideals about singular authorship; as Introna and Hayes (2011) explained,

plagiarist practices are often the outcome of many complex and culturally situated influences . . . [E]ducators need to appreciate these differing cultural assumptions if they are to act in an ethical manner when responding to issues of plagiarism among international students. (p. 215).

Originality/singularity is not globally accepted as the primary theory of authorship; not all students are asked to produce original work, and imitation can often be a staple in some writing processes (Hayes & Introna, 2005, p. 59). Thus, Turnitin’s emphasis on originality/singularity elides a complex cultural understanding of plagiarism and authorship.

These underlying ideologies of original/singular authorship were laid bare and explicitly connected to culture in Turnitin’s “Plagiarism Education Week” event “Copy/Paste/Culture.” Held April 20-24, 2015, the conference was marketed as investigating “how current global trends are affecting our values, especially those related to education, and proposing strategies on how we can address these challenges. #integrity2015.” The conference focused on how to dismantle the “culture of plagiarism,” variously described as a “mindset” of narcissism and entitlement (Hoyt, 2015). As the conference description shows, “our values” are presumed to align with western constructions of authorship. Indeed, something as banal and familiar as the hashtag “integrity”—a word that students and teachers are likely used to seeing mobilized in discussions of plagiarism—immediately connects intellectual property to character, and by extension, plagiarism to poor character.

The “Plagiarism Across Europe and Beyond” conference proceedings echo these stark character judgments, and explicitly situate them in terms of a geographic binary of west and nonwest, including designations of “high trust” versus “low trust” societies and populations (Burkatzki, Platje, & Gerstlberger, 2013, p. 171). In this framework, it becomes the duty of the west (and PDSs) to counter tolerance towards plagiarism, export knowledge, and modernize culture. Through this mapping of nonwest, the proceedings constitute and consolidate geographic sites for corporate/state-level plagiarism detection intervention, with the assumption that Turnitin possesses the correct values of authorship. Howard (1999) explained such rhetorics are largely related to archaic constructions of plagiarism, and don’t allow much space for cultural variance in writing processes:

For the past century and more, [western] academic textual values have been relatively unified, ascribing four properties to the “true” author: autonomy, originality, proprietorship, and morality...The writer who is not autonomous and original demonstrates an absence of morality, earns the label “plagiarist” and deserves punishment. (p. 58)

In the remainder of this section, we identify and deconstruct moments in Turnitin’s conferences when these notions of authorship were upheld by presenters, and discuss the ideological implications of such ideas.

Following Hesford and Schell (2008), we aim to engage critically with the idea of nationhood by examining the way particular nations—and student bodies within nations—are described within the conference. We do so with recognition that the concept of “the west” is a monolithic consolidation of multifarious languages, cultures, communities, and histories—and “the west” is being defined in very specific ways in these proceedings, erasing indigenous, diasporic, and non-standard American English-speaking students in the process. In a presentation on cultural understandings of plagiarism, “the west” was defined as “mainly English speaking countries: UK, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand,” while “the east” was defined as “particularly Confucian Heritage Cultures: China, Japan, Singapore, and Vietnam” (Gow, 2013, p. 27). By linking “the west” to the English language, and distinguishing it from “Confucian Heritage Cultures,” this presentation not only delineates nations along racial and cultural markers, but also suggests that the English language and non-Confucian cultural values are inherently more ethical. Further, in an article on South Asian MBA students studying in the UK at Cardiff School of Management, India was folded into the “eastern” region, and the MBA students’ “academic malpractice” was cited as a problem which parallels the university’s “similar issues with other cultures” (Wellman & Fallon, 2013, p. 71). Thus, “the east” can be understood to include international students attending “western” universities. In the process, populations including South Asians who grew up the UK are erased, as are complexities and distinctions within and across “nonwestern” cultures.

Further, the “west” is described as practicing appropriate and punitive measures in dealing with plagiarism, and distinguished from Eastern European countries, where “plagiarism is not considered to be a big problem”—an accusation that is duly framed as problematic and as a potential market (Foltýnek, Rybička, & Demoliou, 2013, p. 127). For example, Lithuania was described as a corrupt, post-Soviet country with a “high level of tolerance toward cheating” (Novelskaite, & Pušetaite, 2013, p. 238). Similar arguments were made about “developing” countries including Brazil, where cultural knowledge about plagiarism was framed as “rudimentary” (Krokosz & Putvinskis 2013, p. 281), and Nigeria, where problems were cited in a “student plagiarism culture”—the subtext being plagiarism is not taken seriously or punished appropriately, impacting students’ “experience when they study

elsewhere” (Orim, Borg, & Awala-Ale 2013, p. 66). This totalizing attitude toward academic integrity stands at odds with localized, context-specific understandings of plagiarism and pedagogies of authorship.

Drawing on these geographic delineations, the conference presenters advocated the global applicability of PDSs, and outlined the social impacts of plagiarism. For example, in a presentation about Lithuania, the speakers connected plagiarism and the social ills of late capitalism:

Plagiarism is not only an academic issue. It concerns **public interest at large**... it discredits the acknowledgments given by higher education institutions to their graduates, **diminishes public trust** in professional qualifications and social institutions in general... [plagiarism can] **incite society’s feeling of social injustice** and, in radical cases, **cynicism and alienation among its members** (Novelskaite, & Pušetaite, 2013, p. 237, emphasis added).

This direct correlation between plagiarism, trust, cynicism, and alienation is extended into economic success in another presentation: “The Academic Integrity Maturity Model (AIMM) was developed to measure the level of academic integrity maturity for particular country...**the more mature the academic integrity in particular country, the richer the country**” (Foltýnek & Surovec, 2015, p. 121, emphasis added). Conversely, infractions in academic integrity are directly linked to long-term unemployment and rising crime, thus linking poverty to moral failure, and moral failure to plagiarism. As one speaker noted, “if there is high long-term unemployment rate in [a] particular country, people tend to be less satisfied with their lives, crime increases and people give up an honest way of life and tend to dishonesty including academic integrity breaches” (p. 129).

Complementing this emphasis on character, citizenship, and economics, proceedings celebrated courageousness as the goal of academic work, as is demonstrated in a keynote address:

Courage is an element of character that allows learners to commit to the quality of their education by holding themselves and their fellow learners to the highest standards of academic integrity even when doing so involves risk of negative consequences or reprisal. Being courageous means acting in accordance with one’s convictions. (Bretag, 2015, p. 6)

In adopting this moral agenda in a keynote presentation, a clear tone was established for the 2015 conference: Plagiarism isn’t a pedagogical issue, it’s about virtue. In framing plagiarism as a problem that is bound to economics, citizenship, morality, and integrity, these presenters created a need for the solution Turnitin purports to offer.

These alarming links drawn between plagiarism, integrity, character, and geographical location have deep implications in light of Turnitin’s global reach and venture into writing assessment. Turnitin is positioning itself to become the global plagiarism police. In promoting western writing values internationally, programs like Turnitin are poised to standardize writing globally in alignment with EAE and western conceptions of authorship, which reinforces harmful and ideologies that affect writing teachers’ authority to determine our pedagogies and assess our students’ work.

Turnitin, Assessment, and Globalization

Turnitin’s venture into writing assessment is troubling. As we have seen, although Turnitin boasts that their new algorithmic technology is adaptive (i.e, artificially intelligent) and can accommodate each teacher’s behavior and grading practices, the conference proceedings suggest a move toward promoting consistency and standardization in students’ writing practices, and ascribing negative character value to those who plagiarize based on a hierarchical, colonizing, and fallacious west/nonwest binary.

Turnitin’s latest projects involving adaptive technology offer “formative” and “summative” assessment platforms tailored to the “needs of 21st century classrooms” (“Features: Overview,” n.d). However, the company’s long-term use of an algorithm to carry out its text-matching services stands at odds with its efforts to persuade the public that its pedagogy and formative assessment are in students’ and teachers’ interests (Turner, 2014). “Intelligent assessment,” as Turnitin’s marketing calls it, claims to incorporate formative and summative writing assignments “with a range of feedback tools, including automated feedback, originality check, online grading and peer review,” and offers “a solution that improves student writing, saves instructors’ time and enhances the quality of feedback to student and provides institutions with insights into how students learn over time” (“Lightside Labs,” n.d). In order to sell this “adaptable technology,” Turnitin claims its “Scoring Engine” will use an algorithm that is trained to “[use] your previously-graded sample essays, [to] identify[y] patterns to grade new writing like your own instructors would. Give the Engine a set of samples, and it will accurately score an unlimited number of new essays quickly and reliably” (“What We Offer,” n.d). “Adaptation,” here, displaces composition and rhetoric’s arguments for situated pedagogical approaches with a neoliberal rhetoric of efficiency, adaptability, and individual choice. Turnitin’s rhetoric, a clear response to scholarship in writing assessment that urges local and contextualized assessment (Barlow et al., 2007), alleges it can analyze teachers’ prompts and comments on students’ papers the way a teacher would 90% of the time (“Lightside Labs,” n.d).

Formative assessment necessitates that teachers respond to students’ needs, personalities, struggles, and strengths; and get to know them apart from their writing. Revision Assistant, a new feature of Turnitin’s software, claims to offer formative assessment and

is meant to provide holistic responses to student work. In practice, it produces a signal score that shows students how their teachers would score their work and provides feedback about how to achieve their desired scores in the areas of “Analysis, Focus, Language, Evidence” (“Revision Assistant,” n.d). Turnitin described an earlier model of this program as an aid to “marginalized students” who “take great advantage of this student-driven process, bringing Revision Assistant’s feedback to the teacher and proactively asking for help” (“Lightside Labs,” n.d). Through Revision Assistant, Turnitin offers what Condon (2013) explicitly cautioned against: “systems of writing . . . subject to the fallacy of surrogation—the substitution of a statistical artifact—a number—in place of the need for complex information” (p. 101). While Revision Assistant’s more substantive feedback on analysis, focus, language, and evidence might seem less alarming than Turnitin’s plagiarism detection scoring algorithm, a machine is still assigning students a signal score based on an arbitrary scale to convey information about students’ literate and rhetorical abilities.

Automated assessment platforms Turnitin offers also allow institutions unprecedented levels of surveillance over their students’ work. The website boasts that the program is an opportunity for teachers to garner a composite image of how all their students are writing, which is an appealing offer to those who engage in program-wide assessment. Zwagerman (2008) claimed that, through comparing and viewing thousands of pages of student work, reports of student work lend themselves to “the panoptic logic that a structure of examination and documentation does not preclude individuality but rather accounts for it and renders it intelligible” (p. 691). Students are watched to ensure their originality and individuality, which is then legitimized by the machine that polices them. Another problem with PDSs—which becomes even more serious as PDSs venture into assessment—is the unfettered access teachers, institutions, and governments gain to student data. Spellmeyer (1996) has long argued that, rather than offering unlimited data to agencies that may not prioritize pedagogy and best practices for students, we need to

guard against . . . any effort to exclude programs, departments, and universities from the collecting and interpreting of data on their own classes, since the parties that control the spin put on this information will have the last word in every forum.
(p. 180)

Thus, it is important to critically interrogate Turnitin’s rhetorics of formative assessment, which obscure the company’s cooptation of student data and potential to undermine writing program goals.

Furthermore, Deborah Harris Moore (2013) contends that the fear caused by surveillance can be disempowering to students: “Using fear as a deterrent . . . is unethical because it forces students into behaviors based on their perceived powerlessness. . . [S]tudents may see [this technology] as an all-seeing, determining, and surveying mechanism” (pp. 110-111). After the McLean High School lawsuit, this culture of surveillance now appears to be taken for granted by many students, who, according to instructors, view Turnitin as either an “arbitrary hoop” to jump through to submit their papers, or as a “psychological deterrent” and “authority” on plagiarism (Canzonetta, 2014, pp. 21-33). Turnitin’s database was initially designed for this purpose—to deter students from plagiarizing by invoking its vast, national collection of student writing (Zimmerman, 2007).

Beyond serving as a deterrent to plagiarism, Turnitin has seized the opportunity to exploit the current labor crisis in higher education^[2]. As Herrington and Moran (2012) noted, when human labor is in crisis, we often turn toward technology to mitigate human stress and loss of funding to alleviate insufficient staffing (p. 220). Indeed, the company has positioned Revision Assistant as an ally and resource for overworked teachers, arguing that it “takes many of the challenges of continuous feedback out of the teaching equation, such as the pressure on instructors to provide consistent, timely feedback for all of their students. . . teachers are provided with a better picture of each student’s progress when making a final assessment” (“Features: Overview,” n.d). By offering a tool to lighten workloads and the pressures of promptly returning students’ work with feedback (“Customers,” n.d), the company appeals to administrators whose instructional staffs are either overburdened or understaffed; for those who may not share composition and rhetoric’s critiques of PDSs, Turnitin is proffered as a solution to the complex problem that grading writing presents. The artificial intelligence Turnitin is testing claims to be for students, and for teachers who need more time; it instead appears to be a band-aid for upper-level university administrators who would rather put money into a technological “panacea,” as Marsh (2004) wrote, than contend with hiring more faculty. Instead of learning about students, Turnitin’s formative assessment model learns teachers and their behaviors, assesses generic writing processes, and supplies an automated response to a perceived problem. Considering the contingent positions that many writing instructors occupy, and the money-saving imperative of corporatizing universities, Turnitin’s formative assessment model poses a major threat for agency and autonomy within writing programs. The data produced through this program could have serious implications for instructors’ job security if students aren’t achieving scores administrations approve of—scores that could be set and established by Turnitin.

What, then, are the implications of these moves in light of Turnitin’s expansion abroad? Rhetorical links between adaptability, assessment, plagiarism, and pedagogy are visible in the “Plagiarism Across Europe and Beyond” conference proceedings, and Turnitin is cited by many presenters as a positive pedagogical tool that offers opportunities for teachers to craft formative assessment pedagogies that directly result in lowered instances of plagiarism. Indeed, formative assessment is implicitly used to justify the use of Turnitin (Meacheam & Faifua, 2015, p. 45). Our analysis of the conference proceedings reveals a particular emphasis on rhetorics of integrity and consistency, linking western values of authorship with standardization across institutions and geographies. Of particular note is a reference in a keynote address to the monetary investment (€ 300,000) the European Union designated for the project *Impact of Policies for Plagiarism in Higher Education Across Europe* (IPPHEAE), conducted between

2010 and 2013. In this discussion, presenters asked:

What impact did the project have on national and institutional policies for academic dishonesty and plagiarism? What evidence is there that policies for academic integrity in higher education in different parts of Europe are fit for purpose? How can institutions be sure their policies are effective and being applied consistently? What more needs to be done? (Glendinning, 2015, p. 7)

Through this neoliberal rhetoric of fitness (Dingo, 2012), we see a clear call for uniformity in coping with plagiarism—a pedagogical problem that, as composition and rhetoric scholarship shows, is highly contextual and occurs on a “continuum,” not in a vacuum (Sutherland-Smith, 2008, p. 8). Similarly, presentations in both 2013 and 2015 advocated worldwide implementation of an “ANTIPLAG system” that has been adopted in Slovakia and is now enforced there by law:

the SK ANTIPLAG system (a central repository of theses and dissertations, a plagiarism detection system, a comparative corpus, local repositories of theses and dissertations) started routine operation after a preparatory phase. Pursuant to the amendment to the Higher Education Act from October 2009, the use of SK ANTIPLAG... is **mandatory** for all Slovak higher education institutions operating under the Slovak legal order. It is an unparalleled and unprecedented implementation of such a system on a **national level**. A relevant milestone has been built not only on the Slovak scale, **but also worldwide** (Kravjar, 2015, p. 147, emphasis added).

A policy in which PDS use is mandated by the state is ideal for companies like Turnitin; the presenters urged such a model to be implemented worldwide. In an article on the Czech Republic PDSs are defined as “a unique solution in Europe and very likely in the world” (Kravjar & Noge, 2013, p. 212). Similarly, in a presentation on plagiarism in Cyprus, concerns are raised about “the extent of plagiarism practiced by students worldwide” (Kokkinaki, Iacovidou, & Demoliou, 2013, p. 192). Not only does this state-mandated plagiarism check globally advance models of authorship that are compatible with the use of PDSs, but it also allies such companies with powerful governmental agencies to which institutions of higher education are often beholden.

Turnitin applies its rhetorics of consistency to plagiarism policies as well as formative assessment components, claiming that “a consistency of approach” for using PDSs as formative tools should be implemented on a wider scale. Conference presentations suggest the need to change students themselves, and the need for a strict institutional culture:

Perhaps a **consistency of allowing formative use of originality checking systems...** might produce the needed **behavioural changes** needed in our student populations. This is presuming that any institution has a **backbone of policy and practice that supports action** in relation to plagiarism. (Meacheam & Faifua, 2015, p. 47, emphasis added)

Such rhetorics of consistency are a growth strategy for corporate assessment in the context of neoliberal globalization. The “behavioral changes” these scholars and teachers promote (and seek to enforce with legal measures) aim to quell critique and breed a compliant, submissive population of students. Once students sign over their intellectual property to PDSs, an agency that legally enforces such a system would create ideal conditions for assessment companies. Standardizing writing processes, practices, and assessment sets the stage to minimize or eliminate any opposition to their products from scholars and teachers.

Interestingly, in the proceedings, calls for consistency are paired with presentations calling for contextual understandings of plagiarism, incorrectly suggesting that the conference represents a fair debate and echoing Turnitin’s uptake of disciplinary critiques of PDSs: “Every single instance of plagiarism is unique and requires careful examination of all the circumstances and facts, but universal standards on the systematic level also should exist and serve as a prevention of plagiarism and other types of research misconduct” (Vasiljeviene, & Jurkūnaitė, 2015, p. 164). However, these gestures mean little when set alongside the framing of the conference and its broad geographical consolidation, “across Europe and beyond.” Considering Turnitin’s partial sponsorship of this conference, paired with their new initiative to implement formative assessment technology, we have to consider that rhetorics of standardization and consistency are beneficial for Turnitin’s business model, and promises of contextual specificity will be necessary in order to persuade fields like composition and rhetoric to adopt its assessment program.

Conclusion

Scholarship in composition and rhetoric defines plagiarism as a highly contextual, case-by-case pedagogical issue. Turnitin’s assessment platform could be used to execute standardized assessment of writing “across Europe and beyond,” as the conference title indicates. Corporate PDSs, thus, have the potential to standardize student writing itself, potentially on a global scale. Turnitin has set the stage for and monopolized the plagiarism detection market—the end results of which are promoting singular, original conceptions of authorship globally. Now more than ever, it is time for rhetoricians and compositionists to “use our own pedagogies and technologies...[and] fix our gaze on the millions of learners who are being taught with technologies made by people who know very little about writing and learning to write” (Grabill, 2016). Scholars within the field have begun to develop new writing technologies, such as Eli Review, a program created by writing experts—Grabill, Hart-Davidson, and McLeod—at Michigan State University (“About Eli Review”). Other scholars have endorsed emergent technologies; for example, Les Perelman, famed debunker

of the robo-graders supports the technology WriteLab (Berdik, 2015). However, the discipline still faces the problem of globalized models for standardized plagiarism detection and writing assessment.

Who will benefit from globalized programs like Turnitin's, and who will be left out? Herrington and Moran (2012) warned with

the marketing muscle of these testing companies, and the concurrent expansion of the computer-as-reader of students' classroom writing, writing teachers need to understand what is happening here and take a careful look at its substance and likely consequences, lest we be seen as irrelevant and be 'sent out of the room' by the other stakeholders. (p. 220)

And so, as Turnitin is poised to debut its new assessment platform internationally, we need to ask and to challenge what the company values in order to remain in the room.

Our research suggests that debates on assessment must attend to the definitions of plagiarism and authorship that are being implemented globally by Turnitin. The field of composition and rhetoric should build on important existing work (Howard, 1999; Marsh, 2004; Poe & Inoue, 2012; Purdy, 2005; Vie, 2013a & 2013b) to examine how globalizing technologies are changing what we know about plagiarism policies, pedagogy, and writing in a global context, and how corporations like Turnitin are profiting from racist, deficient discursive constructions of the nonwestern student plagiarist and nonwestern countries. Given Turnitin's emerging formative assessment model and globally deployed PDS model, what are the national and international implications for assessment? As educators and researchers of writing, we must think deeply and critically about the links between automation, plagiarism, and assessment, and foreground the global implications of automated plagiarism and assessment protocols.

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Notes

[1] Because Turnitin is in the process of testing its new assessment platforms, the company's technology, language, and website are constantly changing. Thus, the information we refer to may appear on the website under different headings or may have been otherwise altered.

[2] In the U.S. in 2012-2013 academic year, approximately 76% of higher education's instructional staff consisted of contingent laborers (Curtis & Thornton, 2013, p. 8).

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