

2010 Teaching Improvement Project

Academic Honesty: Supporting student learning and quality teaching through best practice use of text matching software

Developing academic honesty and avoiding the consequences, for the institution and its students, of plagiarism is a critical issue in current teaching and assessment practice at the University of Sydney. In 2009 the Academic Board recognised this and revised the university's previous two policies on plagiarism and added a new feature covering the use of text matching software (TMS). The development of the policy was accompanied by considerable debate amongst staff and students. It was apparent that current uses of TMS are highly variable across the university and while some practices may support student learning and constitute quality teaching, many do not. There also appeared to be considerable variation in what software was used. In some cases academics use 'Google' to check if students texts match published work while some faculties have faculty licences for 'Turnitin' or equivalent programs and some faculties had written their own programs. The project is a collaboration between faculty experts, the ITL, the Learning Centre and has the support of the SRC and the Chair of Academic Board who has expressed his interest at being involved. It will (i) report on current TMS practice across all faculties (a requirement of the new policy) and (ii) through collaborative inquiry based in the faculties, identify how different uses of software impact on the quality of teaching and the quality of the student learning experience and student learning outcomes. Building on this (iii) the project will develop and disseminate best practice guidelines and resources to support teachers in using TMS in ways which enhance the quality of both teaching and learning.

Proposal Overview

Preventing plagiarism and promoting standards of academic integrity are issues of strategic concern and priority in Australian universities (East 2010). This importance is reflected in the recent approval by Academic Board of the University of Sydney's revised policy on Academic Honesty and Plagiarism. The policy balances the institution's need for detection and risk prevention with a student learning focussed perspective which seeks to develop academic honesty and includes a new and significant addition through the inclusion of explicit statements regarding the use of plagiarism detection software (Academic Board Policy: Academic Honesty and Plagiarism Section 3.3). In 2009 the discussions amongst students and staff in faculties and on central committees revealed widely divergent understandings and practices in relation to the use of plagiarism detection software (TMS). Practices ranged from the use by students to support their own learning about academic honesty; the use by individual academics at their own discretion; to the use of TMS to replace academic decision making entirely. This variation is not unique to Sydney with universities around the world using TMS in a variety of ways, ranging from a 'police and punish' (Rowell 2009) approaches to 'teaching and learning' approaches (Bertram Gallant 2008). While the policy discussions at Sydney are now over, the considerable diversity of opinion and practice on the 'right way' to use software persists. Such variation represents a considerable barrier to the consistent implementation of the intent of the new policy and hence a barrier to quality teaching at the University. More importantly it is a potential barrier to quality learning, as the different uses of the software appear likely to have significant implications for student learning – both in terms of the quality of the student experience and actual student leaning outcomes in relation to academic honesty.

The proposed project creates a team of academics from the faculties, staff from the Institute for Teaching and Learning (ITL) and the Learning Centre, and student leaders from the SR. All faculties of the university will be invited to work with the team to first accurately determine the current scope of current uses of TMS. The project will provide a mechanism by which faculties will be able to provide the report on compulsory use of TMS to Academic Standards committee of Academic Board, which is required by the new policy. Currently there is no support for faculties in meeting this obligation. In the second stage, the project team will collaboratively explore, with faculty partners, the implications of different uses for teachers' teaching (especially how they set and mark assessments) and on the quality and outcomes of student learning. While such implications seem likely and are assumed in many published reports, a review of the literature indicates there is at present no substantial published

research evidence that describes the impact of these different uses either on teaching or student learning. This project will contribute much needed research required to inform and promote evidence-based changes to current teaching practice relating to the use of TMS. The third phase of the project will use the research evidence and insights generated to develop guidelines and resources to support the effective pedagogic use of TMS. A forum presenting the guidelines and practice exemplars will provide an opportunity for informed debate and discussion on the appropriate uses of TMS at the University.

Criteria 1: Alignment with strategic goals and objectives

The proposed project addresses TIPS theme 1: 'improving teaching'. The project will improve teaching by providing teachers with evidence-based principles and guidelines that will inform their decisions about the use of TMS to enhance student learning. Through collaborative inquiry and reporting on current practice the project will enhance the university community's awareness of the negative consequences for student learning of inappropriate and punitive uses of TMS. It will also develop resources which will support teachers in implementing more appropriate uses of TMS which will lead to an improvement in the quality of teaching (and the quality of the student learning experience). The project will enhance teaching quality by promoting greater consistency and accountability of teaching approaches in relation to TMS across the university. It will seek to re-position academic honesty and plagiarism as a teaching and learning issue rather than a bureaucratic administrative burden for teachers (Bertram Gallant 2008). In the absence of such a project there is risk that teachers may perceive TMS as a 'one stop shop' or panacea to address the issue of plagiarism. The project also enhances student engagement. The implications for student learning of punitive policing uses of TMS directly impact on the student engagement in terms of motivation, effort, agency, self-direction and control; all shown to be key features of engagement (Kuh 2008). Through the involvement of the SRC as a member of the team the project also addresses student engagement and participation in teaching and learning change at the University. In developing case studies of teachers using TMS strategies that promote quality student learning outcomes the project also addresses theme 3. Teachers can be publicly recognised for their quality teaching both through their public presentations at the forum and in the documentation of case studies of good practice.

Plagiarism is a key problem our students face and despite all the support we offer, students are particularly confused and concerned about the rationale for plagiarism software. Such software does have the potential to be integrated into the curriculum in ways that focus on its educational rather than punitive uses. Janet Jones, Acting Head Learning Centre

The proposed project also directly addresses an emerging international and local theme relating to the development of student academic literacies and the avoidance of plagiarism (Bertram Gallant 2008). Reports in the literature show that the role that TMS plays in student learning is recognised though an unanswered question which requires more research. With the introduction of the new Academic Board policy it is timely, indeed vital, that the university now finds ways to ensure that best practice guidelines and principles for the use of TMS are developed and introduced to the university community so that academics can make informed decisions about the best use of TMS to enhance student learning.

The aims of the project are consistent with Goal 2 of the University's L&T Plan (2007-2010) to 'Support Quality and Innovative Teaching' by 'Maintaining systematic processes for Quality Enhancement' and 'Enhancing opportunities for the dissemination of best practice' as well as 'Continuing to promote and support student-centred teaching'. The aims are also consistent with the University Strategic Plan (2007-2010) LT3 'Improve Teaching Quality (through CEQ) and relevant student outcomes' as well as LT6 'Optimise the use of ICT in Learning and Teaching while retaining a face-to-face teaching experience'. The aims of the project are also aligned with the Faculty of Arts L&T Plan (2007-2010), which seeks to 'Promote quality, efficiency, and consistency in the Faculty's assessment principles, policies and practices to enhance student learning (2.3).

Criteria 2: Demonstrable enhancement of student learning

Plagiarism is an issue for every one of the 46 000 students at the university and developing the new policy is designed to position plagiarism detection in ways which enhance and support student learning. However, the fact that there does not appear to be any support for the implementation of the new policy will become a real issue for students. This project will identify the practices in the use of TMS that enhance student learning, and will encourage and support academics to implement these to improve student learning. Irrespective of cultural and educational background, all students need greater support in understanding concept of plagiarism (Maxwell et al 2008). The enactment of the Academic Board policy could have wide-ranging consequences for students' development of foundation skills as TMS can be used as a powerful resource to assist in the development of students' academic literacies (Macdonald and Carroll 2006). Although academic support services such as the Learning Centre exist, not all students take advantage of the resources on offer. This project's university-wide collaborative initiative will add a new systematic embedded strategy which will reach all students in courses where TMS is used.

Criteria 3: Intended learning objectives and rationales

The project has 5 intended objectives.

(i) to gain a clear understanding of the current uses of TMS across the university. This will help to establish current practices (good and bad). (ii) to gather evidence relating to the impact of different uses of TMS on student learning and teaching. This will further help to define good practice. (iii) to develop a set of good practice guidelines and resources to support the academic community in implementing best practice to lead to enhanced student learning across the university. A focus on the non-punitive use of TMS and on learning outcomes which reinforce academic honesty and will help to achieve consistent quality of teaching practice and improved graduate attributes for all students. (iv) to implement the new feature of the Academic Board policy which will lead to enhanced learning and teaching quality. (v) to enhance awareness among the broader university community of the core new Academic Board Learning & Teaching Policy to assist in its effective implementation.

Criteria 4: Innovation that complements enhances or integrates current initiatives

This project is an innovation because TMS is a new feature of a new policy that has new implementation and reporting requirements. The use of such software is new in many parts of the university and its use is increasing.

"The SRC supports this project, as it will facilitate improved teaching around plagiarism and academic honesty. The SRC supports detection software as a tool to assist academics, but recognise that this must be in conjunction with a project to enhance student learning"

Ellie Howse, President SCR.

The new policy is likely to indirectly further promote the use of TMS and it is important to promote best practice and to pre-empt inappropriate use of TMS. Some faculties and units have taken steps to develop academic honesty, e.g. the online modules in the Faculty of Economics and Business, and the Learning Centre courses and online resources and the SWOT program for new students. Faculty staff development programs have also addressed this issue, for example, the Arts Tutoring Development program contains a module on Academic Honesty and there are plans to develop a similar module for UoS coordinators. Various departments and faculties have engaged in extensive debate about detecting and avoiding plagiarism, e.g. in Engineering and in the

Departments of English and Media and Communications in Arts. This project will complement these existing initiatives and build on the interest generated during the Academic Board policy development .

Criteria 5: Project Management

There are three main phases to the proposed project:

1. The team will work with representatives from each faculty to explicate and document the ways they are currently using detection software to support academic decision-making. Faculties will be invited (through the ITL A/Dean L&T Group) to participate by first nominating a liaison person. The project team has developed a simple data collection strategy using an email survey. Respondents will be asked to select one of four approaches to using TMS identified on the basis of the different uses of TMS reported in the literature. (i) TMS is not used (ii) TMS is used by students prior to submission of their assignments (iii) TMS is used by staff if they suspect plagiarism in a piece of work (iv) TMS is used by staff to screen all assignments prior to marking (v) Other: Please describe. The team will consult with the faculty representatives to refine these response categories and to identify the most efficient means of gathering these email responses in each faculty. The responses will be analysed by a Project Officer and a report of current variation in use of TMS prepared for each faculty and the university as a whole.

2. Once the team has mapped the scope of current use, some 'typical' cases will be investigated further in different faculties to explore how the different uses influence the student and staff experience. Ten exemplar cases will be identified from the email responses representing variation in discipline and in approaches to TMS use. These teachers will be invited to participate in a collaborative inquiry, including a short interview to develop a case study and to explore how the TMS approach influences teaching, particularly the design of curriculum and assessment. This information will be paired with data from a focus group with students in the unit of study to explore the implications of the TMS approach for student learning experiences and outcomes. The student focus groups will be run in collaboration with representatives of the SRC and faculty student associations. The data will be analysed to identify relationships between different uses of TMS and teaching and learning experiences of staff and students.

3. This insights into the implications of the variation in TMS use for student learning and academics' teaching will be used to develop best practice guidelines for using TMS to support quality teaching and learning. These guidelines will be supported by the development of a case study vignettes from the teacher interviews to provide examples of effective quality teaching. The guidelines and exemplars will be reviewed by the Steering Group and provided to the relevant Academic Board committees and faculty L&T committees. A forum will be held to facilitate the engagement by faculty L&T committees and the broader university community with the guidelines and resources. Participating teachers will present the case study vignettes and there will be opportunities for debate and discussion of the guidelines. The case study vignettes (short video snippets from the forum and the written case) will be made available through the ITL website for use by the University community and will be incorporated in existing staff development programs such as Principles and Practice Program.

References

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