Exploiting feedback features in Turnitin to enhance academic literacy

E. D. Abrahamson and J. Mann, *University of East London, United Kingdom*

ABSTRACT: Online systems like Turnitin have been identified as ways to improve the quality of work that students submit (Coffey & Anyinam, 2012; Buckley and Cowap, 2013). Related to this, recent studies concerned with Turnitin have foregrounded its capacity as an educative tool that improves students' understanding of academic misconduct (Barratt and Malcolm, 2006; Buckley and Cowap, 2013; Ball et al., 2012; Ryan, Bonanno, Krass, Scouller& Smith, 2009). Academic writing, and the ability of students to appreciate feedback as a significant component of learning is often hidden behind the technological platform of Turnitin. In many cases Turnitin is conceived as software used to detect dishonesty and frame students for inappropriate citation, or misuse of referencing. In this small scale SoTL study we use a qualitative design to better understand the nature and development of online feedback. 58 undergraduate students participated in semi-structured interviews to explore their perceptions of online feedback on academic writing tasks. Making use of key concepts arising from the interviews, the study aims to identify what software features would be most useful for enabling students to develop writing competences across a number of genres. The early findings suggest that online platforms such as Turnitin, are problematic in that they fail to recognise the genre of the writing task, and generic quickmarks often provide general and vague guidance on how to improve. Accordingly, whilst 32% of respondents had a positive opinion of the usefulness of Turnitin for improving academic writing, 44% were found to be negative (with 22% neutral). We seek to understand this disparity, by examining more the pedagogical value of online feedback systems in the context of widening participation, and the British Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). Significantly expanding the discussion beyond plagiarism, taking a genre-based approach (Swales, 1990), and positioning both academic writing and Turnitin/feedback within the context of academic literacies (Lea and Street, 2006), this paper explores the value and concerns when using online feedback for academic writing development. We further suggest a series of practical recommendations that tutors can implement to help raise standards in feedback on student academic writing assessments.

REFERENCES

Ball, S., Bew, C., Bloxham, S., Brown, S., Kleiman, P., May, H., McDowell, L., Morris, E., Orr, S., Payne, E., Price, M., Rust, C., Smith, B., Waterfield, J. (2012) A Marked Improvement. York: Higher Education Academy. Available at: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/a_marked_improvement.pdf. Accessed 22 April 2016.

Barrett, R. and Malcolm, J. (2006), 'Embedding plagiarism education in the assessment process', International Journal for Educational Integrity, 2 (2), 38–45.

Buckley, E. and Cowap, L. (2013) 'An evaluation of the use of Turnitin for electronic submission and marking and as a formative feedback tool from an educator's perspective', British Journal of Educational Technology, 44, pp. 562–570.

Coffey S and Anyinam, C (2012) 'Trialing a contextual approach to academic honesty', Nurse Education, 37(2), pp. 62-6.

Lea, M. and Street, B. (2009) 'The "Academic Literacies" Model: Theory and Applications', Theory into Practice, 45:4, 368-377.

Ryan, G., Bonanno, H., Krass, I., Scouller, K., & Smith, L. (2009). Undergraduate and postgraduate pharmacy students' perceptions of plagiarism and academic honesty. American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education, 73(6), 1-8.

Swales, J. (1990). Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.