Beyond Resistance: Plagiarism Detection Services and the Laboring Body

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Humans often turn to machines when human labor is "in crisis" (Herrington & Moran, 2001, p.220). Currently, teaching labor in higher education is in critical condition: contingent faculty—who are teaching over 75% of college courses—are stretched thin, overworked, overburdened with grading, and lack of resources and support from administration (Fulwiler & Marlow, 2014; Welch & Scott, 2016). To alleviate the strain grading imposes on contingent faculty members, administrators look to automated technology to mitigate some of the burden teachers face. One example of this is institutional reliance on plagiarism detection services, which can promote pedagogical practices that are unsound and antithetical to best practices in Rhetoric and Composition. Scholars within this field have a long history of arguing for discontinuing these programs. However, they continue to grow in popularity and pervasiveness; the field now needs to move beyond resistance to learn what plagiarism detection services can show researchers about students' and teachers' needs. The following outlines how and why scholars and teachers of composition have resisted these programs in the past, the labor problems that are tied up in automated assessment of student writing, and what scholars can learn from how educators are using these programs.

Past Resistance and the Laboring Body

When I first started my master's degree five years ago, I remember feeling confused in first-year teaching practicum when my instructor mentioned something called a "plagiarism detection service" and cautioned teaching assistants against them. I did not understand what these programs were at the time, but I could not help but think, if there was a machine that would help back me up with student plagiarism cases, why would I not use it? After all, why would teachers not want to catch plagiarists?

As it turned out, there were numerous reasons to not use plagiarism detection services (PDSs)—programs that offer text-matching overviews of students' writing to signal to instructors when plagiarism may be occurring. Even then in 2012, many students had already been using PDSs since high school; now, popular PDSs (namely Turnitin) are even more pervasive and continue to be marketed for both higher education and K-12 ("Homepage," Turnitin.com, 2017). In 2012, Turnitin served approximately 10,000 institutions and graded over 20 million papers; today, they serve over 15,000 institutions and have collected 600 million (and counting) student papers ("Homepage," Wayback Machine, Sept. 21, 2012; "Feedback Studio," 2017). As early as 1999, scholars from rhetoric and composition have condemned the use of these programs, some of which have now expanded their services to offer automated assessment of student writing[1]. Such a long history of condemnation from experts of student writing makes it difficult to understand why these programs are accepted practice in the academy today (Howard, 1999; Marsh, 2004, Purdy, 2005; Zwagerman, 2008; Vie, 2013a, 2013b)—a tension that many of scholars in writing and rhetoric may still find puzzling.

In addition to individual scholars speaking out against PDSs, several respected organizations in the field have issued official statements that explicitly outline why teachers of writing should not support these programs (CCCC-IP, 2006; CWPA, 2003; NCTE, 2013). Concerns about PDSs include 1) copyright infringement and concern about safeguarding students' intellectual property; 2), surveillance and policing of student work; 3) privileging an autonomous, Western (English-speaking) author and thereby undermining collaborative processes 4) creating a "guilty until proven innocent" environment in class and 5) unreliability of the programs' assessments (Canzonetta & Kannan, 2016; Howard, 1999; Purdy, 2005; Vie, 2013a; Vie 2013b; Zwagerman, 2008). These statements, and much research on PDSs, highlight the ethical and pedagogical limitations of these programs.

In trying to understand why these programs flourish, Bill Marsh (2004, p. 428) and Stephanie Vie (2013a; 2013b) have suggested programs such as Turnitin are part of a "corporate solution" to fixing teaching problems, which are often labor problems. Humans tend to turn to machines when human labor is "in crisis"

[1] While I would argue PDSs are a type of automated assessment, the terminology refers specifically to programs that evaluate, grade, or score student writing.

(Herrington & Moran, 2001, p. 220). Currently, teaching labor in higher education is in critical condition: contingent faculty—who are teaching over 75% of college courses—are stretched thin, overworked, overburdened with grading. And lack of resources and support from administration (Fulwiler & Marlow, 2014; Welch & Scott, 2016). Vie (2013a) offers insight on why PDSs are used, despite scholarship that argues for disbanding them: material conditions of departments and the make-up of teaching labor necessitate machine intervention to cope with insufficient staffing or overworked teachers (p. 4). She traces out a useful hypothetical that outlines the logic teachers deploy when they support PDSs: "With all of these papers to grade, and given my desire for students to maintain academic integrity, how can I ensure this is the student's own work?" (p. 4). Teachers want to ensure academic integrity in their classrooms but are constrained by their working conditions. PDSs purport to offer a technological remedy for an otherwise incurable labor issue—one that is tied to preserving an institution's ethos and academic integrity.

Beyond Resistance

I am not suggesting we stop resisting PDSs or other automated assessment technologies, but that we look beyond our disciplinary past with programs such as Turnitin; we need to start thinking about how automation may have potential in writing classrooms. Currently, scholars from the field have started this work by creating Eli Review, a peer-writing program that uses automation to facilitate quality feedback among students ("Eli Review"). To extend this work and continue having a role in designing the technology our students are subjected to, we should also look to programs we disapprove of to collect data on how teachers are using them in their classrooms. They can teach us about what students and teachers need from educational writing technologies as we start to enter conversations about design.

We should not use Turnitin, but we should look at how and why it has been so successful as we usher in a new technological era (Huws, 2014; Markoff, 2015). In Jeff Grabill's keynote speech at Computers and Writing in 2016, he argued that the most popular writing technologies currently on the market were not designed by actual experts of writing, and we have a chance to change that. Most importantly, this work addresses issues of labor as they relate to PDSs. As Christopher Dean says in *Con Job: Stories of Adjunct and Contingent Labor*, "I don't know if it's a dark secret, but people in comp, we don't tend to talk about labor conditions quite so much. We kind of need an action plan I think" (Fulwiler & Marlow, 2014, 5:53). In moving forward with these conversations, I argue that teaching labor in writing classrooms needs to be a central part of discussions as we consider how to work productively with machines in the coming years.

We need to reconfigure our resistance to poorly designed programs, such as PDSs, and not let our past observations overshadow the potential we have to work with automation in the future. We should and must continue to resist machines that promote writing practices that are antithetical to best practices in the field. However, our past strategies against programs such as Turnitin have not been particularly effective. While PDSs may not be as popular in departments of English and Writing, they are prevalent across the university, as is evinced by Turnitn's global popularity ("Community," 2017; Vie, 2013b). One reason that has not received adequate attention is that our universities continue to create untenable labor conditions and consequently, PDSs and automated writing assessment programs, however imperfect, appear as a welcome relief for overburdened teachers.

Given this, scholars in computers and writing need to not only argue that programs such as Turnitin constitute bad pedagogy, but that they point to larger labor issue connected to the teaching of writing across the university (Vie, 2013a; 2013b). Currently, the majority of instructors teaching college classes in the US are untenured and are working in unmanageable conditions (Welch & Scott, 2016, p. 5-6). If we consider why programs like PDSs and other automated assessment programs have thrived in higher education, we can better understand how to help contingent faculty members through more responsible and ethically sound uses of automation in our classrooms.

How Are Teachers Using PDSs in Their Classrooms?

To collect data about how teachers used PDSs in their writing classes, I conducted a focus group study within the English department I worked at during fall of 2013. This focus group was comprised of four teachers

who had used a PDS prior to the semester of the study, and three teachers who were using a PDS for the first time that semester. To garner a wider purview of how PDSs were being used in writing classrooms across the country, I sent a survey to composition teachers on the WPA and TechRhet listservs about their experiences with PDSs. The results of the focus group and survey and showed what we can learn about teaching pedagogy from how teachers deploy PDSs. Further, the data supported Vie's (2013a) assertion that teaching labor was a significant factor in how these programs gained traction in higher education.

Data from this study suggested that in most cases, teachers were repurposing PDSs for more ethical use "as tools to teach citation and attribution, as authorities on plagiarism, as visual aids, and as self-checks for students. Instructors have been finding ways to use this technology to teach students about plagiarism" (Canzonetta, 2014, p. 49). Instructors in both the survey and focus group were subverting the program's intended use and tried to frame the PDS as a teaching tool, and as a self-check for students' citation practices--one instructor even used a workaround to keep the program from storing students' data. This tells us two things that can inform how we use technology in writing classes in the future: 1) writing teachers appear to be interested in technology that helps them teach citation practices (rather than a plagiarism catching tool) and 2) they often want students' intellectual property to be safeguarded[2].

As I mentioned earlier, when I was a novice teacher, I wanted support from a PDS if I had to talk to students about plagiarism. However, in conducting this study, I realized the programs do not actually offer plagiarism detection, rather, they are fallible text-matching services that cannot provide definite proof about plagiarism. Even though writing teachers were trying to use the tool ethically[3], they were still granting authority to a machine over their own expertise as writing professionals. Deferring authority to the PDS manifested when teachers described the PDS reports as "self-checks" for students—rather than asking the instructor for help with citation, the PDS was legitimized as a tool that could replace teachers' professional knowledge. Additionally, teachers also granted authority to the PDS reports by implying they provided "backup" if they had to approach a student about plagiarism, which also validated the tool as an accurate indicator of plagiarism. What does this tell us about plagiarism pedagogy and technology? First, plagiarism is a complex problem that is embroiled in contention—teachers should not have to fear approaching students about a pedagogical issue in their classrooms. Second, technology that helps teachers and students with complicated citation practices could be welcomed in writing classrooms, which would render plagiarism detection irrelevant. Last, an interesting insight that emerges from the data relates to labor and expertise: automation has the potential to deskill workers and replace them. If teachers are surrendering their authority to the PDS, it means we need to be careful about the technology we promote in our classrooms in the future to not let automation remove teachers from classrooms (Huws, 2014; Reeves, 2014; Zuboff,1988).

Data from the focus group repeatedly pointed to issues of labor. Instructors commented on the large amounts of papers they needed to grade and the race against time. In fact, instructors were using the language that reflected expediency and urgency in ways that were similar to the rhetorical strategies on the Turnitin website. In the fall of 2013, when this study was conducted, Turnitin's customer page read: "Faster, Better Feedback. Instructors indicate that Turnitin allows them to give better feedback in less time" (Wayback Machine, Nov. 27, 2013). One focus group participant, who was a teaching assistant with a heavy workload, echoed this rhetoric and claimed that the PDS "just cut down time for me… It definitely just cuts down time to know where [the matched text is] coming from and it's easier to tell students too that this is where it's coming from." In a similar vein, another teaching assistant also used these rhetorics of convenience and efficiency: "[The PDS is] just convenient for me and it's convenient for [students]. You know they can see [the report] if they have questions, they can answer them [on their own] ...It's convenient." Clearly, teachers thought the PDS saved them time because it eliminated low-order tasks (i.e., teaching students how to check

[2] In the survey, 62% of participants responded that they want the PDSs to prominently advertise the programs are storing students' work; 33% responded that the PDSs should discard student work after an allotted amount of time; and last, 29% said PDSs should not store student work at all.

[3] Rather than using PDSs to find and punish plagiarists, teachers used the reports to talk to students about attribution.

for plagiarism) from their workload. Students relied on the tool rather than just the instructor for information about citation, which freed up teachers' time for more high-order concerns.

The last finding I want to address is related to expertise: not all teachers who participated in the study were specialized in rhetoric and composition. Another aspect that connects with labor issues and PDSs concerns who is teaching writing courses[4], and these differences are significant in how teachers understand plagiarism. Participants had difficulty in defining plagiarism in the focus group, and there was inconsistency in the survey results as well. Most notably in the survey, teachers had different understandings about whether incorrect citation counted as plagiarism: "Most instructors (95.83%) believed intentionally using someone else's words, thoughts or ideas constituted plagiarism, but several (62.5%) viewed incorrect citations as plagiarism" (Canzonetta, 2014, p. 36). While this is an issue of education and expertise, it was also one of labor. The teaching labor we employ to teach first-year composition does not require a degree in the field (Vie, 2013a), which means teachers are going to have differing perspectives on writing values and pedagogy. The survey was administered to the WPA listserv and TechRhet listserv, but this does not mean all teachers who participated in my survey were from the field, or that they were not contingent laborers or graduate students. In the focus group, no teachers had degrees in rhetoric and composition, and they too struggled to define plagiarism as a group.

Going forward with how we engage with writing technology as a field, we need to pay attention to the material conditions teachers are working in and who they are, as to not "presume an audience of professionally secure teachers" and, I would add, to not presume an audience with shared educational backgrounds (Strickland, 2011, p. 5). This is especially important in the coming years, particularly when we consider seven of the twenty-four teachers who took the survey were *required* by their administrations to use a plagiarism detection service (Canzonetta, 2014, p. 49-50). If people who cannot refuse to use this kind of technology in their classrooms are going to continue to be subjected to it, we must consider what it means when the technology we do or do not design is forced on non-tenure track teachers who are not specialists in writing or rhetoric.

So why do PDSs endure despite writing experts' work against them? Vie explains why PDSs are problematic, yet persistent in higher education:

> In many ways, the desire for plagiarism detection services—despite our understanding that plagiarism is a deeply complex and contextual issue, despite our knowing that these services frequently fail to achieve their intended goal—reflects the working conditions of writing faculty in the academy today, particularly as more writing programs rely heavily on non-tenure-track or renewable contract faculty who teach multiple composition courses each semester, year after year. (2013a, p. 4).

The importance of this passage is twofold: Vie signals that composition scholars are not Turnitin's main audience, and that the conditions contributing to the program's success are not necessarily in our control. Vie also points to a testimonial video Turnitin used to host on its website: one professor claims that he can grade 120 papers as if they're 30 with the help of Turnitin. By that logic, one instructor could take on the workload of *four* teachers easily. Turnitin is thus marketing a "streamlined" grading process so he can get back to the real work he's meant to do: teaching. Rather than explaining grading as a rewarding and integral part of teaching, it is instead framed as a burden for overworked teachers. This logic is certainly appealing to administrators who are looking for ways to cope with budget cuts, course enrollment increases, and inadequate staffing.

In 2014, Turnitin charged universities $3 USD per student for access to their program, and it is likely that those prices vary depending on the capabilities the university wants the program to have (Fenton, 2014, p. 1). These corporate structures are making money from students' intellectual property. While $3 USD per student

[4] In Con Job, Cary Nelson, former President of AAUP suggests "the English and foreign language departments...pioneered exploitation hiring amongst the faculty. It's one of their real achievements that they can go down in history for. The casualization and deprofessionalization of the work force. (Fulwiler & Marlow, 2014, 4:09.)

may seem like a feasible solution to a writing and labor problem, Grabill (2016) argues that solutions that are perceived as free, or cheaper, or cost-effective come with costs we don't always consider:

> You're paying for your technology – you might be paying for it by making your students give up their personal data, or by giving up your own data, or you may be giving up technical or learning support. But you're paying for it, and one of the most insidious moves in educational technology is schools penchant for *free* on the surface, which costs them dearly downstream, particularly in the toll it takes on the lives of teachers. (n.p.)

Further, the widespread use of programs like these have effects on students after they leave the university: "Turnitin.com socializes student writers toward traditional notions of textual normality and docility" (Marsh, 2004, p. 427). As students become accustomed to freely handing over their intellectual property to these programs, as they learn to write papers to an algorithm, they could learn habits that lead them to be uncritical.

Current labor conditions in higher education are in crisis; if we do not address the exigencies PDSs and automated writing assessment programs purport to help, we risk being "sent out of the room" by corporate "stakeholders" (Herrington and Moran, 2011, p. 220). Thus, we need to reconfigure our resistance by analyzing how these programs are being deployed and how they "help" teachers and students. Doing so can inform how we can work with designers in the future on emergent writing technologies.

Reconfiguring Our Resistance: How Can We Learn from PDSs?

In closing, I want to return to Turnitin's website and the rhetoric the marketing team deployed in 2012. In a series of testimonial videos the company used to host on its customer page, Summer Dittmer, an English Teacher at Bishop O'Dowd High School claimed, "There's no way for a human to do what Turnitin does." Stephanie Sanders-Badt, an Instructor in Health Sciences at Berkeley City College said, "I spend more time commenting on my students' work and less time organizing it." Jiansheng Guo, a Professor and Interim Associate Dean at California State University, remarks Turnitin helped him "cope" with 120 student papers as if they were 30. We cannot ignore the fact that some teachers are reliant on Turnitin, and that it helps them manage their workloads. Turnitin's website has since changed its rhetorical strategies to show more pedagogically attuned language. However, these excerpts from the past are pointing to issues that we cannot deny today: grading writing and teaching it is untenable without technological intervention in our current economic and labor conditions in higher education.

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