



A Pedagogy of Resistance Toward Plagiarism Detection Technologies

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Abstract

This article interrogates the use of plagiarism detection devices from a critical and rhetorical standpoint, using both plagiarism detection technologies as well as essay mills as sites for analysis and subversion. My goal is to argue for a pedagogy of resistance to plagiarism detection technologies. Both plagiarism detection sites and online paper mills play into the very issue we as rhetoricians and compositionists should be resisting; that is, by upholding the singular notion of authorship as something individualistic, commercialized, and commodified, these sites reinforce individual authorship to the detriment of more communal forms of writing that are prized in online environments such as social networking sites, blogs, wikis, and so on. If we are forced into the circular logic of avoiding plagiarism/catching plagiarists/punishing plagiarism and prizing singular authorship above all other forms, then we risk failing to find the ability to break free and move beyond to more challenging modes of writing that rely on community. The potential time-saving benefits of plagiarism detection services—that is, the ease of discovering potential plagiarism—may unfortunately lull us into compliance and cause us to forget that there are larger issues regarding copyright law and ownership of ideas still up for debate.

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1. Introduction

As the writing center director at a small college, I field questions about student writing and our tutoring services daily from faculty and students alike. One of the more frequent questions I receive from faculty outside of our writing program is whether or not our campus subscribes to any plagiarism detection services—and, if not, what might I suggest using to discover whether students are plagiarizing? Currently, our campus does not subscribe to any detection services, so I turn these queries into teachable moments: I proffer assistance in crafting stronger assignments, ones that are less likely to result in plagiarized papers; I also suggest offering one-on-one conferences with students, facilitating peer response sessions during class, and scaffolding large writing assignments with smaller, low-stakes composing events. In other words, these inquiries have become opportunities for me to help faculty outside of composition and rhetoric incorporate sound principles drawn from writing pedagogy and theory into their classrooms, a sort of *ad hoc* writing-across-the-curriculum plan (as we have no formal WAC or WID program currently).

I must admit, though, that when I recently received the same query regarding the availability of plagiarism detection services from a writing program faculty member, my heart sank a little. Our program believes in ongoing professional

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development; each month, we read and discuss two articles drawn from academic journals in our field in an attempt to foster continued growth as teacher-scholars in rhetoric and composition. Yet this continued growth conflicts with the realities of our program: the faculty are largely non-tenure-track, most without advanced degrees in rhetoric and composition but instead from fields as varied as veterinary medicine, history, theatre, and psychology. They are hardworking and professional, but grapple with a teaching load of four or five composition courses per semester (with the attendant pile of a hundred or more papers to grade every few weeks). While we may read about and discuss ways to structure the classroom so as to make plagiarism detection services unnecessary, the landscape of our program remains such that instructors seek ways to balance the paper load while ensuring that students are not turning in plagiarized papers. Ultimately, the request from within our program is similar to that of the faculty from outside our discipline, their plea being as follows: With all of these papers to grade, and given my desire for students to maintain academic integrity, how can I ensure this is the student's own work? Still, my original response to the situation remains. I could not help but be disappointed that with all of the work we (and here I turn away from the local "we" of our program to our field as a whole) have put into discussing, describing, and understanding plagiarism and intellectual property, some writing instructors still ask for plagiarism detection services. What does this desire reflect about our field?

In many ways, the desire for plagiarism detection services—despite our understanding that plagiarism is a deeply complex and contextual issue, despite our knowing that these services frequently fail to achieve their intended goal—reflects the working conditions of writing faculty in the academy today, particularly as more writing programs rely heavily on non-tenure-track or renewable contract faculty who teach multiple composition courses each semester, year after year. When pressed further about her request for Turnitin <<http://turnitin.com/>>, the faculty member in my program repeatedly mentioned time: It would save time for her by not having to copy and paste selected suspicious phrases into Google to uncover plagiarized papers; it would save her students time in not requiring them to include copies of all their sources along with their final papers. In this sense, then, a reliance on plagiarism detection services is a symptom of a larger issue, much like Neal Lerner (2005) articulated in his discussion of teacher-student writing conferences which, he stated, serve as a window into the impediments to teaching writing effectively—what he calls "tension points"—such as surging enrollments, rising course caps, and ever-opening admissions windows (p. 188). Rebecca Moore Howard (2001) similarly described how poor working conditions lead to situations in which teachers are unable to compose and respond to authentic writing assignments, again leading to incidents of plagiarism.

These tension points and working conditions, I argue, have also led to the temptation to rely on plagiarism detection technologies, with their siren song of efficiency. Turnitin uses this desire as part of its marketing materials, an example of rhetoric in action—discover your audience's desires and promise that you can deliver them. Turnitin's website trumpets its ability to save time, increase productivity, and create "new possibilities for feedback, engagement and learning"; it assures us it can help students engage with the course material, their instructors and their peers; and it swears to "remove the roadblocks associated with delivering rich and timely feedback to students" and help instructors manage assignments "so they can do what they do best—teach" ("[Turnitin Company Backgrounder](#)"). If Turnitin could truly deliver all of that, who wouldn't be swayed? But of course new technologies frequently bring with them what Martin Heidegger (1977) has described as an instrumental view of those technologies, one that swears our problems will be solved and our lives will be better if we apply the technology appropriately. Such a view makes Turnitin's promises of classroom advancement—made possible, of course, only with the use of the program—even more alluring.

2. Critical and rhetorical approaches to plagiarism

Not only have the material realities of writing instruction led us to a point where plagiarism detection services become seductively sweet, plagiarism itself seems to be on the rise, lending a panicky sense of certain doom—if we don't address this problem, it will only continue to grow. If once the lament was why Johnny couldn't write, today many wonder why Johnny can't (or won't) write his own paper. Thus, Howard (2007) wrote of the "specter of 'Internet plagiarism'" that hangs over the academy, threatening to undo the entire enterprise (p. 3). Plagiarism doesn't only impact the writing classroom; Stephen Ambrose, Jayson Blair, Doris Kearns Goodwin, Alex Haley, Martin Luther King, Jr., Susan Sontag, and Kaavya Viswanathan are just some of a growing list of professional writers who have been accused or found guilty of plagiarism. Certainly today's reliance on computer-mediated communication is one factor in the seeming increase of detected plagiarism over the last few decades (Kitalong, 1998; DeVoss & Rosati, 2002; Grossberg, 2008; Purdy, 2008); in her examination of the intersections of plagiarism and technology, Kelly Ritter (2006) has noted that the rise of cut-and-paste academic dishonesty and the ease of purchasing papers from digital

paper mills in particular have concerned writing faculty (p. 25). Similarly, composing in technologically mediated environments and using electronic plagiarism detection services potentially makes plagiarism easier to commit as well as ascertain. Though Howard (2007) advised caution in ascribing a correlation between the popularity of the Internet and increased student plagiarism, she does not deny that the proliferation of online texts allows for potential plagiarism of these works (pp. 4–5).

In response to the seemingly growing issue of online plagiarism, researchers have interrogated online technologies that promise to combat the problem, most notably focusing on Turnitin, arguably the most widely used and recognized online plagiarism detection service. While some instructors note positive uses of the service (see Atkins & Nelson, 2001, for example), the overall tenor of the research in our field is critical of Turnitin and its parent company, iParadigms LLC. Many suggest that Turnitin, in general, is an example of using technology as a panacea for an incredibly complex, multi-faceted issue, a “corporate solution to a nagging pedagogical problem” (Marsh, 2004, p. 428). Others note Turnitin’s inability to flag plagiarism reliably or even, in some cases, at all (Royce, 2003; Bishop, 2006; Brown, Fallon, Lott, Matthews, & Mintie, 2007; Gillis, Lang, Norris, & Palmer, 2009; Slinkard, 2011). For example, Andy Dehnart (1999) recounted in a Salon.com article, “I am a plagiarist. At least, that’s what an online plagiarism-testing service report says.... Plagiarism.org had just discovered a copy of my own thesis online. Instead of realizing that it was my work and ignoring it, the service had accused me of plagiarism” (n.p.). After participating in a trial of Turnitin at Massey University in New Zealand, Lisa Emerson (2008) discussed the complexity of her feelings toward the site, seeing it as potentially useful but only if instructors approach it and its reports with a commitment to teaching academic writing skills, reading the site’s reports carefully and sensitively and using the reports to differentiate between deliberate fraud and inaccurate use of source materials. However, given the current antagonistic climate surrounding plagiarism, she felt this would only happen if writing instructors were involved in the conversation about plagiarism detection services (pp. 190–193). Yet often WPAs, let alone writing instructors, are not given the chance to be involved in the decision-making regarding plagiarism detection services and must therefore devise ways to cope with the institutional presence and impact of Turnitin after a decision made for them, not with them (Donnelly, Ingalls, Morse, Castner, & Stockdell-Giesler, 2006).

Along with general concerns about the use of a for-profit software program as a solution for a host of writing-related problems, instructors may worry specifically about the effect of plagiarism detection services on the student writers themselves. If we as writing teachers work hard to build and support a community of writers in our classrooms, what happens when we introduce a technology like Turnitin? After all, plagiarism detection tools seem to imply a message of “guilty until proven innocent,” assuming that students are likely to plagiarize and our goal is to catch them. As the CCCC-IP Caucus (2006) recommendation statement on academic integrity and plagiarism detection services noted, these services can create an atmosphere of mistrust in the classroom and can violate students’ privacy and intellectual property rights. Students may hesitate to articulate their concerns about uploading their writing to a plagiarism detection site with their instructor; furthermore, students may lack the contextual knowledge necessary to understand just what exactly they are being asked to do (Ingalls, 2006). Students uninformed about Turnitin’s practice of gathering and maintaining a database of original papers might submit to pedagogical practices they might not agree to if more fully informed. Even students aware of their intellectual property rights and opposed to their copyrighted material being stored indefinitely in Turnitin’s database face a difficult struggle, as students who have brought suits against their schools for using Turnitin have faced lengthy battles (see Purdy, 2005; Vanderhye, 2006; Hilton, 2008; Zimmerman, 2008).

Given these issues, writing instructors are justified in cautiousness regarding the use of online plagiarism detection services. However, as my opening anecdote suggests, some instructors still desire these services for various reasons; similarly, many institutions mandate the use of plagiarism detection services. Much like plagiarism itself, then, plagiarism detection services are unlikely to disappear any time soon. While I wish we might someday realize a utopian setting in which plagiarism detection services are deemed entirely unnecessary, I will be realistic. Instead, I believe that our field must continue to critique and assess our approaches to plagiarism and their attendant detection services. But while we do so, we could do more to help students and our fellow faculty participate in critical and rhetorical analyses of plagiarism and intellectual property, particularly for faculty in disciplines where the ongoing conversation is not paying careful attention to Turnitin. While the conversation regarding plagiarism is one central to writing-related fields, other disciplines may not be as aware of the strong scholarly work that already exists related to plagiarism detection services. Similarly, students may not be aware of the ethical and legal concerns surrounding these sites without their being made aware through critical studies of the sites and their uses.

One way to incorporate this kind of critical rhetorical analysis, I propose, is to use plagiarism detection technologies and paper mill sites pedagogically as artifacts and in assignments. For example, to assist students in thinking critically about plagiarism and its effects on the classroom, instructors can fashion writing assignments asking students to critique both paper mills and plagiarism detection services from a rhetorical perspective. In this article, I offer one potential pedagogical opportunity that asks students to rhetorically analyze Turnitin and SchoolSucks <<http://www.schoolsucks.com/>>, an online paper mill site that offers students to “download their workload” (n.p.). Using rhetorical and critical analysis as my methodological lenses, I analyze these sites by comparing text on selected pages, including the sites’ Terms of Service, testimonials, and “about this site” pages; I also visually compare and contrast these sites, considering the argument presented by the images, colors, and graphics used. These sites are rich repositories of analytical material and for the sake of brevity, I only touch upon them in this article to give a sense of the pedagogical possibilities (rather than provide a close in-depth reading of both spaces).

The overall goal is that, through analysis of noteworthy websites related to plagiarism and its detection, students are guided to judge the power differentials inherent in instructors’ and students’ use of Turnitin or paper mill sites. Such an assignment, which can be adapted to an instructor’s particular institutional context, is one way to meet the CCC-IP Caucus’ (2007) recommendation that “students... at an institution that uses [plagiarism detection] services... should be informed of submission requirements and the nature of the PDS’s use of their work” (pp. 1-2). While some institutions have responded to this call by crafting sample syllabus statements informing students of Turnitin’s use, I believe this is an issue of enough significance that it should be incorporated into the classroom even more deeply. Following Dànielle Nicole DeVoss & Annette Rosati’s (2002) call to adapt our curricula to include spaces that pose promise and peril, I offer this sample assignment as one way to adapt and even subvert plagiarism detection spaces and thereby a scaffold a larger discussion of plagiarism, citation practices, and intellectual property.

3. Why subvert plagiarism detection technologies?

Turnitin.com began in 1995 as Plagiarism.org, quickly expanding and becoming a profitable plagiarism detection service. The cost of the service can be several thousand dollars per institution; as a result, schools enrolled in the Turnitin suite of plagiarism detection offerings are likely to strongly encourage or even require instructors to use the service to offset their substantial monetary investment. Today, Turnitin offers multiple branded services through its main site: OriginalityCheck, which tests a paper for originality; GradeMark, an automated grading technology that provides standard markings like “good point” or “cite source”; PeerMark, a peer reviewing portal; and other features such as iThenticate (offering researchers and publishers intellectual property protection) and Turnitin for Admissions (checking students’ college application essays for originality).

One of the more interesting developments from Turnitin in recent years is their WriteCheck program, where for \$6.95 per 5,000-word paper, a student can check their writing for originality prior to its application in the OriginalityCheck program. The testimonials are fascinating:

“Now I can submit my work with confidence and no concern, knowing it was purely original. Thank you, WriteCheck, for allowing me to write freely without fear!”

“WriteCheck is a great way for students to feel rest assured [sic] about handing in a near flawless report. Thanks!”

“I love your service that you offer. Getting caught for plagiarism is a big deal so I like to always make sure I am covered. Thank you!” (“[WriteCheck Reviews](#)”)

In comparing the testimonials on Turnitin’s main page (for its OriginalityCheck) versus the reviews for WriteCheck, a reader can quickly notice how the main page testimonials speak directly to an instructor, offering speed, ease of use, and the ability to get back to what really matters—teaching—whereas WriteCheck’s reviews showcase an undercurrent of trepidation, of getting caught, of writing with fear. These testimonials highlight the power differentials and the culture of fear surrounding plagiarism in the classroom; WriteCheck taps into that fear (and likely turns a tidy profit at \$6.95 per paper for reassurance).¹

¹ Interestingly, papers submitted to WriteCheck are not saved in a database whereas papers given to Turnitin’s OriginalityCheck are housed in the centralized database of 150+ million student papers. Essentially, students pay for the privilege of not having their work housed indefinitely in Turnitin’s coffers.

This fear is reinforced on WriteCheck's Frequently Asked Questions page where plagiarism is defined: "The Oxford English Dictionary (2011) defines 'plagiarism' with more criminal terms, or as 'literary theft'" ("Student Plagiarism Checker FAQ"). While the site implies that plagiarism is indeed more complex than just literary theft, one must click through to Plagiarism.org to find out more—where a reader learns that "many people think of plagiarism as copying another's work, or borrowing someone else's original ideas. But terms like 'copying' and 'borrowing' can disguise the seriousness of the offense... [P]lagiarism is an act of fraud. It involves both stealing someone else's work and lying about it afterward. But can words and ideas really be stolen? According to U.S. law, the answer is yes" ("Plagiarism.org Learning Center"). Despite the rich work that has been done on complicating intellectual property and definitions of plagiarism by researchers in rhetoric and composition, these sites reflect the dominant ideological narrative about plagiarism that detection services draw from to make their sales.

Since its inception, Turnitin has maintained a centralized database of work used to police uploaded papers for plagiarism; in 2007, the site held approximately forty million student papers from 9,000 academic institutions in ninety countries and today it has more than 150 million student papers from 10,000 institutions in 126 countries (Epstein, 2007, n.p.; "Turnitin.com"). Indeed, the entire service depends on this centralized database of work (drawn from submitted student papers, archived and current web pages, and professional context taken from online journals and other professional publications) to run its originality checks. Initially, learning about Plagiarism.org's centralized database and practice of retaining any uploaded student papers took one mouse click: from the site's front page to their frequently asked questions, readers discovered the site compiled a massive database of digital material ("Plagiarism.org FAQs"). After Plagiarism.org was converted to Turnitin, information regarding the submission of copyrighted material to the site's database was largely buried. After significant searching on Turnitin, one may finally discover that iParadigms LLC (the company that provides Turnitin's suite of products) harvests, stores, and uses students' essays when they are uploaded for originality checks. While the main pages are filled with glowing testimonials and advertising copy, information about Turnitin's practices with regard to archiving students' work is now buried deep within the site itself. Instructors who rely on Turnitin's plagiarism detection services bundled within one of the supported course management systems may be even less likely to discover information about the database of previously submitted work.²

John Barrie, chairman and co-founder of iParadigms LLC, has responded to concerns regarding Turnitin's database and collection practices, arguing that the company encourages instructors to notify students of the database and to request that students themselves upload their work rather than the instructors (Foster, 2002, A38).³ Glossed over is the issue of coercion: because of inherent power differentials between students and instructors, students may feel forced to submit their work to Turnitin to receive a fair grade. Further complicating the issue, while students had previously successfully challenged the use of Turnitin at individual institutions, the US Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit later ruled that iParadigms LLC's use of students' writing was considered transformative under fair use guidelines and therefore legal (Povejsil, 2009; "Answers to Common Legal Questions"). Given these rulings and the protracted battle that resistance might entail, students might decide not to fight the use of plagiarism detection services and instead allow their work to be submitted despite their reservations.

Despite rulings that argue the legality of iParadigms LLC's practices, many instructors and even institutions feel that Turnitin's approach may be legal but not ethical. These institutions have devised protocols to allow students to opt out of Turnitin if they choose. For instance, Ryerson University in Toronto, Canada allows students to individually opt out of Turnitin when it is required in a course by consulting with their instructor to make alternate arrangements ("Ryerson University Undergraduate Course Management," 2011). Similarly, the University of Massachusetts Amherst suggested on its sample syllabus statement that students who opt out of Turnitin must instead submit copies of the cover page and first cited page of each source listed in the bibliography along with the final paper ("Plagiarism Prevention Service,"

² It is also not well advertised that Turnitin allows specific institutions to opt out of the larger database, retaining uploaded student work in a site-specific database for that institution alone. It seems likely that iParadigms LLC would not want to advertise this fact given that the database containing hundreds of millions of student papers is one of the hallmarks of their service.

³ Intriguingly, though Barrie, creator of Turnitin.com, was a graduate student at the University of California-Berkeley, the university as a whole declined to subscribe to the service on the grounds that students' work could be appropriated by Turnitin's database without the students' consent; as the assistant chancellor for legal affairs at the institution noted, "We take student intellectual-property rights seriously, and that became one of the trouble spots for us in moving ahead with this proposal [to adopt Turnitin's services]" (Foster, 2002, A37). However, individual departments can subscribe to the Turnitin suite; the Haas School of Business at the University of California-Berkeley is one which has done so.

2011). Other institutions have simply dropped the use of Turnitin altogether, such as Mount Saint Vincent University in Nova Scotia, who in 2006 instituted a campus-wide ban on Turnitin (“[Senate Meeting](#),” 2006).

Overwhelmingly, Turnitin offers an expensive service that can be easily replicated—if desired—with free technologies such as checking search strings on Google. It has been called into question for its collection of authors’ copyrighted work, held in perpetuity, supposedly allowable under fair use; for its inability to detect actual academic dishonesty and likeliness to flag non-plagiarized material; and for its potential to foster a classroom atmosphere of hostility and suspicion. Yet the numbers don’t lie: numerous institutions support Turnitin despite these concerns. What should instructors required to use plagiarism detection sites but who find them unethical do? For these individuals, the rallying cry of “turn it down, don’t turn it in” unfortunately does not apply.

Thus, the following section outlines some possibilities for instructors who wish to comply with their institution’s support of Turnitin but also use the software to spur students to think more critically about plagiarism detection technologies. Even teachers who support plagiarism detection services may find these activities beneficial in introducing students to a critical approach to technology along the lines of what [Andrew Feenberg \(1991\)](#), [Cynthia L. Selfe \(1999\)](#), and [Stuart A. Selber \(2004\)](#) have articulated. In such an approach, students might be guided to examine Turnitin and SchoolSucks as artifacts embedded within a complex network of assumptions, practices, and politics, artifacts that can be examined for their design, use, institutionalization, and representations in academe and the media more broadly. Similarly, examining Turnitin and SchoolSucks through a critical analytical lens allows us to articulate the connections between these artifacts and the articulated ideological relationships ([Selfe, 1999](#), p. 123) that are revealed.

4. Other people’s papers: SchoolSucks and Turnitin

Turnitin can be used as a means to discuss plagiarism beyond a simple warning statement, instead involving students in a critical rhetorical analysis of plagiarism and intellectual property. Asking students to examine online paper mill sites alongside plagiarism detection sites equips them to better understand the limitations of doing all of their research online rather than relying on a mixture of sources. [Ritter \(2006\)](#) argued that bringing paper mill sites into the college classroom offers an intellectually stimulating means of antiplagiarism instruction as well as offering a challenging assignment that relies on critical thinking skills (p. 33). Examining online paper mills also gives students a clearer view of how plagiarism is propagated online by seeing the resources available to students and teachers to plagiarize or to detect plagiarism. Finally, such an assignment helps students complicate their view of writing as a commodity, information that often changes hands for a price—either monetary (the purchase of an essay from a paper mill or a payment to a detection site to assert the originality of a piece) or consequential (the repercussions of relying on an essay from a paper mill rather than writing an original essay). Complicating plagiarism in this way broadens classroom discussions of academic integrity and moves them beyond platitudes.

Visually contrasting plagiarism detection sites and online paper mills can help students imagine the different audiences and purposes that helped construct these sites. Even asking students to analyze only the main page of these sites can lead to an informative discussion. Students quickly attend to the differences between the sites in terms of their overall visual design, tone, and intended audience. [Figure 1](#) presents the main splash screen for SchoolSucks.

The image of the student with sunglasses, slouched in a desk and with a sort of “too cool for school” smirk provides an immediate ethos for the site, especially with contrasted with the text “we prove that school doesn’t have to suck.” Additionally, the “A” near the student not only emphasizes the connection to grades but also may remind students of the symbol for anarchy, a kind of stick figure letter A that touches or moves beyond the borders of the circle surrounding it. In this way, the site emphasizes in just one image the tension between coolness and getting good grades, between beating the system and achieving the degree.

Interestingly, the site does not bill itself as primarily a repository of essays, instead highlighting the ability to “share and review course notes and essays” and “post and receive feedback from other students just like you, all over the world.” Given the emphasis on peer response and community learning in many composition courses, it is unsurprising that SchoolSucks latches on to this concept to boost its ethos in students’ eyes. Further down the page, the site responds to the hypothetical question, “Should I turn in this homework [as mine]?” with “No... don’t do it! The homework on School Sucks definitely wont [sic] get you an A and turning in someone else’s work as your own is plagiarism.” By anticipating the questions of its intended audience and preemptively responding, SchoolSucks again moves to bolster its ethos in students’ eyes. Particularly in a class focusing on rhetoric and rhetorical analysis, SchoolSucks can serve as a site rich with material to consider.

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Figure 1. SchoolSucks.com Splash Screen.

Figure 2 presents a second page of SchoolSucks that appears after clicking through one of the listed “popular papers,” “Why Honesty is Important.” While the reader is only provided the first several hundred words as a preview (a user must sign up and share an essay to gain full access to the site), it is enough for a critical reader to analyze the sample paper—complete with student and instructor name, date submitted, and a definition lifted from Dictionary.com (uncited, of course) to begin the paper: “Honesty is defined as the quality or fact of being honest; uprightness and fairness. . .”

The topics of many of the papers included can be part of a lively discussion of ethos and irony; from papers like “Why honesty is important” to essays on lies, academic honesty, and ethics in accounting, students may find humor in not only the kind of papers uploaded to these sites, but their topics as well. What does it say about the state of education today that a student can download a paper on the importance of academic honesty from a paper mill site? Many students who work hard to achieve their grades will rankle at this fact.

Upon examining multiple papers available on the site, a savvy student would promptly realize that, rather than being a miraculous timesaver, these essays would need so much work to be suitable for their particular classroom context, they end up worthless. Students are often surprised at the shoddy work that is presented on most of these sites (even the misspellings found on the first page of the site hint at this shoddiness before a reader even gets to an uploaded paper). SchoolSucks admits that the work represented on their site is mediocre at best and even goes so far as to place the blame on educators: “If we wanted students to plagiarize, we’d charge for the papers. They’re free for everyone—students and teachers—to read. And, we don’t rate them—you could be downloading garbage. That garbage is the result of the education system. In a way, teachers write these papers too” (“About SchoolSucks”). The essays posted to paper mill sites are usually substandard: displaying numerous spelling and grammar errors, wandering off topic, or remaining incredibly simplistic, they tend to be unsuitable for the assignment given. Pointing out to students that paper mills will likely produce nothing more than an essay requiring hours to clean up can open students’ eyes to the mediocrity of other people’s papers on the web.

This can also lead to a discussion of evaluating web resources in general, another skill students desperately need as they rely heavily on web sources in their academic work but tend not to evaluate them before use. Some, as DeVoss and Rosati (2002) depicted, simply choose a major search engine, type in a search phrase, and use the first few hits that come up (p. 192). While issues of information literacy are often scaffolded into writing classes, it is important to make connections between these issues and the actual composing processes that go on throughout the course. In this instance, integrating information literacy within the composing process while also within the larger context of

The screenshot shows a webpage layout. At the top right, there is a blue button with a flag icon and the text 'Flag this Paper'. Below this, on the left side, is the title 'Why Honesty Is Important' in a bold, dark blue font. To the right of the title is an orange button with the text 'JOIN NOW'. Below the title, the author's name 'Troy Outlaw', 'Mr. Terrance Jones', and the date '5/24/10' are listed. The main text of the paper begins with 'The Importance of Honesty' and discusses the definition and importance of honesty in everyday life, mentioning that honesty is the basis of routine activities and that lying can lead to controversy and mistrust. At the bottom left of the page, there is another orange button with the text 'JOIN NOW'.

Figure 2. SchoolSucks.com “Why Honesty is Important” sample paper.

academic integrity brings all of these topics into conversation with each other, which is the sort of metacognitive work students should be capable of doing upon leaving the academy.

In contrast, Turnitin’s appearance is intended to appeal to its most likely audience, that is, college administrators and instructors. While SchoolSucks relied on a color palette mainly comprised of blue, purple, and orange, Turnitin’s bold color scheme (see Figure 3) focuses largely on blue and red, reinforcing common tropes about plagiarism and integrity that seem designed to appeal to instructors and administrators in particular. The repeated use of red on the front page as well as in the site’s originality reports echo “getting caught red-handed” as a plagiarist.⁴ Marsh (2004) likened the color-coded originality report to an “ethical drug test,” stating that these writers “submit to the color-coded reconstruction of their texts and, more profoundly, their identities as writers... all writers who participate in Turnitin.com’s screening process provide, willingly or not, material support for the corporate detour known as plagiarism detection” (p. 434). Interestingly, prior incarnations of Turnitin’s main splash page were even more blatant in their use of red and white (see Figure 4), highlighting assessment as the main focus. Now, given iParadigms LLC’s move toward diversifying Turnitin’s suite of services (by offering WriteCheck, OriginalityCheck, PeerMark, and GradeMark, among others) and showcasing Turnitin’s supposed abilities to deliver “rich feedback,” the emphasis on assessment is downplayed while pedagogical strategies familiar and comforting to writing instructors—offering peer review, engaging students in the writing process, and so on—are emphasized.⁵

The starkness of the red against the lighter background similarly hearkens to militaristic metaphors; indeed, issues of academic integrity are often likened to a battlefield pitting instructors against students, each side incessantly gathering

⁴ An originality report on Turnitin.com is color-coded using green, blue, yellow, orange, and red. Green symbolizes an entirely original piece of writing while red signifies serious unoriginality. Plagiarized passages are highlighted in red text.

⁵ On some campuses, assessment can be viewed with suspicion and skepticism; see Donna Heiland and Laura J. Rosenthal’s commentary on closing the gap between assessing and teaching in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (February 24, 2011). Turnitin’s decision to move away from emphasizing assessment to “safer” terms like peer review and engagement makes sense given current cynicism regarding assessment.

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Figure 3. Main page of Turnitin.com, 2012.

new ammunition to aid in the fight. Howard (2001) noted the use of such phrases in the discourse of plagiarism like “a plague of plagiarism... we are at the ramparts, trying to hold back the attack. We see ourselves in a state of siege, holding the line against the enemy” (n.p.). Thus in many discussions of academic integrity, a false binary is constructed that establishes a “good” group, usually instructors who demand nothing less than honesty and veracity from students, and a “bad” group, frequently depicted as students who, not caring about the consequences, dare to appropriate someone else’s work as their own and hand it in to the unsuspecting teacher. Of course, this binary is often inverted to depict overworked and unappreciated students who are asked to achieve the impossible by instructors hopelessly out of touch with the real world that exists outside of their ivory towers. Such students may turn to paper mill sites because their own work would never be good enough for these demanding instructors; or, alternatively, these students are villainized as guilty until proven innocent by teachers who command the use of plagiarism detection services. Many paper mills and plagiarism detection services play into these false binaries and students can be encouraged to find evidence supporting such rhetorical constructions while at the same time attempting to complicate these views and break them down.

Students can examine these sites or similar ones, considering how each site acts as a persuasive text rather than simply a space offering a commodity for sale. As well, students may be guided to discuss how the sites themselves position students and instructors: as adversaries pitted against one another in warlike montages? As colleagues working together toward a similar goal? Is one group invisible in the language and imagery of the chosen site? Particularly since students are likely to have their intellectual property rights violated by the use of Turnitin as it is their writing, not the instructor’s, uploaded to the site and stored in perpetuity, a rhetorical analysis of the language and imagery used to describe students in plagiarism detection sites as compared to paper mill sites would be rich for discussion. For example, SchoolSucks pits “old” instructors who rely on “old words to teach with old methods from old textbooks. Which is fine... IF YOU’RE OLD!” while Turnitin is described as “an indispensable aide to proper scholarship” for educators who wish to engage students, once again playing into dominant tropes about good versus bad: here good instructors don’t lead their students to paper mill sites because of their poor teaching and good instructors also use the indispensable technologies available to them to engage their students.

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Figure 4. Main page of Turnitin.com, 2008.

The names of these sites are also ripe with analytical material that students can mine for use in such an assignment. Consider the language operant in “school sucks” versus “turn it in.” The former is highly colloquial, negative towards academia, and derogatory. The phrase “school sucks” has an air of thumbing one’s nose at authority. On the other hand, the latter phrase is authoritative: a service to be provided, a command to be followed; indeed, the verb most commonly used in conjunction with uploading a paper to Turnitin, “submit,” has its etymological roots in words that mean yield, reduce, lower—and according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, submit was used as early as 1374 by Chaucer as “to place (oneself) under the control of another” (n.p.). Teachers commonly require students to turn work in and students generally comply without resistance; students therefore place themselves (and their writing) under the control of their instructor and, once provided to Turnitin, to iParadigms LLC. As previous legal cases have indicated, some students have taken offense to the commanding authority of demanded compliance with Turnitin. Rather than avoiding discussion of such controversies in the classroom, shying away from them because of their problematic nature, we can instead embrace these controversies as evidence of the complicated nature of authorship, integrity, and plagiarism. These situational cases showcase how plagiarism itself is a fraught term (Howard, 2001), that issues of academic integrity are often highly local and institutionally based, and that, as Ritter (2006) pointed out, instructors are portrayed as adversaries in issues related to plagiarism (p. 32). Students can therefore analyze both the language used by

the sites' creators to portray themselves as well as how various academic groups (instructors, parents, administrators, students, plagiarists) are described throughout these sites.

5. Conclusion: A pedagogy of resistance

Despite all of the drawbacks previously mentioned regarding Turnitin (and by extension similar plagiarism detection services and software), I hope that the prior discussion of potential ways to incorporate Turnitin into a rhetorically based composition course may be helpful for those faculty who teach on a campus where the software is mandatory. Many faculty members teach on campuses that have, for various reasons, adopted Turnitin and must now balance the use of the service and their awareness of its many pitfalls. Tracy Ann Morse (2006) described her experience as a new faculty member on a large campus requiring the use of Turnitin; her attempts to turn away from the use of the service as a policing tool, instead finding ways to help students more clearly focus on revision, is one possibility for instructors who are in similar situations. She concluded by musing, "While I can come up with some positive ways to use Turnitin.com and possible positive effects from students engaging with the tool, I am still torn with requiring students to use it" (n.p.). Morse's conflicted feelings regarding the use of Turnitin speak to the complexity of the issues surrounding this particular pedagogical tool; it also showcases the need for rhetoric and composition scholars to continue debating the place, if any, that plagiarism detection services should occupy in the writing classroom.

I would like to reiterate that Turnitin and other plagiarism detection services are technological tools that should be approached with care. The Council of Writing Program Administrators' (2003) statement of best practices on defining and avoiding plagiarism suggests a vigilant stance toward plagiarism detection services, noting that though such services may be "tempting, they are not always reliable" (n.p.). Howard (2007) also cautioned us to rely too heavily on even those potentially useful pedagogical features offered on plagiarism detection sites, as Turnitin could result in teachers who "avoid asking the hard questions about what the new revolution in access to text teaches us—that both reading and writing are collaborative, appropriative activities, and that social leaders are not above plagiarism and are not necessarily punished for it" (p. 11, emphasis in original). Both plagiarism detection sites and online paper mills play into the very issue we as rhetoricians and compositionists should be resisting; that is, by upholding the singular notion of authorship as something individualistic, commercialized, and commodified, these sites reinforce individual authorship to the detriment of more communal forms of writing that are prized in online environments such as social networking sites, blogs, wikis, and so on. If we are forced into the circular logic of avoiding plagiarism/catching plagiarists/punishing plagiarism and prizing singular authorship above all other forms, then we risk failing to find the ability to break free and move beyond to more challenging modes of writing that rely on community.

The potential time-saving benefits of plagiarism detection services—that is, the ease of discovering potential plagiarism—may unfortunately lull us into compliance and cause us to forget that there are larger issues regarding copyright law and ownership of ideas still up for debate. Yes, Turnitin may save an instructor time, but shouldn't we be concerned about the ways in which iParadigms LLC has managed to build a multimillion-dollar enterprise using the intellectual work of others, many of whom have serious ethical concerns regarding the company's practices? Shouldn't we question why and how iParadigms' use of that intellectual work has been upheld as "fair use" under current copyright law? As Samuel J. Horowitz (2008) noted, "Plagiarism may be a pressing social dilemma, and archiving student papers for plagiarism prevention may promote a very legitimate public benefit. But because that benefit is impertinent to the goals of copyright law, its promotion does not justify expanding fair use" (p. 262). Let us not be distracted from discussing the ongoing ethical issues inherent in plagiarism detection services overall and in Turnitin and its suite of products, all touted as easy-to-use time-savers.

The changes that have occurred as the result of the increased use of technology in the writing and research processes are changes that cannot be undone. With each shift in the research process brought by the incorporation of technologies like the Internet and plagiarism detection services, we find ourselves confronting ethical dilemmas like those outlined in this article. The writing classroom becomes what Feenberg (1991) has termed a social battlefield, a site of struggle, "or . . . a parliament of things on which civilizational alternatives are debated and decided" (p. 14). Even as we struggle to define and determine our appropriate reactions to plagiarism detection services, the concept of plagiarism itself is undergoing change. While academic integrity remains a serious issue in the college composition setting, we still have the ability, as Howard (2007) pointed out, to ask the hard questions about plagiarism—in this case, namely, leading the call to resist the advancement of plagiarism detection services and to ask at every step along the way *cui*

bono—to whose benefit? (Or, alternately, given iParadigms LLC’s monetary interests in plagiarism detection, we can consider another meaning for *cui bono*: Who has profited from it?) As members of a field that has been debating the civilizational alternatives connected to plagiarism, we must be vocal when the time comes—in our programs, on our campuses, within our school systems, and beyond—to make decisions regarding plagiarism detection services, given their profound impact on our pedagogy and student body.

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