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## Arts student won't "Turnitin"

By Adam Verwymeren, The  
McGill Daily

MONTREAL (CUP) -- The first challenge to the use of the anti-plagiarism Web site Turnitin.com at McGill has been launched by Jesse Rosenfeld, who claims the site violates his rights as a student.

Several weeks ago, Rosenfeld handed his first Economic Development assignment directly to Professor Sonia Laszlo, violating Laszlo's requirement that the assignments be submitted through Turnitin.com. As a result, Laszlo gave him a zero on the part of the assignment that was to be evaluated by Turnitin.

Rosenfeld said he objects to the climate of distrust created by Turnitin.

"My issue with it is that students are guilty until proven innocent," he said. "Basically what students are being asked to do is to prove they didn't commit a crime before their paper has even been looked at or before suspicion has even been raised."

The California-based Web site, which is currently in trial use at McGill, checks each paper submitted against an ever-growing database of essays.

Arts Senator Nick Peters acknowledged the usefulness of services like Turnitin.

"If there is an issue with a paper, a professor should be able to talk to a student about it, and if there is a need to use tools like this as part of an appeals process or disciplinary process, fine," said Peters.

But Peters said he disapproves of the widespread use of Turnitin at McGill.

"To have everyone presumed guilty even before they have handed something into a professor is a little bit Orwellian, and it is the wrong way for McGill to operate," he said.

Rosenfeld said that Turnitin also infringes on intellectual property rights by continuing to use students' papers after they are submitted to the site.

"My paper is now aiding the profit of a private company," he said.

"It seems rather contradictory, when you are looking at plagiarism issues and copyright issues, when a company is making profit off of numerous student papers and not even acknowledging it."

But Associate Science Dean Morton Mendelson, who is overseeing the Turnitin experiment at McGill, defended the service.

"It's not an issue of guilt any more than asking students to write an exam with invigilators present," he argued.

Mendelson also dismissed Rosenfeld's claim that Turnitin profits from the intellectual property of students.

"That small cost to a student is worth the benefit of all students," Mendelson said.

Rosenfeld said he is trying to resolve the issue directly with Laszlo and the university, but is prepared to file a student grievance. He is also appealing the assignment academically.

When contacted by The Daily, Laszlo declined to comment.

McGill's trial use of the Turnitin service will expire in December, at which point the university will decide whether or not to register for further use.

Student Council spokesperson Vivian Choy said she wants to gauge student opinion on the problem of plagiarism and on Turnitin.

"I am having an open forum and am doing research to get the facts straight," she said. "We need to have a completely informed decision before proceeding with action. It's simple to say we don't like this, we don't want this, but we also need to put something on the table to suggest something better."

Choy said she would rather see academic integrity preserved by educating students on the issue of plagiarism.

"That is where I see this issue being addressed, through education and not by trying to catch people in the end," Choy said.

Peters and Choy will also be bringing up the issue at the Committee on Students Affairs in the coming months.

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