

## Pitfalls of Turn-it-in in Detecting Percentage of Plagiarism among Graduate Students Thesis in University of Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria

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### Abstract

This paper was to examine the pitfalls of turn-it-in detecting percentage of plagiarism among graduate students thesis in university of Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria. Plagiarism Detection Software (PDS), Turnitin is the most widely used software in detecting plagiarism in University of Calabar. In spite of the immense contribution of Turnitin to address the problem of plagiarism in the academe, specifically in the light of Federal university of Calabar Cross River State Nigeria where students are asked to reduce the level of plagiarism in the thesis work to a minimum of at least 10% plagiarism and 90% originality. The results of the study reaffirmed certain laudable benefits claimed by Turnitin, while these also revealed some tentative limitations in the software's promise of detecting plagiarism, especially in the common instances of misuse of the PDS, technicality of the software, detection of word, sentences clauses and phrase that may ordinary be termed outliers in a topic and blurred lines between the concepts of originality and plagiarism. The use of Turnitin was found to engender conflicting attitudes among the students towards avoiding this academic offense. Hence, this paper robustly recommends the careful guidance of stakeholders (teachers and students alike) in the proper use of the promising PDS as well as the re-evaluation of the plagiarism policy or approach of the institution in order to enhance and sustain quality in the software.

### Keywords:

Re-evaluating,  
pitfalls, turn-it-in,  
plagiarism, graduate  
students' thesis.

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### **Background to the Study**

Plagiarism is an unintentional, reckless or deliberate imitation or use of somebody else's work for one's benefits without proper acknowledgment of the original author (Kennedy, 2006; Logue, 2003; Moore, 2000). Direct lifting of somebody's work without given due credit to the source is an act of plagiarism. Most scholars feels that coping somebody's work may always be an easier and a convenient option, plagiarism is becoming more rampant in almost all institutions especially in the academe. Weber-Wulff (2008, cited in Vergano, 2011: 3) "plagiarism is a social problem, we need better education on how to properly write and research" the ability to assess a plagiarized work is difficult therefore, the introduction of turn it in is a grand breaking invention in the academic field (Eyong, 2015) Prior to the innovations of Plagiarism Detection Software (PDS), teachers tended to rely more on note cards (submitted or prepared by students), perform manual cross-checking of students' works side by side against references, depend on the their familiarity of the students' writing styles and/or execute internet search (via Google or other search engines) to find the sources of suspected plagiarized passages. The process is subjective, unsystematic, and also quite tedious.

### **Objective of the Study**

The objective of this paper was to examine the pitfalls of turn-it-in detecting percentage of plagiarism among graduate students thesis in university of Calabar, Cross River State.

### **Literature Review**

#### **The need for Turnitin in Reducing plagiarism**

Even though some studies (e.g., Martin, 2005; Scaife, 2007; Starr & Graham-Matheson, 2011a) described Turnitin as a "perfect" tool, other research investigations presented a more realistic assessment of the PDS by acknowledging both its advantages and disadvantages (Arnott, 2009; Chew & Price, 2010; Davis & Carroll, 2009; Koshy, 2009). They recognized that saving time, deterring plagiarism, and promoting ethical writing are three of the many advantages of Turnitin. Badge and Scott (2009), Jocoy and DiBiase (2006) and Williams (2007) emphasized that by using Turnitin, teachers could save time cross-referencing their students' works with the cited and uncited parts of their papers. Students likewise became more careful in writing citations and were discouraged to just simply copy-and-paste information knowing that teachers use Turnitin.

### **Methodology**

#### **How to use Turnitin in your Research work**

To use the Turnitin software, teachers will have to request for an individual account through their university's library or any other office designated to manage the Turnitin subscription. After logging in to the main website, <http://www.turnitin.com/>, the teachers are now ready to create their own individual class accounts in their own instructor homepages. The class accounts can then be created using the "Add Class" option featured in the instructor homepage. After turning in the work, the similarity index rating is indicated in the box displayed at the upper right corner of the document viewer. This rating is important because it shows how much of the student's paper content matches with the documents in the database of Turnitin. The matched items give

the teachers a clue which part of the paper may have been plagiarized. This feature therefore eliminates the need to execute Internet search (i.e., Google) and manually cross-check passages against generated references.

However, high Similarity Index does not automatically translate to a plagiarized paper. The exact sources that the document matched with must be scrutinized for they may include the student's own draft submitted prior to the final paper. Additionally, to avoid making a sweeping judgment by outrightly saying the paper is plagiarized due to its high similarity rating, teachers may use the Filters & Settings option to screen and/or limit the bibliographic, quoted or small match sizes.

### **Pitfalls of Turnitin**

However, some drawbacks of the use of Turnitin include the limited sources, distrust issue and expensive cost. Teachers cannot solely rely on Turnitin because of the limited sources that it has (Locke, 2002). Some parts of the students' works may not be highlighted as plagiarized because their sources may not have been digitalized yet. Skinner (2010) pointed out in his paper that tables, figures and images were not recognized by Turnitin. Another disadvantage is that some students may be given an impression that teachers do not trust them and that there was already a presumption that they would cheat or copy some parts without proper citation (York University, 2012). Unlike other PDS that are readily available online, Turnitin is quite expensive software because its license needs to be renewed annually for university of Calabar to avail its services. This may be the reason why most state and colleges of education has not been fully ready to utilize the benefits of the software. *Turnitin* has some very serious limitations to its ability to fully detect plagiarism. For one thing, *Turnitin* can only detect the most blatantly copied text. It cannot detect cleverly paraphrased passages, or copied text that has been vastly altered by the student's use of a thesaurus.

It is also ineffective for detecting works that have been written by another student, person or a "ghost writer," unless more than one student submits the paper. *Turnitin* cannot distinguish between text that has been properly quoted and cited and text that has not. Subsequently, it returns an inaccurate originality report. *Turnitin* often returns a report of unoriginality for paper headers, and bibliographies. Therefore, the initial plagiarism percentage rating cannot be used as a trustworthy indication of the degree of plagiarism. Additionally, many students participate in online forums that store the comments in a database and display them in a thread. Often, *Turnitin* will incorrectly match disparate and disjointed sections of that thread to the students' papers, or will return a plagiarism report for students who are actually quoting themselves.

More importantly, the use of *Turnitin* could compromise the instructor's own grading criteria. Upon reading a paper, an instructor might judge it to be original and give it a high mark. However, after submitting the paper to *Turnitin* and viewing the originality report, the instructor would most likely lower the grade and even confront the student. Additionally, using the service places an emphasis on policing student behavior and has the ability to shift the instructor's attention away from teaching good writing skills and

ways to avoid plagiarism. Although I am certain that there are numerous other pitfalls to using *Turnitin*, one of the most serious problems may be found in the way instructors use it. It is a very dangerous practice to judge a paper by the originality report alone, although that is how many instructors have utilized the service. By reading a hard copy of the paper (on which they make their corrections and edits) and relying on the originality report alone to assure the absence of plagiarism the instructor treads on very thin ice. The software is technically not its own weakness per se, but the lack of proper training of its users. There have been criticisms on the “flawed” detection of plagiarism (mostly overdoing it) by Turnitin that were confirmed in the initial phases of this study. James, McInnis, & Devlin (2002: 3), in their evaluation of various PDS, warn to users carefully check the report generated in Turnitin since “the software detects correctly-cited material as well as plagiarised material”. This observation was echoed by a number of students in this study. One student evaluated the software thus: It's useful for both students and teachers. But it's not all that effective sometimes because it flagged my direct quotations as plagiarized material and sometimes it's better to proofread the work to effectively know if it's plagiarized.

### **Conclusion**

Turnitin is obviously not yet perfect software because of the limitations that were mentioned earlier in this paper. First, it is unable to detect improperly cited text and to countercheck sources mentioned in the in-text citation with the reference list. Second, it also cannot highlight pieces of information that need citations. Third, its complex program/system often lends itself to some forms of misuse from its users. And lastly, its very nature of “detecting plagiarism” by reporting the level of similarity of a text with its vast database often creates some form of confusion on concepts of similarity/originality versus plagiarism. This confusion often leads students to resort to misguided tactics in evading high percentages in the similarity index, instead of paying greater concern over clarity in writing while maintaining academic honesty. These limitations should not be neglected because Turnitin has all the potentials to perfectly aid the teachers to tap the confidence and competence of every student writer in the ESL writing class.

As suggested by previous studies (James et al., 2002; Koshy, 2009; McAvinia, 2006), plagiarism detection software, such as Turnitin, serve to help minimize instances of plagiarism and inculcate a sense of vigilance among students and teachers alike in upholding academic integrity. This belief is confirmed in this study whereby benefits like increased awareness on plagiarism and originality as well as greater care in integrating various researched material were realized by the students. Further, this software facilitated the previously tedious process of detecting plagiarism

### **Recommendations**

Since the university considers plagiarism as a major offense, lecturers and students should exercise maximum tolerance in dealing with plagiarism. As such the following recommendations were drawn as the need to correct the pitfalls of turn-it-in software. First, Turnitin merely presents the percentage of similarity of a document to other existing works in its repertoire. Hence, manual checking and human judgment are still needed

Secondly the university system should increase the level of plagiarism to accept an already defended thesis say 20 to 25 percent. This is because most word like quality, intelligence, aptitude, self-concept may be detected as plagiarism.

Thirdly, every university has its standard outline for research thesis most of these guides are seen to be detected by the software which makes it difficult to beat the acceptable percentage. In the course of trying to correct these other mistakes are found like disjointed sentences, use of phrases etc which may make the work poor even after a perfect thesis defense carried out by the student concerned. Also, regular seminars, workshops should be conducted to equip graduate students with the skills involved in working with Turnitin. This is because students who are vast in computer see Turnitin as a money-making venture where they use it in exploiting those who lack the skills.

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