

CCCC-IP Caucus Recommendations Regarding Academic Integrity and the Use of Plagiarism Detection Services

Abstract

Use of Plagiarism Detection Services poses several compromises to academic integrity and effective teaching of which educators need to be aware before or if their institutions avail themselves of these technologies. The CCCC-IP Caucus recommends that compositionists take a leadership role in educating their institutions about the limitations of these services and conduct more empirical research to understand better how these technological services affect students' writing and the educational environment.

Introduction

Concerns about plagiarism in educational settings have given rise to the increased availability of plagiarism detection services (PDSs). Such services generally use software to search digital databases for correlations or matches between student writing and already written materials. In addition to web sources, databases often include compositions previously submitted by student authors. While it is true that effective teaching requires instructors to know when students turn in work which is not their own, a range of concerns has been raised regarding the ethics and pedagogical effects of PDSs. The purpose of this resolution is twofold:

1. To identify compromises to academic integrity—and effective teaching—that arise when PDSs are used as a component of postsecondary instruction as a whole, and writing classes in particular; and
2. To recommend an advocacy role for compositionists with respect to the use of such services.

Academic integrity and plagiarism detection services

The Center for Academic Integrity defines academic integrity to mean “a commitment, even in the face of adversity, to five fundamental values: honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility.” For this commitment to be meaningful, all members of academic communities—students, faculty, staff, and administration—need to enact these values. In keeping with this principle, educators should recognize that the use of PDSs can compromise academic integrity in at least five ways:

1. Because some PDSs routinely incorporate student work into their databases, the use of PDSs can undermine students' authority over the uses of their own writing. Even when students sign release forms, they do so within an unbalanced power differential which can be experienced as coercive. At a minimum, before prospective students are accepted at an institution that uses such services, they should be informed of submission requirements and the nature of the PDS's use of their work.

2. The use of PDSs places students in a position of being “guilty until proven innocent,” which casts them as in need of being policed, rather than as trustworthy learners who are motivated to pursue their educational goals with integrity. Not only is this unfair to the majority of students who do not plagiarize, but it conflicts with best practices for fostering student engagement and learning.
3. Reliance on PDSs may create a hostile environment. Asserting that PDSs insult honest students, a McGill University undergraduate succeeded in his refusal to submit his work to a university-mandated PDS. The students at Mount Saint Vincent University successfully lobbied their institution to ban the use of PDSs because they create a “culture of mistrust.” At Dalhousie University, a graduate student is devising strategies for thwarting PDSs, as a way of retaliating against the appropriation of his intellectual property. Such episodes of reasoned, successful student resistance illustrate the adversarial climate that PDSs create.
4. The use of plagiarism detection services can have the effect of transferring responsibility for identifying and interpreting instances of plagiarism from the instructor to computer software. The use of technology is no substitute for good teaching. Instructors have an obligation to their students to be clear about the roles and mutual responsibilities inherent in college writing. Teaching with integrity means that discussions about academic honesty should be a central part of the learning process, a role that technology can never fulfill.
5. PDSs can violate students’ right to privacy by making student writing available to commercial third parties not engaged in the relationship implied in the educational process. Most PDS licensing agreements give companies the right to “reproduce, display, disclose, and otherwise use” student work for their business purposes. In addition to student papers, “work” includes “questions, comments, suggestions and other data and information” submitted to the site. Even with the promised exclusion of “personally identifiable information,” such blanket permission to circulate student work presents risks which students might not anticipate or fully understand.

Plagiarism Detection Services and Writing Pedagogy

In addition to undermining a general environment of academic integrity, the use of PDSs can specifically disrupt good teaching of writing. The Council of Writing Program Administrators publishes a statement of best practices for defining and avoiding plagiarism, noting that the availability of PDSs “should never be used to justify the avoidance of responsible teaching.” Policies and practices surrounding plagiarism need to focus on teaching the multiple reasons we use sources and why we cite them, shifting the conversation about plagiarism from policing, property, and stealing to pedagogy and rhetorical processes. In addition to the principles described in the WPA statement, educators should consider the following cautions about the effects of PDSs in composition classrooms:

1. The use of PDSs shifts an instructor's role from supporting students and coaching them when they make mistakes, to policing writing and enacting punishments which may exceed the individual instructors' best judgment. This shift compromises the relationship between teachers and students.
2. PDSs foster an artificial view of originality and the role of imitation and borrowing in writing. Instructors need to respond to the changing values and definitions of writing that the Internet generation brings to the classroom.
3. PDSs enforce a narrow construction of writing as property and do not help students understand the more complex relationships among authorship, ownership, sources, and property and the ways in which they vary according to factors such as context, audience expectations, genre, and purpose. Distinctions between original and reproduced texts are always made within specific contexts.

Compositionists' roles and responsibilities

Compositionists should contribute to an environment of academic integrity and to effective teaching of writing by the following means:

1. Compositionists can draw upon their knowledge of and experience with the causes for plagiarism to help quell the panic that drives conscientious, fair-minded instructors to resort to plagiarism detection services.
2. Compositionists can take a leadership role in limiting the use of plagiarism detection services within educational settings.
 - a. At institutions where plagiarism detection services are not in place, compositionists can advocate actively against the adoption of such services.
 - b. At institutions where plagiarism detection services are in place, compositionists can refrain from using such services; can counsel their colleagues to do the same; and can offer sound pedagogical alternatives to the use of PDSs.
 - c. In cases where a given institution, college, department, or individual faculty member is committed to using plagiarism detection services, we urge compositionists to adopt and share practices for responsible, ethical use. At a minimum, such practices include notifying students at the beginning of the term that the service will be used; providing an opt-out clause; inviting students to submit drafts to the service before turning in final text; and conducting research to discover whether the service is accomplishing what instructors want it to.
3. Researchers conduct empirical studies to explore the effects of available strategies—including PDSs, pedagogy, and honor codes—on students' ethical writing from sources. Such studies need to explore whether or how PDSs, pedagogy, and honor codes produce results such as these:
 - Students' proficiency and confidence as writers;

- ❑ Students' understanding of what they can gain from completing their writing assignments;
- ❑ Students' sense of investment in and commitment to doing their own writing;
- ❑ Students' understanding of what constitutes plagiarism and ethical writing in a variety of contexts;
- ❑ Students' commitment to establishing a community of integrity and mutual trust;
- ❑ Reduced incidence of cheating and fraud.

Such research is necessary to support an evidence-based understanding of connections between teaching and the use of plagiarism detection services.