This article will discuss a pilot scheme (in the Dept. of Sociology) where students were introduced to the JISC PDS and encouraged to submit their work to it prior to submitting paper copies to their tutor. Originality reports from the JISC PDS were then attached by students to essays submitted in the conventional format.

During the course of this academic year (2004-5) I was introduced to the plagiarism detection service Turnitin (Forsyth, 2003), which is provided by JISC (hereafter referred to as JISC) and to which MMU subscribes. Prior to this I was aware that various systems were available for detecting plagiarism but that most commonly, colleagues relied on using Google to detect web-based plagiarism. It was clear to me and my colleagues that because of increased reliance on the Internet and the increasing availability of online essay banks (BBC News 30th June 2004), opportunities for plagiarism by students were increasing (BBC News 30th June 2004).

Following a departmental discussion I became aware that it was now possible for tutors to ask, or even require, students to submit their own work to JISC for plagiarism detection. This system would then provide the student themselves with a report on the extent of the work’s originality (or otherwise). I was intrigued. Following one quick demonstration of the JISC system I determined that I would pilot it on my second year ‘Sociological Psychology’ unit which, as it happened, had an essay submission date within the next 3 weeks or so.

On Monday 21st February 2005 I explained the JISC submission system to students at the beginning of a lecture slot. Students were shown a copy of a demonstration submission and the corresponding originality report produced by the system. Originality reports inform the tutor of the percentage of the work which matches other sources along with, for example, the address of any website which matches the student’s essay. These other (electronic) sources of material are itemised at the top of the report and are colour coded to indicate the proportion of matching text which was produced1. There is also the option of a side-by-side view of the report where the screen splits to reveal, for comparison, the relevant section of the student assignment and the matching source, enabling direct comparison of the two sets of text.

In part, the appeal of the originality report is that it is colour coded and parts of the ‘essay’ which match other sources are produced in coloured font with various colours representing different sources used. In the summary report the differing levels of match with the original source are also marked with different colours. Blue font marks less than 2 matching words, green 0-24% matching text, yellow 25-49%, orange 50-74%, red 75-100% matching text.

Thus parts of the essay which use large chunks of other sources tend to ‘jump out’ to the reader of the originality report. The image above shows the student’s text with coloured sections representing text which matches other sources.

1 During August 2005 (whilst this article was in print) the system was updated and improved.
In the next image (what is called a 'side-by-side view') the student assignment is on the left hand side of the screen and the matching source document is on the right with matching text highlighted in each source.

I informed my students that their assignments would be searched against all material in the JISC database (which is of course held electronically). The database covers a very wide range of both current and archived internet sources, other materials stored in a database called 'Proquest' and a database which consists of all student essays submitted to JISC.

An important point which one must understand (and convey to students) is that matching text does not automatically constitute plagiarism and that you as the tutor are fully aware of this. So for example quotations which are used and properly referenced would show up as identical – it is the tutor’s job to take into account the quotation marks around the text in the student’s use of this text. The recent update of the system has taken into account the issue of quotations to some extent

Moreover, and this was an attraction from my point of view, when the tutor sets up a class and assignment folder in the JISC PDS system, there is an option which allows tutors to decide whether or not they wish the originality report to be available to the student. I decided that I did want my students to be allowed to see the report which was generated for their piece of work. This then would allow them to make any changes which they deemed necessary. Thus students would be informed about possibly ‘risky’ practices in advance and ignorance of plagiarism would be more difficult to sustain as an excuse. My interest in using JISC PDS was not as a mechanism for catching plagiarists but as a mechanism for deterring plagiarism in the first place.

To summarise, my introduction of the JISC system was designed to indicate to students that:

- plagiarism must be taken seriously, and if they were not already sure, they must get up-to-speed on what constitutes plagiarism
- JISC PDS is a comprehensive and quick system for detecting text which matches a wide variety of electronic online sources
- they will be expected to test their work through this system
- they will, if necessary, be expected to modify their work in the light of the originality report produced on their own work.

I had previously registered all students taking my unit by uploading an Excel file which contained their names and student registration numbers. JISC then automatically sends an email to each student providing them with a user id and password. Students were told to expect such an email from JISC to appear in their MMU student email account.

In the lecture slot students were provided with a single sheet of instructions for logging-in to the system and were asked to submit their essay for Sociological Psychology to JISC before submitting it to our Faculty Receipting Office (deadline 2-3-05).

Students were asked to print out a copy of the originality report for their essay and to attach it to the essay itself. In addition, (in part because I was not entirely sure that things
would go to plan) I asked them all to submit a disk copy of the essay along with the paper copy and a copy of the originality report to the Faculty Receipting Office. Because of the short lead-in time which was left for introduction to the JISC PDS I did inform students that submission by them was optional, but that if they couldn’t manage this they should submit a disk with their assignment so that I could pass their work through the system for them.

Results

1. 16 out of 59 (27%) students did submit their own work to JISC before the deadline date.

2. Of these everyone had relatively low proportions of ‘unoriginality’ (colour coded blue (up to 1% matching text) or green (1-14% matching text)).

3. 32 students provided me with a disk which I submitted to JISC for them. However, 2 of these students submitted files in a format not recognisable by JISC (acceptable formats for JISC are MS Word, Wordperfect, RTF, PDF, Postscript and HTML).

4. Altogether 48 (81%) students finally either submitted themselves or provided me with a disk.

5. All of these were in the blue/green area in terms of originality.

Conclusions

In my opinion (based on informal comments provided by students) students did shy away from copying electronic sources. Many of them ‘returned’ to the library and to books. I was encouraged by this even if their reasons for this might have been to avoid detection of plagiarism. I didn’t detect any plagiarism from books.

Also I believe that more students would have submitted directly to JISC if there had been more of a lead-in time and if they had had a chance to test it out in a class situation beforehand. For next year I intend to spend part of a class session allowing them to play with ‘dummy’ assignments and allowing them to discuss the implications of the system.

On the whole I regard this experiment as having been successful. Further (though admittedly limited) evidence for this comes from the fact that one of the students in this cohort had to submit a second assignment in lieu of an exam. She obviously tried to use JISC to check on this piece of work and found that I had not created a folder for submission of a second assignment. Rather than forget about it, she emailed me asking me to create such a folder so that she could check this work through it!

The JISC system is not at all difficult to learn and is one of those rare pieces of software where the presentation of results is both colourful, informative and in some cases, dramatic. I believe that students, whilst they are understandably nervous of the system, on the whole will come to appreciate it as a useful device and even perhaps as a way of enhancing the quality of their submissions.

Finally, it has to be said that for next year in this particular unit I am changing the nature of my assignments away from essay questions to other formats (e.g. in class tests and projects) which ‘design out’ many of the possibilities for plagiarism. However I do still regard the JISC software as an excellent tool for staff and students and will recommend its widespread adoption as long as we continue with assignments where plagiarism is possible.

References


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