

○ ELECTRONIC GRADING AND MARKING

A NOTE ON TURNITIN'S GRADEMARK FUNCTION

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This article evaluates the use of the Turnitin program as a teaching and evaluation tool in a first year history program.

The use of the Turnitin program as an anti-plagiarism tool is now quite widespread in the academic community. While this program has its merits and problems, it does offer a worthwhile corrective to the chore of marking and grading essays through its Grademark function.

In first semester 2006 I coordinated a first year Australian history course at the University of Newcastle which had an enrolment of over 500 students, and five academic staff. While teaching such a large group brings its own challenges, handling the sheer volume of paper involved in marking assessment items was a daunting prospect. It was decided to trial Grademark to streamline the allotment of essays to markers and to eliminate the huge amounts of paper that such a marking epic would have otherwise entailed.

BlackBoard software is used in all UoN courses as a central point to communicate with students and where scores for assessment items are placed before being uploaded to the university's system so that final grades can be generated. Turnitin is accessed at UoN from within BlackBoard. Students submit their work and an originality report is produced for the student. If the student is unhappy with the originality report, the work can be resubmitted as many times as the student wishes before the work becomes due. It is at this point that the functions of Grademark can be used to make life a little less complicated. Each assessment item can be controlled so that essays are automatically sorted in the best possible way. For example, for a major essay BlackBoard allows you to create a button or folder on the course main page, in this instance 'Major Essay'. By choosing to use Turnitin within this section you can streamline the way in which students submit their work. For example, you can design this section so that essays can be submitted by tutor or by question, the date and time the essay is due, whether you will allow for late submission, the date the essay will be posted for students to retrieve their work (you can alter this if you need!) as well as allowing the student to resubmit work until the due date and any special instructions that might be needed. At this point you can sit back and relax. The essays will be available for you to mark on your computer (and any other marker's computers) at the time you specify, in the order you specify – no piles of paper.

After the due date has passed you access Turnitin (via BlackBoard's control panel) and you are given a page which shows the name of the student, the question they are attempting and their Turnitin report. By default essays are listed from highest to lowest Turnitin scores (this can be changed). To the right of this information is a small black, red and white square – the Grademark symbol. Click on the symbol that correlates to the essay you wish to mark and a new screen appears with a facsimile of the essay on your screen. At the top of that page Grademark gives you the student name, the question being attempted, the word length of the essay, a space for the final mark and the date submitted (in red if it is late).

At this point Grademark offers a number of functions analogous to hand marking. You can highlight, underline or strike through text and add a comment on the essay. When the essay is returned to the student, they can access the marker's comments by running the cursor over the balloon next to the highlighted text. For frequent comments that you might like to use these can be named and stored to a clipboard which you can use to paste the comments quickly on a paper. Grademark also has a number of in-built comments for common problems such as 'Incomplete Sentence', 'Tense Shift' and 'It's vs Its'. This function is similar to the 'Comments' function in Microsoft Word but, in my view, easier to use. One very useful aspect to Grademark is that you can delete inappropriate comments where necessary before the student views the marked paper – no need for whiteout. Put simply, Grademark automates some of the marking process, is tied to the student's work and is much quicker than hand writing the same comments over and over again. As well as this there is a section for general comments on the essay and a provision to mark with a rubric scorecard which is quick to design and flexible. When a mark is entered for the essay, it is automatically placed in BlackBoard's Gradebook, and if you have it set up, converted to a percentage score – this allows you to mark out of 100 for example but weight it at, say, 50%, for the course. The mark you enter is tied to the student's name and avoids the problem of accidentally transposing marks when entering large amounts of data. You can also see statistics on previous assessments for each student and that student's mark against the class average. You can export files and send them to colleagues to double mark (blind if you wish) when necessary. It even has a useful tutorial to guide users on how it works.

Grademark has some problems. For example, it can time out rather quickly and sometimes I have had a few problems logging into the system. Colleagues have also expressed reservations – some would prefer to take a pile of essays and sit in the park, others simply resent more time spent in front of a computer screen. However, in terms of ease of use, speed and targeted comments, Grademark does represent an impressive electronic means for marking that eliminates repetition, organises the task and automatically enters marks. In Student Evaluation of Teaching surveys students have expressed a high degree of satisfaction with this method. Grademark may not represent the final word in electronic assessment but it is an impressive step forward and gives a real possibility of creating a paper 'lite' office. I would highly recommend it as a useful assessment tool.