The ethics and politics of policing plagiarism: a qualitative study of faculty views on student plagiarism and Turnitin®

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Recently, the usage of plagiarism detection software such as Turnitin® has increased dramatically among university instructors. At the same time, academic criticism of this software’s employment has also increased. We interviewed 23 faculty members from various departments at a medium-sized, public university in the southeastern US to determine their perspectives on Turnitin® and student plagiarism. We wanted to discern if there are important disciplinary differences in how instructors define and handle plagiarism; how instructors use Turnitin®, and if instructors’ thinking aligns with ethical and political concerns commonly expressed in the academic literature. Despite varying attitudes towards Turnitin®, those interviewed did not differ significantly in their views as to what student plagiarism is or its seriousness, and typical objections to ‘policing’ plagiarism and Turnitin® had little resonance with interviewees. The majority viewed a substantial amount of plagiarism they encountered as unintentional and penalised only what they considered to be extreme versions of intentional plagiarism. However, often this contradicted the way they presented the concept of plagiarism in their syllabi and their classrooms. Surprisingly, these patterns were consistent among those who employed the software frequently and those who did not.

Keywords: plagiarism; faculty perspectives; Turnitin®; qualitative research

University professors have expressed conflicting views about several aspects of student plagiarism. These conflicts range from disagreements about its causes to disputes over penalties. Some contend that student plagiarism results from a failure to grasp the relevant norms of academic writing (Ellery 2008). Others maintain that it is caused by laziness (Batane 2010), a cost–benefit calculation by students regarding the risks and rewards of plagiarism (Rettinger 2007), or by instructors who do not adequately explain the purpose of proper referencing (Power 2009). Some believe the best response to plagiarism is for teachers to more effectively engage students in writing assignments (Howard 2001; Scanlon 2003). Others think the remedy is for them to be better models of academic values (Townley and Parsell 2004) or for a revision of academic citation practices (Zwagerman 2008). Still others call for increased vigilance and enforcement of the rules (Heckler, Rice, and Hobson Bryan 2013; Ledwith and Risquez 2008).

Increasingly, university faculty members are turning to anti-plagiarism software programmes to address the problem. Both in the United States and internationally, the most popular plagiarism detection software is Turnitin® (Turner 2014). Turnitin®
claims usage by more than a million educators at 10,000 institutions in 135 countries; it is available in fifteen languages and processes some 190,000 papers daily (Hoge 2013; Turnitin® 2014). Although some studies have found the software to be of limited value as a deterrent (Walker 2010; Youmans 2011), most have shown the opposite (e.g. Buckley and Cowap 2013; Heckler, Rice, and Hobson Bryan 2013; Stapleton 2012). From 2009 to 2012, Turnitin®’s parent company, iParadigms, attained an annual growth rate of 25% (Hoge 2013), which suggests that the software is at least widely perceived to be useful.

The institution where this study was conducted is a medium-sized, public university in the southeastern United States with a mean annual enrolment of 12,911 over the last five years. In terms of the modified honour code system developed by McCabe, Treviño, and Butterfield (2002), this is a ‘no code’ university with no formal policy for penalising or handling student plagiarism. Instead, the university includes a statement about the impermissibility of plagiarism in the Student Handbook, and faculty members have wide discretion as to how they treat suspected plagiarists. Numerous support structures are in place to aid students in their writing and research, but these structures are not systematically integrated into the academic curriculum.

Turnitin® was first used reactively at this university in the fall of 2003 in a hybrid online World Literature course with around 525 students. In recent years, the employment of Turnitin® at the institution has increased dramatically. During 2008–2009, 285 instructors and 6663 students used the programme, submitting a combined total of 12,387 papers. During 2012–2013, those numbers had grown to 357 instructors, 12,041 students and a combined total of 40,208 papers, a dramatic rise of 224% in papers submitted over the four period. To some extent, this rise has been fuelled by growing numbers of online classes the university offers, as Turnitin® is integrated into the Blackboard® software platform the university licences to host online classes. However, instructors of both online and conventional classes have the prerogative as to whether or not to use Turnitin®. This study seeks to better understand instructor attitudes towards student plagiarism and Turnitin® in the light of the software’s increased popularity.

**Literature review**

The literature on student plagiarism is vast, but two categories of commentary are of special relevance to our study, both of which involve criticisms of how instructors often deal with plagiarism. The first kind questions the whole notion that instructors should be vigilant and punitive towards plagiarism. These range from objections based on the idea that plagiarism is an ill-defined, vague concept to more abstract political concerns. The second category of criticism targets plagiarism detection software specifically. These objections include claims that plagiarism detection programmes are crude and ineffective tools that fundamentally damage the teacher–student relationship. While there is some overlap between broader criticism of policing plagiarism and more specific criticism of plagiarism detection programmes such as Turnitin®, the latter objections target particular aspects of the functionality and limitations of this type of software. We will briefly describe these objections in turn.

A prominent concern regarding policing student plagiarism is that there is no standardised, clear definition of what plagiarism is (Blum 2009). Students are often unsure of the concept beyond the most blatant instances (McCabe, Trevino, and
Butterfield 2001; Power 2009), and their self-reported understanding of plagiarism may not reflect their grasp of the concept (Risquez, O’Dwyer, and Ledwith 2013). Even professors within the same department often differ from one another in their views of plagiarism (Flint, Clegg, and Macdonald 2006; Roig 2001). Additionally, there is a lack of agreement regarding the ethics of student plagiarism. Many students do not consider turning in material copied directly from the internet without citation to be wrong (Baker, Thornton, and Adams 2008; Dee and Jacob 2010). Furthermore, some critics have emphasised that citation norms in the West differ from those in Asian cultures (Stowers and Hummel 2011), and others have questioned the very idea of treating student plagiarism as an issue of individual ethics, arguing that academic honesty tends to be shaped more by social and contextual factors than personal moral integrity (McCabe and Treviño 1993).

A related objection, typically expressed in terms of ‘intertextuality’, questions the idea that there is anything wrong with plagiarism in the first place. Roughly, intertextuality is the idea that genuine originality, at least in the form that became valorised in nineteenth-century Western culture, is something of a romantic fiction. Since we are always to some extent borrowing, reformulating and repurposing others’ materials into a new ‘pastiche’, nothing is really original. Howard has asserted that intertextuality regards the ‘appropriation of text as an inescapable component of writing’ (2007, 9). Blum has argued that ‘the rules [regarding plagiarism] unrealistically assume an ability to trace the origins of all our thoughts’ (2009, 30). The objection is thus that plagiarism norms presuppose a flawed, naive ideal, particularly for today’s college students, who have grown up in a world of interactive blogs and social media.

Critics also have objected to enforcing citation standards on various political grounds. Howard has argued that the concept of originality is inherently gendered in favour of men and that anti-plagiarism efforts help to maintain an elitist distinction between the well-educated and ‘the Great Unwashed’ (2000). A different kind of political critique has targeted software marketed by for-profit companies for its intrusion into academic values. In this vein, Marsh decried Turnitin® as yet another step in the ‘forced privatization of public higher education’ (2004, 436). Similarly, Jenson and De Castell viewed the rise of Turnitin® as confirmation that the ‘policing of boundaries’ it facilitates are ‘largely driven by new economies of knowledge…aimed at private accumulation of knowledge “capital”’ (2004, 311).

Another broad category of ethical objections involves concerns that are specific to the functionality of plagiarism detection software. Turnitin®’s ‘Originality Check’ – iparadigm’s’ term for the plagiarism detection component of Turnitin® – works by comparing student papers to materials contained in its vast databases, which include over 45 billion web pages, 130 million academic articles and 337 million student papers (Turnitin® 2014). Once student papers are submitted, the software quickly produces an ‘Originality Report’, analysing the percentage of the submission that duplicates archived content. The Report’s colour codes match passages in the submission with putative source material. By default, Turnitin® saves student submissions in its databases. Precisely because students’ intellectual property is stored by the software for its own purposes, Turnitin® had to defend itself from a well-publicised copyright infringement lawsuit. iparadigm® won the case, largely because courts saw its use of student materials as a ‘fair use’ exception to copyright protection (Vanderhye v. iparadigm® 2009).
Some writers have objected to Originality Check on the grounds that there is a conceptual gap between text matching and plagiarism. A student’s paper might match verbatim portions from other materials as a result of mere mistakes or confusion, just as a submission could be plagiarised without any significant amount of matching text. For this reason, Emerson criticised Turnitin®’s mechanistic approach to plagiarism detection as a ‘blunt instrument’ (2008). Others have worried that, due to the software’s obvious efficiency, instructors may not carefully evaluate its findings (McKeever 2006; Stapleton 2012). Poignantly, Purdy noted that instructors who use Turnitin® as a labour-saving device act out of the same motivation as students when they plagiarise: both act out of convenience (2009).

Other critics have questioned whether plagiarism detection software properly conveys the ethics of good citation practices. Howard argued that it is ‘prima facie, an outrageous proposition’ to believe that ‘a mechanized detections system could teach ethics’ (2007, 12). Some have argued that, in using Turnitin®, instructors unfairly presume students are guilty until the software proves them innocent (Holi Ali 2013; Zwagerman 2008) or that the software’s use damages the relation of trust that should exist between teacher and student (McKeever 2006; Williams 2007). Others have blamed teachers for facilitating Turnitin®’s exploitation of students, since students who want credit for assignments may have no meaningful choice in the matter (Purdy 2009; Townley and Parsell 2004).

Despite a significant amount of research on student plagiarism, the present study fills a void in the literature because it examines faculty perspectives using qualitative techniques with an eye towards critics’ objections. Most research in this area has utilised quantitative methods, such as those employed in faculty surveys by Bennett, Behrendt, and Boothby (2011) and Holi Ali (2013). Studies that have used qualitative techniques usually have made student interviews the focus, such those by Blum (2009) and Power (2009). Work devoted to ethical objections to Turnitin® consists predominantly of non-empirical, argumentative essays, such as those of Zwagerman (2008). Studies of faculty attitudes towards Turnitin® tend to have centred on the software’s functionality and ease of use (Savage 2004; Sutherland-Smith and Carr 2005). A recent study by Buckley and Cowap (2013) is a case in point. It involved staff interviews conducted as part of a pilot programme to decide if the institution should implement Turnitin®. As such, the authors concentrated on the software’s effectiveness, its most useful features and the technical difficulties some staff members experienced. The study that most resembled ours is that of Flint, Clegg, and Macdonald (2006). Like us, they conducted interviews with faculty members from a variety of departments. However, their emphasis was on how instructors defined plagiarism in the light of a new institutional policy. Turnitin® was not an issue.

Critics’ scrutiny of plagiarism detection software combined with the software’s increased popularity in general and on our campus in particular raises two questions that motivated this study. Our first research question concerns whether or not instructors’ current thinking about student plagiarism reflects ethical objections of the sort described above. Many scholars have cast aspersions on the idea that instructors should actively seek out and punish plagiarism; many of these critics have backgrounds in English, especially composition and rhetoric. The emergence of Turnitin® and other anti-plagiarism software early in the last decade exacerbated unease about ‘policing’ plagiarism. We wanted to know if these criticisms resonate with faculty members outside of English departments in terms of how they think about and manage student plagiarism, especially since Turnitin® has become so widely used.
Our second research question is whether or not those who use Turnitin® regularly differ from those who do not in terms of how they define and handle plagiarism. One way this might be occurring is if such text-matching software is encouraging professors to police only strings of verbatim matching text (Emerson 2008). As the concept is standardly defined, plagiarism comprises not only identical word sequences, but also insufficiently cited partial paraphrases and the use of other’s ideas. Since Turnitin® is a ‘one size fits all’ platform, it is also impervious to disciplinary discrepancies. Subtle differences in citation practices and conventions exist between academic fields at the professional level (Haviland and Mullin 2009; Hyland 1999; Loui 2002); the use of direct quotation is frequently discouraged in the sciences but encouraged in the humanities, for example (Buranen and Stephenson 2009). Turnitin® is blind to such nuances.

Methodology
We conducted 23 semi-structured interviews with faculty members across disciplines to observe similarities and differences in attitudes towards the concept of plagiarism and Turnitin®. All interviewees were full-time faculty members at the same institution. Ten of the participants were male, and 13 were female. Their years of teaching experience ranged from 6 to 31 years with an average of 18.5 years of experience. Their ages ranged from 32 to 66 with an average age of 50.6 years. Eight of the participants identified themselves as primarily teaching undergraduate courses, four identified themselves as primarily teaching graduate-level courses, and 11 identified themselves as teaching both graduate and undergraduate courses.

In recruiting participants, we used a combination of stratified purposeful and convenience sampling. This allowed us to adapt our selection process as the study progressed and seek out interviewees who could offer perspectives that would potentially expand the range of attitudes represented in our survey (Marshall and Rossman 2011). Our aim was to diversify our sample in order to gain a range of views from different academic fields. While we interviewed a number of instructors from English, the field most heavily invested in discussions of plagiarism, we also spoke with faculty members from music, history, biology, criminal justice, nursing, marketing, education, sociology, social work, medical laboratory science, philosophy and political science. In addition, we used institutional data on departmental usage of Turnitin® to help us find participants. We did not pre-screen to determine if instructors were employing the software in a proactive or reactive fashion. Rather, we allowed those who employed Turnitin® to self-describe their means of and motivations for its usage. Of those we spoke with, fourteen regularly employed the software, whereas nine used it infrequently or had never used it.

A phenomenological approach was taken towards interviewing and analysis. This approach allowed us to uncover interviewees’ perspectives by ‘bracketing’, a process whereby researchers set aside their own presumptions in order to better understand subjectively constructed perspectives on a particular phenomenon (Holstein and Gubrium 2005). Semi-structured interviewing was employed to avoid the preconceived categorisations that often derive from structured interview practices (Fontana and Frey 2005). While we asked open-ended questions, such as ‘What is your attitude towards plagiarism?’ and ‘What is your general opinion of using Turnitin® in the classroom?’, recursive questioning was frequently employed as well, and participants were encouraged to elaborate on their personal experiences.
We avoided referencing objections from the academic literature so as not to influence interviewees’ responses. Table 1 details the trigger questions that were used in our interviews.

The interviews lasted between 30 and 45 min. Each was recorded and manually transcribed, and interviewees were given aliases during transcription to protect them from identification. Interview transcripts were read multiple times to identify content topics, which were then used to compile excerpts from individual interviews. In order to gain internal validity, the compilations of excerpts were then re-examined to identify common patterns and deviations among participants’ responses and compared to the original transcripts (Hayes 2000; Lemon and Taylor 1997). In addition, we collected copies of syllabi from instructors to explore how their discussion of plagiarism with us compared to their official class policies.

Findings

A common theme among many interviewees was dissatisfaction with the university’s policies and procedures regarding student plagiarism. Paul (history) argued that the institution has ‘done a very bad job’ at ‘maintaining standards’. Crystal (English) said ‘there needs to be a more meaningful university policy with teeth’. Jim (marketing) lamented that concerns over plagiarism were not ‘more a part of the culture of the university’. Sometimes these criticisms were targeted specifically at the school’s treatment of Turnitin®. For example, Stacey (criminal justice) argued that Turnitin® was insufficiently promoted at the university.

However, only rarely did interviewees express the sorts of political, pedagogical or ethical objections that are common in the academic literature. Even participants who did not use the software regularly expressed no reservations about policing plagiarism in general. Rather, they tended to mention self-deprecatingly a lack of technical know-how as the reason they did not employ Turnitin®. One instructor joked that she did not use it because she was ‘a little lazy’; another laughed and said that she ‘simply forgot about’ the software. Others indicated that they stopped using Turnitin® because they found it time consuming or irrelevant to the type of assignments they were giving their students.

A few instructors, however, cited objections to the use of the software. Tony (history) described himself as ‘old fashioned’ and compared using Turnitin® to using PowerPoint, stating that both ‘really kind of puts off our responsibility [as teachers]’. Crystal (English) offered a similar pedagogical objection:

the classroom is very personal. I don’t mean it’s about me as a person, but you know, I see it as a very human encounter. And, it’s why I love books. It’s why I love literature.

Table 1. Trigger questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
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<tr>
<td>What is your general attitude towards student plagiarism?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you think plagiarism in general is a serious problem?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you think some types of plagiarism are more serious than others?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What do you think students’ attitudes towards plagiarism are?</td>
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<tr>
<td>If you discuss plagiarism in your classes, how specifically do you talk about it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your general attitude towards Turnitin®?</td>
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<tr>
<td>If you have used Turnitin®, what was your experience like?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you have not used Turnitin®, why have you not used it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you think students’ attitudes towards Turnitin® are?</td>
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That’s why I don’t read on a Kindle… That’s why I’m inclined to tell students, ‘You cannot just read this electronically. You have to have a hard copy to work with in class’. So, I do think that all of these technological mediations they facilitate certain things but they probably work, in certain regards, to de-personalize and overly mechanize, the really organic thing that happens in the classroom.

Those who expressed familiarity with common ethical objections to Turnitin® had largely come to terms with the software. Warren (English) said that he was aware of the ‘ethical problem’ with Turnitin®, which he described as relating to ‘a company that is making money off of the intellectual property of others… who are not being compensated’, but described himself as ‘pragmatic enough’ to realise it was a necessary tool in teaching large online courses. Along the same lines, Paul (history) reasoned that ‘the way that Turnitin® is using these documents seems fair enough’ because it is a ‘John Lockeian moment where you give up a little bit of your freedoms in order to have a little bit more security’. However, one instructor expressed views that echoed much of the critical literature. Sharon (English) argued that if students can plagiarise ‘really well’, it does not bother her because ‘academic writing… is replicating’. This perspective echoes the intertextuality arguments made by critics like Blum (2009). Sharon indicated that she thought the software was ‘problematic’ because ‘it does in some ways violate students’ rights to their intellectual property’. She also expressed comments similar to the concerns of some critics:

I do think that it is often used as a sort of scare tactic and a means of not having what can be very difficult conversations with students, and with what is a difficult skill to teach. I think that because writing is different in every discipline, it is a faculty member’s responsibility to teach their students how to write in that discipline. I think that you can use Turnitin® and still do that, but I do think there are some faculty who don’t. I do think there are some faculty that simply use it as a policing mechanism and I do think that is problematic.

Yet while Sharon voiced personal misgivings about the software, she also emphasised that she did not think other instructors were necessarily wrong for using it or for having different pedagogical approaches.

Several objections to policing student plagiarism in the academic literature are in some way or another related to the issue of intentionality, such as those of critics who fear that Turnitin® will be used mechanically to punish students based on simplified word match algorithms alone. This is the one issue on which we found significant overlap between the concerns of critics and the views of those we interviewed. Many of the interviewees believed that plagiarism is often a deliberate attempt to cheat, even though few of them identified this as the sole or even the primary cause of plagiarism.

For example, Max (education) indicated that using Turnitin® made the complexities of the issue clear to him:

as I was bringing students into the office and was discussing [it] with them, it quickly became apparent that they were not attempting to be dishonest but rather were ignorant and uninformed about plagiarism issues… I think [plagiarism is] a mortal sin. But to humanize it somewhat, I believe that it is often quite unintentional and done out of a certain amount of naiveté.

Elaborating on this phenomenon, Rachel (biology) concluded that students ‘don’t understand what’s necessary to cite and what’s not necessary to cite’. Sharon
(English) commented that ‘while they’ve heard the word plagiarism, they understand it as simply copying, they know very little about citation’. Adrianna (biology), Caroll (medical laboratory science) and Stacey (criminal justice) all also stated that they think student plagiarism is often unintentional and results from a failure to comprehend proper citation practices. This sentiment was repeated throughout interviews, both among instructors who used Turnitin® regularly and those who did not. These comments support research by Risquez, O’Dwyer, and Ledwith (2013) which has shown that students’ working knowledge of proper academic citation often fails to match their self-reported understanding.

A significant number of the interviewees attributed student plagiarism to a lack of proper education at the secondary level. Christopher (English) and Jackie (political science) both hypothesised that students developed bad habits in high school that had gone uncorrected. Three of the interviewees illustrated similar points with specific, unprompted examples from their own experiences with their children’s primary or secondary education. Roger (criminal justice) described asking his daughter where she got a piece of information for one of her papers, and she replied that she did not know. Samantha (social work) indicated that she always starts her discussion of plagiarism in class by bringing up an example of when she caught her daughter plagiarising and made her confess to her teacher even after her daughter had already received an ‘A’ for the assignment. Penny (sociology) described a similar experience in detail:

So my daughter had to write a paper… And so she just, first thing she did was just write up what she’d found… and I had to sit down with it and make her cite it appropriately. So you know, she was like ‘Mom, we don’t have to do this; this is embarrassing’. But I was like, you know, ‘I can’t let you be trained [like this] because it becomes what’s the default of how things are done’.

She noted that ‘copying things and memorizing the definitions’ was ‘part of how these kids study’.

Nevertheless, the vast majority referred to plagiarism as ‘cheating’ or ‘academic dishonesty’ on their course syllabi, a characterisation at odds with the idea that most student plagiarism is unintentional. Table 2 details the way plagiarism was presented in the syllabi of interviewees.

As Table 2 indicates, 18 out of 23 of the interviewees’ syllabi associated plagiarism either with ‘cheating’ or with ‘academic dishonesty’. Of these 18, half indicated in interviews their belief that plagiarism was often unintentional. This discrepancy may be partially explained by most of these syllabi repurposing language from an outdated version of the Student Handbook which had defined plagiarism as a type of academic dishonesty. Yet, instructors said that they discussed plagiarism in classes in a similar way. Jim (marketing) told students it is ‘academic theft’ and that ‘from an academic point of view it’s pretty much the worst thing you can do’. Tony (history) referred to it as ‘the cardinal sin in academia’. Warren (English) said that he makes ‘an impassioned case’ to students on the first day of class that they are robbing not only others, but also themselves when they plagiarise.

Additionally, a small minority argued either that most plagiarism they saw was intentional or they overtly collapsed any possible distinction between inadvertent plagiarism and cheating during our interviews. Surprisingly, three of the four English instructors we spoke with thought that the majority of cases were deliberate. Christopher (English) argued that in most of the cases he encountered, students
know what they’ve done’. Crystal (English) implied intent as well. She surmised, ‘by and large my sense of when students plagiarise has to do with a lack of confidence or a fear of failure’. Warren (English) stated that he divided the majority of plagiarism cases he encountered into two categories: ‘scammers’ and those who were ‘just being lazy’.

Tony (history), one of the few strong critics of the software, expressed concern about the mechanical way Turnitin® functions: ‘I think the bottom line [for why] I don’t like Turnitin®, com is that I’m looking for plagiarism when I use that programme. But it doesn’t give often a perfectly clear answer. It’s a percentage. So then I don’t like the idea of, well, what am I going to give? Eighty-two percent of an F?’. However, among those who use Turnitin® regularly, most indicated that they evaluated Originality Reports on a case by case basis. Adrianna (biology), for example, said she goes out of her way to reassure students that the numbers in the reports are not the ‘end all be all of what they are doing’. With regard to these numbers, Jim (marketing) stated bluntly, ‘I don’t use that number, and there’s no fast rule, none at all’. Roger (criminal justice) similarly explained, ‘I’m not saying well you have a 13% or you have a 27%, you’re done… I’ll go look and see what it’s saying is in the 13%’. Even though he used the software regularly and described himself as ‘in the bag’ for Turnitin®, Paul (history) gave a specific example demonstrating why he thought the numbers on the Originality Report were not very valuable:

I had a student this week who plagiarized, I mean Turnitin® found matches... and basically the thesis statement on each of [two] paragraphs seems to have been plagiarized. And all the original work in the paragraph was not... This is a freshman who I think is just trying to learn and this is somebody who despite that scary 30% number... and the teaching assistant had originally flagged it for my attention with the thought that this was very serious. When I looked at it, to my mind this was less serious. So, that’s what I mean by trying to discern their intent. There’s nothing automatic about plagiarism’.

Table 2. Interviewee syllabi.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plagiarism related topic</th>
<th>Regularly uses Turnitin®</th>
<th>Does not regularly use Turnitin®</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Has plagiarism statement in syllabus</td>
<td>10/14</td>
<td>9/9</td>
<td>19/23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syllabus refers to student handbook on plagiarism/academic dishonesty issues</td>
<td>11/14</td>
<td>7/9</td>
<td>18/23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syllabus states penalty for plagiarism ‘may’ result in failed assignment grade</td>
<td>5/14</td>
<td>3/9</td>
<td>8/23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syllabus states penalty for plagiarism is an automatic failed assignment grade</td>
<td>4/14</td>
<td>2/9</td>
<td>6/23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syllabus states penalty for plagiarism ‘may’ result in ‘F’ in course</td>
<td>8/14</td>
<td>7/9</td>
<td>15/23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syllabus states penalty for plagiarism is an automatic ‘F’ in course</td>
<td>2/14</td>
<td>1/9</td>
<td>3/13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syllabus associates plagiarism with ‘cheating’ or ‘academic dishonesty’</td>
<td>10/14</td>
<td>8/9</td>
<td>18/23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syllabus associates plagiarism with ‘cheating’ or ‘academic dishonesty’ and interview characterised it as often unintentional</td>
<td>5/14</td>
<td>4/9</td>
<td>9/23</td>
</tr>
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*One syllabus indicated automatic failure in course for a second infraction.*
Christopher (English), Samantha (social work) and Warren (English) also indicated that they do not rely on the metrics Turnitin® provides in any substantial way. A significant number of those we interviewed stated that it was students who clamoured for hard and fast numbers on what was considered plagiarism, numbers which the instructors who used Turnitin® refused to give them. Max (education) commented: ‘They’ll say is 18–20 percent acceptable? And I’ll say, well, that depends on what it is. 18–20 percent could be you submitted the results section from one of your team members’. In short, almost all of the instructors we interviewed claimed either to ignore Turnitin®’s metrics or de-emphasise their value. Most used the software the same way they would use conventional means of plagiarism detection: by examining each paper on a case by case basis and comparing it directly to potential source documents.

Only a few instructors mentioned using specific metrics provided by Turnitin® regularly. Betty (nursing) indicated that 30% on an Originality Report was her guideline. Todd (marketing) said that he looks more closely at anything highlighted in red, the colour indicator Turnitin® uses to highlight passages with the highest degree of similarity to potential source material. However, even those who relied on Turnitin®’s metrics indicated that they still look at the actual matches carefully before making a final determination as to whether or not further action was required.

Interviewees were almost unanimous in claiming that they penalised only the extreme cases of verbatim plagiarism which they viewed as instances of academic dishonesty. Cynthia (biology) said that she penalises only flagrant cases of plagiarism and merely underlines passages that are ‘flirting’ with plagiarism. Jim (marketing) described the same phenomenon as ‘the chicken pox pattern’ which he does not penalise. He indicated that in such borderline cases he staples the printed out version of the website to the paper and tells students ‘you don’t need to be doing this’ as a ‘shot across the bow’. Christopher (English) similarly explained that while ‘two or three well-chosen words’ could be considered plagiarism, he raises the issue only with individual students when he believes that ‘dead to rights there’s a case to be made’.

Many explained that in addition to using Turnitin® as a deterrent, they also employed it as a ‘formative’ or proactive teaching tool to deal with less flagrant forms of plagiarism, echoing findings in Rolfe (2011). Samantha (social work), Adrianna (biology) and Stacey (criminal justice) indicated that they are lenient towards plagiarism found in the first paper or drafts, but give no credit for subsequent plagiarised work. Max (education), Todd (marketing), Amy (sociology), Adrianna (biology) and Samantha (social work) all explained that they let students submit papers as many times as they wish before the due date and view the Originality Reports. Betty (nursing) said that she makes the reports immediately available to students, but they could not resubmit their papers without asking permission to do so. She said that she does this so ‘they can see what they are doing’ and ‘use it for the future’.

When we asked instructors about student attitudes towards Turnitin®, most indicated that their students had few or no concerns about the software other than initial difficulties learning its interface. A few interviewees mentioned specific scenarios in which students requested their papers not be submitted, however. Paul, for example, discussed one such scenario but emphasised that ‘it was one student’ over the course of the many years he had been using the software. Several of the instructors thought that younger students had a different attitude towards privacy and intellectual property than older generations. Penny (sociology) referred to the type of content
younger students post on Facebook as ‘a lot more embarrassing’ than material in their papers and surmised that ‘18–20 year olds are less concerned about privacy altogether’. Sharon (English) indicated that she wishes students were more concerned than they appear to be:

I can sit here and talk about their intellectual property rights and I don’t think it matters to them for the most part. I don’t think they see that in the same way that they don’t see someone else’s Facebook post as sort of intellectual property. At this point I don’t think they conceive of themselves as authors… But I think even without the right sort of context and conversations set for them, I just don’t know that they sort of are looking critically at the world around them in those ways, unless we are sort of pushing them to do so.

Yet even though Sharon wanted her students to be more critical, she explained that the main reason she does not continue using Turnitin® in her own classroom is because students complained that they did not like the interface. She also indicated that she had turned off database submissions and was using Turnitin® ‘strictly as a grading tool’. Her case aside, we found that among both faculty members who do and who do not use the software, convenience, more than ethical, political or pedagogical objections, seemed to play the largest role in shaping their attitudes towards Turnitin®.

Conclusion
In terms of our first research question, overall we found little support for the idea that instructors’ current thinking about student plagiarism reflects ethical objections that are common in the academic literature. However, some of those who did not use Turnitin® regularly voiced general concerns about the impact of technology in the classroom. While most instructors expressed no reservations about, or even awareness of, intellectual property issues related to the software, those who did thought that its use was a Faustian bargain justified by the current teaching environment. Moreover, while most of those we interviewed indicated that very few of their students expressed objections to the software, different methods, including those involving classroom observation and student interviews, are needed to explore this issue adequately.

In terms of how instructors define and handle plagiarism, we found little difference between those who used Turnitin® regularly and those who did not. The majority in both groups believed that a large portion of student plagiarism is accidental and most penalised only extreme cases of verbatim copying. Despite much of the criticism on policing plagiarism coming from the field of English, among our interviewees, the English faculty members were comparatively sceptical about the prevalence of accidental plagiarism. Both those who used Turnitin® regularly and those who did not generally said they made determinations about penalties on a case by case basis and in a similar manner.

One area for further research is the relation between how Turnitin® is used and university culture and policy. Among our interviewees, we saw little evidence that Turnitin® was being used mechanically. Few relied on Turnitin’s quantitative metrics and many allowed students to view the results of Turnitin®’s Originality Reports before making final submissions. Additionally, many penalised first drafts or initial assignments much less severely than subsequent offences. However, it may be that instructors at universities with more regularly enforced plagiarism policies use the software somewhat differently.
Another area for additional study involves the discrepancy between the way many instructors characterised plagiarism as frequently accidental or the result of ignorance in interviews and how plagiarism was often defined as a form of dishonesty or cheating on their syllabi. The disparity existed almost equally among both those who used the software and those who did not. One possible explanation is that professors’ tendency to attribute plagiarism to unintentional causes reflects what is known in the plagiarism enforcement literature as ‘psychological distancing’. Schools without honour codes and clearly defined institutional policies have been shown to engender permissiveness by both instructors and students (Vandehey, Diekhoff, and LaBeff 2007). A related possibility is that instructors’ attributions of unintentionality represent a rationalisation induced by conflict aversion. According to one study, a large majority of faculty members regard confronting students about cheating as ‘among the most onerous aspects of their profession’ (Keith-Spiegel et al. 1998, 215). Both explanations are compatible with the possibility that the moralistic tone common on instructors’ syllabi reflects a largely passive reuse of the institution’s ‘official’ statement regarding plagiarism from the Student Handbook. This moralistic syllabus language may also be a precautionary measure intended to allow instructors maximal flexibility in dealing with plagiarism. Further study is needed to determine which if any of these possible explanations has merit.

Finally, the relationship between how instructors define and handle plagiarism and the associations they may be making about student understanding and student behaviour warrants further exploration. As Risquez, O’Dwyer, and Ledwith have pointed out, many studies of student plagiarism have involved the questionable assumption that students’ self-reported understanding of plagiarism equates to an adequate working knowledge of the rules of proper academic citation (2013). A related gap involves the supposition that bare conceptual understanding reliably translates into practice. In the field of grammar pedagogy, for example, research has shown that there is no consistent connection between a conceptual grasp of grammar learned through isolated exercises and competent use of grammatical skills in writing (Hillcocks 1986; Weaver 1996). Similarly, it may be that students’ abstract understanding of plagiarism often fails to translate into their citation practices. In their discussions of intentionality, our interviewees often apparently assumed that students’ citation failures stemmed from a lack of understanding. However, further work needs to be done on possible differences between students’ self-reported understanding, their actual understanding and instructors’ perceptions of students’ understanding, on the one hand, vs. students’ citation behaviour on the other.

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