

Punished but Not Prepared: An Exploration of Novice Writers' Experiences of Plagiarism at University

Stephanie Crook, University of Manitoba

Jerome Cranston, University of Regina

Correspondence to Stephanie Crook: umcrooks@myumanitoba.ca

Abstract

This paper reports on the results of a study of first- and second-year Canadian undergraduate students' perceptions of academic integrity and plagiarism. Using a sequential explanatory research design, the first phase involved a Likert-type survey that gauged students' perceptions ($n = 350$) of academic integrity and plagiarism, whereas in phase two, students ($n = 3$) were interviewed to further explore their perceptions. The findings indicate that students often categorize acts as either plagiaristic or non-plagiaristic despite their inability to clearly explain how they made their determinations. Furthermore, the participants in the study experienced the university as being predisposed to punitive action rather than to supportive action. These experiences are significant because the students were only beginning to understand the nuances of academic integrity. Overall, the findings indicate that novice university writers would benefit from formative pedagogical processes to guide them to producing effective academic writing in a university context. Responding with punitive measures to ambiguous situations appears to slow down the internalization of academic integrity principles.

Keywords: academic integrity; academic misconduct; Canada; first-year experience; first-year students; plagiarism; writing pedagogy

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Integrity is a term that evokes moral values, including the ones identified by the International Center for Academic Integrity (ICAI, 2013), which include: honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage. These values are, arguably, important to community cohesion and it seems reasonable to expect the members of an academic community to abide by them. However, these values, like any others, are abstracted concepts that can only be actualized within context-specific bounds.

Although students do need to learn the general values that are associated with academic integrity, it is critical for them to move beyond declarative knowledge and to gain an

understanding of how these values might be applied. A growing body of research regarding academic integrity-related issues has begun to recognize the complexity of going beyond conceptual knowledge and towards developing procedural application (e.g., Angélil-Carter, 2000; Carroll, 2002; Childers & Bruton, 2016; Christoph, 2016; Thompson, 2006). Studies of students' perceptions of academic integrity have demonstrated that wondering what is permissible and what is not arises mainly in practice (Lin & Clark, 2021; Waltzer & Dahl, 2020; Zwick et al., 2019).

An increasing number of universities recommend or even require students to take academic integrity tutorials that provide them with an overview of the topic (Kellum et al., 2011; Miron et al., 2021; Stoesz & Yudintseva, 2018). The tutorials, however, likely do not provide students with the opportunity to develop context-specific procedural knowledge. To be fair, it is unreasonable to expect institution-wide tutorials to scaffold students' learning in this way, as paradigm shifts cannot be facilitated in such large-scale environments (Cuseo, 2007). Despite this reality, many students are not provided with systematic, scaffolded education regarding academic writing at any time during their undergraduate programming (Carroll, 2002). Furthermore, institutional academic integrity policies are often based on the assumption that the principles underpinning academic integrity are easy for students to recognize and to apply to their work. As a result, students are often presumed guilty until proven innocent during adjudication processes (Eaton, 2017; Senders, 2008; Sutherland-Smith, 2011).

In many Canadian universities, institutional approaches to academic integrity have not been developed from a primarily pedagogical standpoint. Rather, university policies seem to assert that students who have allegedly violated academic integrity policies should be presumed guilty until they can prove their innocence during adjudication processes (Eaton, 2017; Senders, 2008; Stoesz & Eaton, 2020; Sutherland-Smith, 2011). Such an approach not only defies a guarantee that members of society, including university students, have the right to be presumed innocent until proven guilty (Government of Canada, 1982), but also presumes that students understand which acts do and do not constitute transgressions, or even that there are clear lines between acceptable and unacceptable acts. This is particularly problematic given the extent to which even faculty members do not agree on the bounds of transgression in the context of plagiarism (Bennet et al., 2011).

This fundamental concern with policy-injustice was the impetus for the present study. The study was focused on the perceptions of undergraduate students with respect to academic integrity and plagiarism. The main objective of the study was to answer the following question: how do novice writers understand and experience the phenomenon of plagiarism? For the purposes of this study, novice writers were defined as those who were new to writing within the university context; namely, first- and second-year undergraduate students. In the first phase of the study, novice writers were asked to rate the degree to which various behaviours represented acts of plagiarism. In the second phase of the study,

a semi-structured interview protocol provided some students with a one-to-one opportunity to discuss their understandings of academic integrity and plagiarism in greater detail, to begin an investigation into the nuances of conceptualizing these issues.

Background

Originality has been an important characteristic of written work in Western cultures for centuries and is also one of the underlying principles of the contemporary, Western conception of academic integrity. In 1759, Edward Young, an English philosopher, wrote about originality as an ideal feature of written compositions, explaining that philosophers of old had no choice but to produce original work being, as they were, without models to follow. Young's (1759) argument compared originality with moral purity in the Christian tradition. He argued that original writing participates, on some level, in the ultimate creative process referred to in the Book of Genesis of the Bible. Although the adherence to specifically Christian sensibilities may no longer be a central consideration in North American and many Western European universities, a sense of moral obligation derived from the biblical text continues today (Adam, 2016; Price, 2002). Yet, unlike the biblical story of creation where everything that exists is created from nothing, research on written composition has demonstrated that it is not possible to create new written works without building on existing works (Borg, 2009; Kristeva, 1966/1980; 1985/1996; Martínez Alfaro, 1996).

Unfortunately, the punitive approach taken by many universities to handling alleged plagiarism creates an environment in which students, as novice writers, are excluded from the conversation about intertextuality (Kristeva, 1966/1980; 1985/1996). As Martínez Alfaro (1996) explained, "the theory of intertextuality insists that a text cannot exist as a self-sufficient whole, and so, that it does not function as a closed system" (p. 268). In other words, texts participate in dialogue with other texts. Academic texts are no different. If explicit intertextuality must be learned, then expressing one's own voice in a multi-voiced environment must also be learned. As Borg (2009) explained:

While all language has ways of indicating, 'she said ... I heard ...', academic writing is characterized by explicit intertextuality, which is something that lecturers have learned and that students need to be taught. Ideas and specific language must be referred to others in conventionalised ways (e.g., Harvard or numeric citation systems) that are different from writing in other contexts. Learning explicit intertextuality is a part of disciplinary acculturation. (p. 417)

Developing a strong authorial voice is the chief by-product of gaining an understanding of the existing scholarly conversation. This understanding can only be developed over time, through consistent engagement in the conversation. Authorial voice encompasses the unique ways in which writers express their ideas (Humphrey et al., 2014) and, in the case of academic writing, the unique ways in which they contribute to scholarly conversation. University students

inevitably find themselves engaging with new discourses, and they can find participation in these discourses to be challenging at first. As Renaud and Murray (2008) observed, critical thinking (i.e., the skillset needed to effectively add to scholarly conversation) can only be developed within context; that is, one can only think critically about topics with which one is already familiar.

As a result, novice writers necessarily rely on knowledgeable others to learn from (Vygotsky, 1978). Learners initially imitate those with more expertise in a given discipline. When learners are in relationship with those who are more expert, they need to be challenged with tasks that engage with the skills and knowledge that are just beyond their current level of mastery (Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, learners will make mistakes. Mistake-making is arguably the very essence of learning. By way of illustrative example, patchwriting is a form of writing that appears to derive from the peculiar process of learning to write academically, but it is often categorized as plagiarism. The term patchwriting refers to “copying from a source text and then deleting some words, altering grammatical structures, or plugging in one-for-one synonym-substitutes” (Howard, 1992, p. 233). Patchwriting can also occur on a macro-level in a piece of writing (Abasi & Akbari, 2008), such as when a student closely imitates the structural features of another author’s piece. Patchwriting represents a departure from prototypical plagiarism (i.e., wholesale copying and pasting with the intention of misrepresentation), and derives from issues of language use, comprehension, and the process of developing authorial voice (Pecorari, 2008).

Childers and Bruton (2016) conducted a study of students’ perceptions of what they called “complex citation issues.” Students in the study responded to textual passages and categorized the passages as participating in plagiarism or not doing so. The present study has taken a similar approach but has focused on students’ perceptions of descriptions of compositional behaviours rather than of textual passages. The reason for this difference is that the present study is more concerned with uncovering students’ procedural understanding of plagiarism. In effect, we sought to identify the ways in which students understand plagiarism to occur. By developing an understanding of novice writers’ developmental perceptions of plagiarism, we hope the findings might allow instructors to better devise ways to help students learn to monitor their strategies for writing with integrity.

Theoretically Framing the Study

The theoretical framework for this study is social constructivism. According to Bazerman (2016), sociocultural studies of writing have generated the following insights, among others, about how people learn to write (qtd. from p. 15-16):

- Development of writing skills depends on a passage through situations, solving problems and becoming articulate in those situations.

- Learning to write within certain domains is closely integrated with learning the knowledge, forms of reasoning, criteria of evaluation, and forms of action in those domains.
- Moving from one social domain to another requires adjusting writing, learning new skills, and transforming the knowledge one brings from previous experience.
- Enculturation into writing is socially sponsored and shaped by the sponsor's agendas.

Owing to the social embeddedness of the practice of writing, novice writers face challenges to becoming adept at writing within a new domain. These challenges provided the impetus for the current study, particularly given that students face potential sanctions for even unintentional violations of academic integrity policies. As can be observed from Bazerman's (2016) summary, becoming an effective writer involves problem-solving, understanding what constitutes knowledge in a particular domain and how to evaluate information, and acknowledging the ways in which social context will shape one's writing. These factors, which are embedded in the writing environment, can be difficult to recognize.

In the context of writing for university, first- and second-year students find themselves studying several different subjects simultaneously and they are not overly familiar with any one of them. This unfamiliarity, coupled with a large volume of new information to learn, can tax novice writers' working memory considerably (McCutchen 1996; 2000), making it difficult for them to be particularly efficient or 'original' writers. They are also unfamiliar with the ways in which knowledge is typically generated in various disciplines, how reasoning is undertaken, how arguments are evaluated, and even the ways in which information is typically presented for the reader. Furthermore, universities' agendas, as social sponsors of writing, are typically not understood by students (see 'academic literacies' in Lea & Street, 1998; 2006). Institutional academic integrity policies have a substantial bearing on which compositional behaviours are considered appropriate, whether students realize this fact. The present study was designed to ask first- and second-year students about their understandings of academic integrity and plagiarism precisely because they have not yet been enculturated to the university writing context.

Because the literature suggests that plagiarism is a complex phenomenon and is not easily defined, this study was not designed to uncover some essential concept of plagiarism, but rather, a particular group's experiences with plagiarism as a phenomenon. We assumed that novice writers' experiences of plagiarism would have at least some elements in common. In fact, they did. This study provides a thematic analysis of this group's experiences.

Method

This study involved a sequential explanatory research design, which is a process of collecting and analyzing quantitative and then qualitative data in two consecutive phases within a single study (Ivankova et al., 2006). The first phase of the study was meant to uncover generalizable evidence on students' understandings of plagiarism using a survey with Likert-type questions. The second phase was intended to explore the nuanced aspects of how students might make decisions about what does and does not constitute plagiarism. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Manitoba.

Survey

The survey consisted of selected-response questions in four parts, two of which are reported in this article. The first part asked about relevant demographic factors, including: age, student status, citizenship status, primary language of communication, admission category, faculty of registration, and completed credit hours. The second part asked participants to rate the degree to which 13 academic behaviours represent an act of plagiarism, on a scale offering the following options: "Never Plagiarism," "Usually Not Plagiarism," "Usually Plagiarism," "Always Plagiarism," and "Unsure." See Tables 1-3 for survey items. The survey items were designed without behavioural definition, which is generally how students encounter these terms in the classroom. The survey responses were then analyzed to recognize inconsistencies in students' understandings and qualitative interviews were conducted to provide more insight to these inconsistencies and, in some cases, commonalities.

The survey was distributed to students enrolled in an interdisciplinary first-year seminar course, the content of which is focused on preparing students for engaging in university-level thinking and writing. The survey required 20-25 minutes to complete and was completed after the point in the course at which the students had already received feedback on their first 500-word argumentative essays (students in the course write two sets of essays, each of which begins as a 500-word version and then is extended to a 1,500-word version). This timepoint was selected for data collection because it allowed for students' perspectives to be captured before they received in-depth instruction on citation and plagiarism. The students were only required to cite one source (which was provided to them) in their 500-word essay. At this point in the course, they would have discussed the principles of citation within APA (American Psychological Association) formatting as well as basic principles for quoting, paraphrasing, and summarizing sources. After the data was collected, students would go on to learn more about the complexities of citation as they went on to work with multiple sources simultaneously.

Potential participants were informed that completing the survey was optional and that participation was not connected to receiving course credit. In the end, the participant pool was made up of 350 first- and second-year students at the University of Manitoba, a Canadian prairie research-intensive university.

Semi-structured interviews

All students who completed the survey were invited to participate in a follow-up semi-structured interview. Although more than a dozen students initially agreed to be interviewed, a number of logistical challenges meant that only three students were ultimately available to be interviewed. Each interview was approximately 20 minutes in length and was guided by two main questions for each academic behaviour that was previously described in the survey:

1. In the context of writing an essay for a university course, please comment on the degree to which the following behaviour represents an act of plagiarism:
[behaviours from the survey were listed here].
2. Why is this behaviour [always, usually, usually not, or never] plagiarism, or why are you unsure?

There were also questions regarding students' definitions of academic integrity and plagiarism, as well as questions regarding the ways in which students felt they had received instruction about academic integrity and plagiarism at the University of Manitoba (these same questions also appeared on the survey but are not being reported on in this article).

Data Analysis

Survey Analysis

Survey data was analyzed through the production of frequency distribution tables through SPSS Version 24. Demographic factors of the sample were summarized and compared non-statistically with the general population of undergraduate students enrolled at University of Manitoba. This comparison was made to determine the normality of the sample – it was important to establish whether the sample differed from the broader population. Next, frequency distributions were produced for the participants' ratings with respect to plagiarism. Items were grouped based on the degree of skewedness in the responses (i.e., for many items, respondents largely agreed or disagreed on whether the behaviour constituted plagiarism). The survey results were integrated with interview findings with respect to the behavioural items.

Interviewees' responses were quoted and interpreted based on contextual information and non-verbal cues. A summary of responses to questions regarding instruction at the University of Manitoba was also provided and integrated with the interview findings. Individual survey responses were not linked to interview transcripts due to privacy concerns. Given the importance of the survey data remaining anonymous, it was critical that no identifying information was included on the surveys themselves. However, to account for this, interviewees were asked to rate the behaviours once again and to explain their ratings.

Interview Analysis

Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and coded using concept coding, which focuses on identifying “a ‘bigger picture’ beyond the tangible and apparent” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 119). The purpose was to generate themes that “suggested meaning broader than a single item or action” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 119). The first author analyzed each transcript to establish the initial list of codes. Once all three transcripts were analyzed, the first author reviewed each transcript again based on the established codes. This second review of the transcripts ensured that the interview responses were coded consistently and provided an opportunity for additional codes to arise. To establish credibility (McMillan, 2012) with respect to the first author’s coding, the second author thoroughly reviewed all of the coding work. The co-authors met to discuss the codes and adjusted the labeling of the codes so that they reflected a common understanding between them. We recognize that our interpretations of the data are but one such possible interpretation, and that it is not possible to establish true reliability across coders, owing to the fact that identical nomenclature would not necessarily signify identical meanings.

Results

First, we report the participant demographics and then we present the survey results and interview findings alongside one another. Values reported may not sum to 350 participants due to missing responses for some items. The number of missing responses varied across questions (i.e., 1-5). The number of responses indicated in Tables 1-3 serve as the denominators for calculating percentages.

Participant Demographics

The participant demographics are described to compare the composition of the sample with the general population from which the participants were drawn (i.e., undergraduate students at the University of Manitoba). This process was meant to determine the normality of the sample group.

Admission category for citizenship

Of the students who completed the survey and were eligible to be included in the study ($n = 350$), 90% ($n = 314$) indicated that they were Canadian citizens or permanent residents, whereas 10% ($n = 35$) indicated that they were international citizens. One student did not answer this question. According to the Fall 2017(a) report from the Office of Institutional Analysis at the University of Manitoba, 16.1% of students enrolled in undergraduate study were international students. This means that the sample group had a difference of 6.1% in favour of domestic students.

Age category

As expected for a first-year undergraduate course, most respondents were 18-21 years old (86.2%, $n = 300$). Notably, 7.4% ($n = 26$) of the respondents indicated that they were older than 23 years. Two students did not indicate their age. The University of Manitoba does not provide publicly available data on age; as such, a comparison to the general population of first-year students could not be made. However, given that most high school students graduate at the age of 18 years, and that the participants were drawn from a first-year course, the age distribution does appear to be in line with what might be expected.

Student status

Most respondents (88.9%, $n = 311$) were enrolled full-time during the Fall 2017 term (which, in the institution under study, is defined as taking at least 3 courses for a total of 15 credit hours), whereas the remainder (11.1%, $n = 39$) were part-time students. The majority of the respondents were enrolled in University 1 (75.1%, $n = 263$), while the remainder were enrolled in other faculties. Twelve students did not indicate their home faculty. This finding is similar to the statistics provided by the Office of Institutional Analysis (2017b) at the University of Manitoba, which indicate that 84.9% ($n = 4,196$) of University 1 students (i.e., undeclared students) studied full-time in the Fall 2017 term whereas 15.1% ($n = 744$) of them studied part-time. A breakdown of student status was not available for first- and second-year students enrolled in other faculties. Available figures included upper-years students; therefore, those figures were not included here for comparison to the sample.

Credit hours completed

Most respondents (79.4%, $n = 274$) reported that they had received final grades for up to nine credit hours, which is one course short of one full term of study. This group was guaranteed to be in their first year of study at the time of the questionnaire distribution because students can register for a maximum of 15 credit hours per term. Of these 274 respondents, 240 (87.6%) indicated that they had not yet received final grades for any courses. Fifty-three additional respondents (15.1%) had completed 12-30 credit hours at the time of questionnaire distribution, comprising the group of students who were just beginning (or on the cusp of beginning) their second year of study. A small proportion of respondents (5.1%, $n = 18$) indicated that they had finished 33-60 credit hours. Six of these respondents may have been in their last term of their second year of study or beginning their third year of study at the time of the questionnaire, given that they had already completed 45-60 credit hours. Five students did not indicate how many credit hours they had completed, but their responses were still included because they were likely to be first- or second-year students. Only two respondents indicated that they had completed more than 60 credit hours of study and their responses were excluded from the study on that basis.

Summary of demographic factors

Overall, the demographic composition of the sample was similar to the general undergraduate student population data at the University of Manitoba, though this assertion is based on limited publicly available data. Results of this study may be useful for the University of Manitoba and for similarly populated research-intensive institutions. The most likely candidates for comparison would be the institutions belonging to the U15 group of Canadian research universities.

Plagiarism Ratings

The results of the survey are followed by the findings of the interviews. For some questionnaire items, responses were skewed towards “Usually” or “Always” plagiarism, for some, they skewed towards “Not Usually” or “Never” plagiarism, and some items elicited a more equally distributed response pattern. Frequency distributions for each of the behavioural items have been grouped by the responses given by the majority of respondents.

“Usually” or “Always” Plagiarism

Most respondents felt that four behaviours reflected plagiarism in most or all cases (see Table 1). These items have common features – most notably, the act of direct copying. Even a modified quote includes at least some identical wording to an external source. The research literature indicates that students can recognize direct copying as problematic (Childers & Bruton, 2016; Waltzer & Dahl, 2020), however, some instances of copying are not as easily recognized as plagiarism (Waltzer & Dahl, 2020). The present study confirms earlier findings.

Table 1. *Usually or Always Plagiarism*

Behaviour	Percentage of Respondents			<i>n</i>
	Usually/Always Plagiarism	Usually Not/Never Plagiarism	Unsure	
Copying information word-for-word from an article, book, or website and including that word-for-word information in your essay.	92.0%	5.2%	2.9%	348
Submitting an essay for credit in two separate courses.	71.3%	15.3%	13.3%	346

Copying the structure of another student's essay.	67.9%	22.9%	9.2%	349
Changing a quote by modifying a few words and including the modified quote in your essay.	70.2%	24.4%	9.7%	349

Note. Percentages are based on the number of responses for a given item and may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Copying information word-for-word

As a group, survey respondents strongly agreed that copying information word-for-word falls under the category of plagiarism. Most respondents (92.0%, $n = 320$) believed that copying word-for-word information into one's essay was usually or always plagiarism, 5.2% ($n = 12$) indicated that it was usually not or never plagiarism, and 8.0% ($n = 10$) were unsure of the nature of this behaviour.

The interviewees expressed similarly strong feelings to the larger sample. Morgan suggested that the behaviour was always plagiarism, explaining that it's "directly copying something from another work and not giving credit for it." Similarly, Taylor explained that the behaviour was "usually plagiarism, if not cited." Riley seemed to agree, saying that the behaviour was usually plagiarism unless the word-for-word information was "cited properly." Riley explained that "if the writer just get the word-for-word information in the essay, then, without anything, then that is plagiarism."

If the broader sample group possesses a similar awareness of citation protocol to the interviewees, this would explain the frequency of the "usually plagiarism" and "always plagiarism" ratings. It is not clear what might have led a minority of the respondents to be unsure about the behaviour, or to regard copying word-for-word information into one's essay as a permissible action in most or all circumstances.

Dual submission

Most respondents (71.3%, $n = 247$) identified submitting an essay for credit in two separate courses as an act of plagiarism in most or all cases. This is a behaviour that they seemed to feel particularly strongly about, as 46.8% of the respondents ($n = 162$) indicated that it was an act of plagiarism in all cases. Only 13.3% of the respondents ($n = 46$) were unsure about the nature of this behaviour. Despite the group's tendency towards identifying the behaviour as plagiarism, 15.3% ($n = 53$) indicated that it was usually not or never plagiarism (6.6%, 23 respondents selected "never"). Many institutions consider this behaviour to be an act of self-plagiarism

(Halupa & Bolliger, 2013), and, at the University of Manitoba (2016), the rationale given for this concept was that students were expected to produce original work for each course.

Each interviewee mentioned the concept of self-plagiarism when speaking about this behaviour, and all indicated that it was always an act of plagiarism. However, each interviewee used circular reasoning to explain why it was a problem. That is, they did not provide clear ethical reasoning for its status as plagiarism. Morgan explained that once the essay was submitted in the second course “that would be plagiarizing yourself, I think. I know you can do that so that’s what I would assume it would be.” Taylor provided a similar explanation, saying that it’s always plagiarism “because you’re plagiarizing yourself by submitting something for two different courses.” Riley appeared to have a little more difficulty with identifying the exact problem with the behaviour but offered the following: “[I]t’s obviously that you copying some, an essay from other course. Even that’s the essay that you wrote it, and, like, just basically submit it for oth – for this course, which is [...] not the purpose of the essay.” Riley seemed to indicate that the problem was with copying one’s own work. Taylor was the only interviewee to describe where she learned about self-plagiarism. She reported that it was “heavily talked about [...] at Orientation – talked about how you can’t submit an essay for two different courses that you’ve written.” Taylor took note that dual submission was emphasized in the formal process of induction to the university learning environment.

Modified quotations

Respondents were less sure of the nature of including modified quotations in one’s work than of directly copying information. Although 92% ($n = 320$) of respondents thought that directly copying information into one’s essay was usually or always plagiarism, only 70.2% ($n = 245$) felt the same about modified quotes. Furthermore, 79.6% ($n = 277$) of respondents felt that direct copying was always plagiarism, as compared to 30.4% of respondents ($n = 106$) who believed modified quotes to hold the same status. It seems that the concept of modifying quotations introduced ambiguity to the respondents, particularly as indicated by the fact that 20.1% ($n = 70$) reported that the behaviour was usually not or never plagiarism and 9.7% ($n = 34$) were unsure of the nature of the behaviour.

Riley seemed to take a strong stance on modified quotations. For Riley, the behaviour is “always plagiarism because it’s like, you use someone else based on their work, but like, adjust or change is the same thing, and is, like, disrespect to the writer.” Morgan gave a similar response, saying that “[it’s] also known as paraphrasing and it needs to be cited.” Taylor seemed to assume the opposite – that the behaviour did include citation, saying that it was “usually not plagiarism as long as you cite it as paraphrasing ‘cause there’s ways to cite quotes as using paraphrasing [...] and you still have to cite them ‘cause if you don’t you are still plagiarizing their work.” It seems that the interviewees more or less agreed on this issue, in spite of the ambiguity indicated in the survey by the larger group. One possibility is that those who selected ‘Usually Plagiarism’ or ‘Usually Not Plagiarism’ may have actually been expressing similar

sentiments – a possibility that is based on Taylor’s answer. If respondents selecting ‘Usually Not Plagiarism’ assumed, like Taylor, that the behaviour did include citation, they may be saying the same thing as respondents assuming that it did not include citation and selecting ‘Usually Plagiarism.’ Further research would be needed to investigate this possibility.

Copying another student’s essay structure

Most respondents (67.9%, $n = 237$) believed that copying the structure of another student’s essay met the criteria for plagiarism in most or in all cases. Still, 22.9% ($n = 80$) of the students felt that it was usually not or never plagiarism and 9.2% ($n = 32$) were not sure which it was. Given that academic integrity includes being honest about authorship, it may be that some students do not consider an organizing framework as something that can belong to a particular author – perhaps they view it as standardized. Another possibility is that copying structure is viewed as being a reasonable strategy for creating a framework for an essay on a particular topic. Because the survey respondents were not asked to define the term “structure,” nor were they provided with its definition, the way the term was interpreted is not entirely clear. However, the interviewees provided some indication of their own interpretations.

For Riley, settling the issue of copying structure was simple – to her, it is always plagiarism to copy another student’s essay structure: “copying structures still means copying something.” The idea of copying, regardless of content, was important to Riley’s definition of plagiarism. Taylor had a more involved process for determining whether it was permissible to copy another student’s essay structure. According to Taylor, it is permissible to copy the “flow and organization and the referencing style” and “[use] the framework on how you’re going to organize your essay.” Taylor rated the behaviour, as listed on the interview protocol, as usually not plagiarism. Morgan seemed to disagree with Taylor, explaining that it is usually plagiarism because “when you’re writing an essay your structure should be your own. Like, I think.” Morgan did not seem certain that this was the case, but at least indicated a strong suspicion by the rating she chose. The interviewees did not come to a clear consensus, but neither did the larger group of survey respondents.

“Usually Not” or “Never” Plagiarism

Most respondents felt that six behaviours did not reflect plagiarism in most or all cases. Each of these behaviours is part of the initial information-gathering stage of the writing process. Respondents may believe that the information-gathering stage of writing, by definition, does not involve plagiarism.

It is interesting that responses were more evenly distributed with respect to “Discussing your ideas for your essay with a classmate and including some of your classmate’s ideas in your essay”, particularly because the behaviours that were like this item elicited more skewed response patterns. This difference in rating suggests ambiguity surrounding the

use of a classmate's ideas that does not attach to using others' ideas. It may be that novice writers consider proofreading, searching for sources, and discussing ideas as processes inherent to the beginning stage of writing – processes to which the concept of ownership does not attach. It seems that the only time they are concerned with including others' ideas is when the ideas are coming from classmates. These are listed in Table 2 and described below.

Table 2. *Usually Not or Never Plagiarism*

Behaviours	Percentage of Respondents			<i>n</i>
	Usually/Always Plagiarism	Usually Not/Never Plagiarism	Unsure	
Asking the professor for help with generating ideas and including some of the professor's ideas in your essay.	19.6%	72.0%	8.3%	347
Asking a friend to proofread your essay.	6.9%	89.7%	3.4%	349
Discussing your ideas for your essay with a friend, who is not taking the same course, and including some of your friend's ideas in your essay.	21.9%	70.7%	7.5%	348
Asking a friend, who is not taking the same course, for help with generating ideas and including some of your friend's ideas in your essay.	24.2%	69.5%	6.3%	347
Asking a classmate to help you find relevant websites to your essay topic on an Internet search engine.	10.7%	83.6%	5.8%	347
Asking a friend to help you find relevant research articles and/or books for your essay topic.	8.7%	87.6%	3.7%	347

Note. Percentages are based on the number of responses for a given item and may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Asking the professor for help and including the professor's ideas

Most of the sample (72%, $n = 250$) considered the inclusion of the professor's ideas in one's essay not to be plagiarism in most or all instances. Despite this relatively strong agreement, 2.9% ($n = 10$) of the respondents rated this behaviour as plagiarism in all cases. This certainly constitutes a minority of the respondents, but, nonetheless, demonstrates that some understand the issue in an entirely different way than most of their peers. Consistent with the survey response pattern, all three interviewees indicated that this behaviour was usually not plagiarism.

Taylor said that "helping you brainstorm [...] should be part of a good relationship with professors – that they can help you create ideas when you're stuck." Taylor recognized generating ideas as a creative process while simultaneously lending the ownership of such ideas to the student. Something about the mentorship relationship that professors have with students led her to decide that students could not appropriate ideas from professors. She also offered the reason that "you're not taking a piece that [the professor has] written." Perhaps the fact that the hypothetical professor's ideas had not been recorded in print made them fair game.

Riley and Morgan indicated that brainstorming was an important feature of a professor-student relationship. Still, Riley seemed to struggle with the tension between her perceived purpose of a writing task – generating original ideas – and getting help from a professor with generating ideas. She said, "I know like, it's our work to write an essay and to come up with something new, but like, a lot of student[s] have difficulty, uh, on it – with it – and like, professors are like, available to give us some, like, suggestion." Morgan appeared to be more hesitant to rate this behaviour at first, pausing before deciding that it was not usually plagiarism. She explained that "it's definitely useful to brainstorm" but "it's hard to cite your professor's ideas." She also said that "[whether or not it is plagiarism] depends on how much the person changed, like, incorporated the professor's ideas into creating their own ideas, I guess." Morgan and Riley seemed to be unsure of where the boundaries lie around the use of a professor's ideas.

Asking a friend to proofread one's essay

Nearly all respondents (89.7%, $n = 313$) rated proofreading by a friend as usually not or never plagiarism, and 249 (71.3%) stated that the behaviour was not plagiarism in any circumstance. Although the definition of proofreading most likely varies somewhat amongst respondents, it is striking that so many respondents were certain that this behaviour never constitutes plagiarism. Novice writers appear to believe that proofreading by a friend is largely permissible.

Similarly, two of the interviewees indicated that the behaviour was usually not plagiarism, and the third believed that it was never plagiarism. For example, Morgan explained that "just proofreading it and giving feedback isn't a bad thing," but that proofreading did not mean "edit[ing] for grammar, spelling mistakes and stuff," which she identified as being within the realm of plagiaristic behaviours. She also specified revising – "reorganiz[ing] and [...] possibly

put[ing] new ideas into your paper” – as something that should not be done on behalf of the student. In fact, she said that “if someone else was [revising] it, it’s not really your paper anymore.” Even though Taylor was also concerned with maintaining boundaries around revision and/or original writing, she did not worry about “looking for grammatical mistakes and spelling errors and issues with syntax.” That was her definition of proofreading, and, according to Taylor, it did not fall under the definition of plagiarism. She explained that proofreading was not usually plagiarism unless it veered off into “writing in sentences that [the proof-reader has] thought of originally.”

Riley did not distinguish between subtypes of proofreading and/or commenting on a paper. Her understanding of the word proofreading related simply to providing comments on another’s draft. She explained that this would never be plagiarism because “it doesn’t relate to anything with copying or cheating at all.” Riley did not see how providing comments could be considered cheating because it did not involve copying anyone else’s work. Her exploration of this behaviour was more concrete than the other interviewees’.

Including a friend’s discussed ideas in one’s essay

Most survey respondents (70.7%, $n = 246$) identified including a friend’s ideas in one’s essay as not plagiarism in most or all circumstances. This is a similar response to the other item on the questionnaire that refers to including the ideas that a friend had been specifically asked to generate (69.5% of the sample, $n = 241$). Some respondents felt that it represented plagiarism, but only 4.9% ($n = 17$) stated that it was so in all cases. It seems that novice writers generally view discussing ideas, and even soliciting ideas from friends to be acceptable, as long as they are not taking the same course.

Taylor said that “if [the friend] is not writing a piece on that material, then I don’t believe that it’s plagiarism because they haven’t created something and they’re just helping – you’re just bouncing ideas off of them.” This answer shares strong similarities to the one she provided in response to making use of a professor’s ideas. For Taylor, the context of a friendship allows for such assistance, particularly because the friend is not also working on similar coursework. Riley said that including a friend’s ideas would usually not be plagiarism because, in most cases, the “friend [would not have] really come up with something” that the writer would simply take. She expressed that such a behaviour would represent plagiarism. Morgan shared a similar view, but she appeared to have difficulty articulating her reasons why, saying “[y]ou should be using your own ideas, but brainstorming – it’s hard to kind of define, where those, like, which, where your ideas start and someone else’s doesn’t.” Morgan seemed to have an awareness that ideas belong to people, but she does not seem confident about how to delineate boundaries of ownership.

Asking a classmate for help with using a search engine

Most survey respondents agreed that getting help from a friend to find relevant websites (83.6%, $n = 290$) or getting a friend to help with finding research articles and/or books (87.6%, $n = 304$) are not plagiarism-related issues.

Riley views finding sources as “basically like a skill rather than copying.” She explained that, regardless of the type of source the friend was helping to search for, the behaviour never constituted plagiarism. Similarly, Morgan said that “that’s just helping with research. I think that’s okay. You’re allowed to have help with that.” Taylor said that this behaviour would usually not constitute plagiarism because a friend is “just extra eyes looking out for articles and there’s a lot of information to go through sometimes when you want to find a good peer-reviewed source.” She said that having a friend help was also valuable when looking for online sources because search engines will “come up with like, twelve thousand sources and there’s a lot to look through when you’re looking for certain information.” Taylor did not indicate a reason why getting help with searching for sources might be an issue of plagiarism in some contexts.

More Equally Distributed Response Patterns

Three behavioural items elicited response patterns that were more equally distributed (see Table 3). The first and third item are notable because similar items to these were rated with greater agreement by the sample. When “classmate” was replaced with “a friend who is not taking the same course,” a vast majority of respondents rated the behaviour as not being plagiarism in most, or all, cases. Similarly, when “an article that you read” was replaced with “another student’s essay,” the vast majority of respondents identified the behaviour as plagiarism in most, or all, circumstances. Changing the relationships involved in the items clearly had an impact on the respondents’ appraisal of the behaviours. This suggests that relational context is important for novice writers’ decision-making about plagiarism.

Table 3. *Items with More Equally Distributed Response Patterns*

Behaviour	Percentage of Respondents			
	Usually/Always Plagiarism	Never/Usually Not Plagiarism	Unsure	n
Discussing your ideas for your essay with a classmate and including some of your classmate’s ideas in your essay.	56.2%	38.1%	5.7%	349

Citing a book in your essay that you have not directly read yourself.	23.7%	52.1%	24.1%	349
Copying the structure of an article that you read.	58.7%	31.2%	10.1%	346

Note. Percentages are based on the number of responses for a given item and may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Including a classmate's idea in one's essay

Respondents were relatively split on this behavioural item, with 38.1% ($n = 133$) believing such assistance is not plagiarism most or all of the time, and 56.2% ($n = 196$) indicating the opposite understanding. Many respondents (69.1%, $n = 241$) provided a qualified answer as opposed to 88 (25.2%) who made absolute claims. This is a much lower percentage of absolute responses than for the items discussed prior to this section, suggesting that this item presented greater ambiguity for participants than did the items discussed previously.

The interviewees were also split on their positions. Taylor explained that using a classmate's ideas in one's essay could lead to "crossover between your essays which could be an accidental case of plagiarism because then it might look like you guys wrote the same essay together and just did two copies." She stated that this was a risk especially when writing on the same topic. According to Taylor, this behaviour usually represents plagiarism, and Riley agreed, indicating that "if [a] person want to get the idea from [a] classmate – he or she should really get approval from them first." She went on to explain that using the idea without authorization "can be considered like copy. Cheat." Riley may not realize that regulations around inappropriate collaboration may not allow for students to authorize the use of their ideas. Inappropriate collaboration guidelines are interpreted and applied by faculty members within their particular disciplinary and classroom contexts. As such, different instructors may feel differently about Riley's interpretation of permissible collaboration. After a brief pause to consider the behaviour, Morgan concluded that the behaviour was usually not plagiarism "because it's hard to define where like, your ideas end and their ideas start when you include it in there, I guess." Her response demonstrates that defining boundaries around ideas are important to her definition of plagiarism, and that appears to be an ambiguous undertaking for her.

Citing a book that one has not read

This behavioural item elicited a widely distributed set of responses, with a higher percentage of respondents answering "Unsure" (24.1%, $n = 84$) than for all other behavioural items on the questionnaire. About half of respondents (52.1%, $n = 182$) indicated that the behaviour was

usually not or never plagiarism, whereas 23.7% ($n = 83$) rated the behaviour as usually or always plagiarism. A high proportion of respondents indicated that they were unsure about the nature of this behaviour, and some potential reasons for this confusion can be found in the interviewees' responses.

Riley paused before explaining that she remembered this item from when she filled out the questionnaire and was just as confused about it at the time. She said that she was "confused [...] 'cause the action of citing is, like, the one that – the thing that we do to appreciate other works, but the thing is, that we don't actually read it, so, it's kind of make me confused between those two ideas." She expressed that perhaps not reading the source could make citing it a form of plagiarism. Morgan seemed to take a similar point of view, saying that she was unsure of the nature of the behaviour because "you haven't read the thing, so you don't know the ideas, but you've cited it because you assumed ideas so I'm not sure where that lies." Morgan, like Riley, appeared to be caught between two competing values. Both interviewees seemed to indicate that honesty about one's reading was important, but, at the same time, it was difficult to classify a behaviour as plagiarism when it included citation. Taylor may have held a different point of view. She stated that the behaviour was usually not plagiarism "because you don't need to read the entire book to get all the information you need." She explained that even if the whole book had not been read, it could still be cited and that inclusion in one's own work would not constitute an act of plagiarism.

Copying the structure of an article

About one third of respondents (31.2%, $n = 108$) classified this behaviour as usually not or never plagiarism, whereas 58.7% ($n = 203$) took an opposite viewpoint and 10.1% ($n = 35$) were unsure of the nature of this behaviour. Although most respondents indicated that copying the structure of an article represented an act of plagiarism in most or all circumstances, more respondents (67.9%, $n = 237$) indicated the same about copying the structure of another student's essay. These findings suggest that an 'article' is a more abstract source than a classmate might be, and that abstraction influences decision-making about whether copying structure is viewed as plagiarism.

The interviewees made greater reference to the author's creation than they did in the discussion on using classmate's ideas. Taylor explained that directly copying the structure would usually be plagiarism "because that's information that's already been published." When asked whether it would make a difference if the article was unpublished, Taylor said that "it would still count because it's something that they've created." She did not describe the circumstances under which this behaviour would not constitute plagiarism. Riley appeared to be more certain than Taylor that the behaviour reflected an act of plagiarism, saying: "[i]t's just copying action." However, it seems that she may not have understood the question in the way that was intended on the questionnaire – she mentions grammatical structure rather than organizational structure. Morgan also believed that the behaviour would usually be plagiarism

because “your essay or whatever should have your own organization to it.” She explained that she was unaware of how citation protocols would apply to this situation, but that if the structure was going to be used, it would need to be cited. She did say that copying the structure was “probably a wrong thing to do,” explaining that it is important to make the organization “as much your own as possible.” Like Taylor and Riley, Morgan explained how using another person’s structure might impact originality.

Summary of Plagiarism Ratings

The behaviours that most respondents identified as usually or always plagiarism focused on direct copying. This result aligns with the existing literature’s suggestion that students are generally able to recognize actions involving copying as plagiarism, although there are some instances of copying that they do not typically categorize as plagiarism (Childers & Bruton, 2016; Waltzer & Dahl, 2020). The behaviours that most respondents felt did not reflect plagiarism were each related to the beginning stages of writing and did not seem to have the concept of ownership attached to them. Finally, some of the behavioural items that yielded more evenly distributed response patterns were highly similar to behaviours in other categories. The only difference was a shift in relationships involved in the question (e.g., a classmate instead of a friend). The shifts in the relationships involved in the behaviours were perceived by respondents as different questions, suggesting that relationality is important to novice writers when determining whether a particular behaviour constitutes plagiarism. In short, the judgment is not only based on the behaviour itself, but also on the context in which it occurs.

Discussion

The main findings of this study are that novice writers appear to possess a commitment to maintaining honesty in their work and in putting effort into their writing. They do seem to believe in the ethics of academic integrity, but they can have difficulty with applying the principles of academic integrity in particular writing situations. Namely, novice writers seem to have difficulty locating the boundaries between their own work and the work of others. This difficulty does not appear to be a result of a lack of effort. Rather, it appears to be a result of operating within a learning environment with ambiguous targets and potentially severe consequences for mistakes. The conclusions of this study imply that academic integrity policies should acknowledge that novice writers may apply principles of academic integrity in different ways, depending on their understanding of the concept as well as the relational context in which decisions are being made. Institutions must also recognize explicit instruction with respect to academic integrity as an institutional responsibility and policies should be designed with this instruction in mind.

The Relationality of Plagiarism

There seems to be a relational aspect at play in novice writers' decision-making. In several instances, the survey data reflected different ratings for similar behaviours, with the relationships between the involved actors being the only difference between the behaviours. For example, students rated the following behaviours differently: incorporating professors' ideas, friends' ideas, and classmates' ideas into their essays. This finding is novel. Although the contextual nature of plagiarism has been recognized for some time, we are unaware of another study that has analyzed the ways in which students view specific behaviours differently depending on who they are working with at the time. This aspect of students' understanding of plagiarism is worth further investigating as it may be necessary to address these sorts of behavioural judgments in the classroom and in university policies.

In this study, novice writers appeared to view the professorial role as one which involved mentorship. The interviewees expressed their belief in the importance of being able to go to their professors for help with generating ideas for their writing. The context of friendship also seemed to allow for such consultation, though this did not extend similarly to the context of working with classmates. It may be that novice writers determine the appropriateness of collaboration primarily based on with whom they are collaborating. Those outside the classroom and/or those leading the classroom may be appropriate to choose as collaborators, whereas those inside the classroom (i.e., classmates) may be inappropriate choices.

Further research in this area could examine how widely this finding applies (i.e., does it apply only to the idea-generation stage, or does it extend to allowing others to contribute directly to one's writing as well?). In some contexts, direct editing on a paper could be considered inappropriate collaboration. For example, the University of Manitoba's Office of Student Advocacy identified direct editing as potentially inappropriate collaboration (Academic Integrity Working Group, 2016). Proofreading could also be considered as a form of inappropriate collaboration (Academic Integrity Working Group, 2016). Although appropriate collaboration has been defined primarily in behavioural terms by the University of Manitoba, it may be that novice writers apply a relational dimension to their decision-making, which could ultimately create conflicts between the students and the academic integrity policy.

Policy Implications

There are also several policy implications suggested by the findings of this study. These implications include the need for explicit instruction regarding academic integrity, adaptability in policy, and pedagogical responses to breaches of policy.

For a policy to contain reasonable standards, it needs to be based upon a shared understanding of its terms (Tauginienė et al., 2019). It is necessary to provide students with explicit instruction regarding academic integrity within a set of shared understandings. It is

not sufficient to simply tell them to maintain academic integrity or to instruct them to avoid plagiarism. Given that the university learning context requires writing that is done differently from other contexts, it seems unreasonable to expect students to enter with a robust understanding of the expectations. The fact that students who have been made aware of the concepts related to academic integrity can still have difficulty applying them means that learning to correctly attribute sources requires procedural knowledge in addition to declarative knowledge. Policy needs to be developed based on the degree to which the institution provides explicit instruction regarding academic integrity. It is unreasonable to penalize learners based on knowledge or skills that they have not been explicitly taught.

Policies also need to be adaptable, within the bounds of the institutional culture, to a variety of situations. Although some institutional contexts indicate that intentionality does not matter (University of Oxford, 2021) and many more consider it merely a mitigating factor, it is not sensible to consider the intentional misrepresentation of authorship and unintentional attribution errors as the same problem. One is a dishonest act, whereas the other is a mistake. Treating all situations involving misattribution as equal is not in the students' best interest and is not consistent with an apprenticeship approach to learning. Policy needs to acknowledge that different situations should yield different consequences.

The University of Manitoba (2020) has started to move towards pedagogical responses to breaches of policy. This trend must continue because it allows for policy to be adaptable to the needs of various learners. If a policy is adaptable, it can include the flexibility to assign consequences based on the needs of the student as a learner rather than on the perceived severity of the offense. Two students may engage in the same behaviours for different reasons, some of which may involve an intention to deceive, and some of which may not. Consequences should logically follow from the motivations behind an unacceptable behaviour. It is important for decision-makers to be trained on how to apply the policy in ways that acknowledge this reality.

Limitations

A general limitation of this study is that, given that the subject matter of this study is an offense of misconduct, it is possible that participants were not entirely honest with some of their responses. This would be in the interest of self-protection. Though measures were taken to encourage participants' propensity towards providing truthful responses, such as keeping their instructors out of the room during questionnaire distribution and maintaining anonymity of the questionnaires and the confidentiality of the interviews, it is difficult to eliminate the risk of social desirability bias when researching sensitive issues (Furnham, 1986). Mitigation of the risk of this bias was the main reason for not asking participants about their own participation in plagiarism. It was supposed that asking questions about abstract behaviours might yield more accurate results. This is also the reason that the questionnaires were distributed by a volunteer who was not involved in any other aspect of the study.

One of the limitations of using Likert-type scales is that the psychological distance between ratings may not be as great for some respondents as for others (Sullivan & Artino Jr., 2013). Another concern is that the number of rating options can influence the perceived psychological distance between the options (Wakita et al., 2012). Therefore, the interpretation of results derived from Likert-type scales necessarily involves a recognition that ratings do not reflect a precise degree of agreement or disagreement with a statement. Rather, they provide an approximate representation. Locquiao and Ives (2020) noted that studies involving the recognition of plagiarism typically suffer from the limitation that they assume a common understanding of plagiarism; however, this study does not suffer from this limitation. Rather than assuming that researchers and students share a similar definition, this study rests on the assumption that students may not share similar definitions of a term.

Although the number of interviews included in this study was limited, the interview data provide a look into the potential ways in which novice writers may make sense of the concept of plagiarism. The interview findings are, of course, by no means generalizable, but it is interesting that even between three students, there are several differences in the ways in which they conceptualize plagiarism. There are also a few experiences they seem to hold in common. Although generalization is not the aim of qualitative research due to the impossibility of replication, it is possible to increase the likelihood that the findings can be applied “to other contexts and settings,” a concept otherwise known as “transferability” (McMillan, 2012, p. 305). Although consumers of this research must decide for themselves if the findings might be applicable to their contexts (McMillan, 2012), we have worked to ease that decision-making process by providing “thick description” of the procedures used to collect data, as well as describing the demographics of the population under study (McMillan, 2012, p. 305).

Future Research

Several suggestions for future research emerge from this study. First, similar investigations of novice writers’ understandings of plagiarism will either confirm or contradict the results. Replication is central to the practice of scholarly research. Second, although this study touched on novice writers’ processes for determining the boundaries of plagiarism, it is necessary to further investigate the ways in which novice writers make these determinations. Furthermore, it will be important to understand their processes in actual writing situations as opposed to in rating situations. One suggestion might be to revisit talk-aloud protocols (Flower & Hayes, 1981) as a method of investigation to probe writers’ composition processes and use of secondary source materials. Finally, the effectiveness of pedagogical techniques needs to be examined. This applies to the techniques that might be used to teach academic integrity as well as the techniques that are used to respond to breaches of policy.

Further research is needed to investigate novice writers’ understandings of academic integrity and plagiarism to establish a base from which to design effective scaffolds. Research should also focus on uncovering novice writers’ practices with respect to incorporating sources into one’s

own writing. Pedagogical techniques for teaching academic integrity as well as for responding to breaches of policy must be evaluated for effectiveness. Anecdotal evidence of effectiveness is not sufficient for establishing that particular interventions are in the best interest of the population of students as a whole. Given the sensitivity of the issue, and the impact of penalties on students' lives, great care must be taken to simultaneously protect the standards and reputation of the institution and to facilitate the intellectual development of the students.

Given the paucity of research that interrogates whether academic integrity policies perpetuate the inequities that exist in society based on race, gender, sexual orientation and nationality – all protected grounds by various mechanisms of human rights' legislation – there is a dire need for data to be collected and analyzed to understand how the policies might act to further disadvantage those who are already marginalized within higher education contexts. This is especially true given that “there is growing evidence to show that racialized minorities are overrepresented in reported cases of academic misconduct” (Eaton, 2020, p. 7). Unfortunately, very little is known about potential correlations between allegations or violations of academic misconduct and students' ethnicity or race. The lack of race-based data related to allegations of student misconduct can serve to systematize and institutionalize racial discrimination. Race-based data, if it were collected, might suggest that a given academic misconduct policy and the norms associated with investigating cases associated with allegations might be discriminatory based on, for example, an overrepresentation racialized students who are alleged to have violated a particular policy (Ontario Human Rights Commission, n.d.). Such omissions to collect and analyze race-based data are highly problematic for universities, who serve a public mandate, because “it is not acceptable from a human rights perspective for an organization to choose to remain unaware of systemic discrimination” (Ontario Human Rights Commission, para. 9).

Finally, this study suggests that students may consider various compositional behaviours to operate differently within various relational contexts. This means that students do, on some level, already recognize a deeply contextual aspect to plagiarism. However, further research on this aspect of their decision-making is required. It will be important to determine how students understand both appropriate and inappropriate collaboration, and how they might understand collaboration differently depending on the people with whom collaboration happens, especially in this age of remote learning, wherein students may have greater access to collaborators than they have ever had before.

Conclusion

The themes that emerged in this study reflect an inherent conflict in the novice writers' thinking. On the one hand, the interviewees seemed relatively certain that the ethics of academic integrity could be maintained through the effort of correct attribution. On the other hand, they did not seem to be able to articulate where the boundary exists between one's own work and the work of others. Morgan explained her guiding principle for maintaining academic integrity as follows: “In

university, *everything* [emphasis added] is plagiarism, so just be safe about it.” This, she recounted, was the advice that an upper-years classmate had given her about maintaining academic integrity. In a world in which ‘everything’ is plagiarism, the novice writers seemed to be experiencing an epistemological crisis with respect to defining plagiarism.

This crisis was evidenced by their frequent deferrals of explanation by using examples. Derrida’s (1967/2001) concept of “différance” was certainly an identifiable dynamic within their responses; that is, the interviewees continued to defer meaning by reference to other concepts that were not the one which they were attempting to explain. Much of their language use reflected hesitation – this can be found in the pauses, the ums, the uhs, and the phrases “stuff like that” and “kind of.” Explaining what something is ‘like’ or is ‘similar to’ is not the same as explaining what ‘it is.’ Nonetheless, the interviewees spoke as if they had a clear understanding of the concepts, perhaps confusing what they felt they ought to know with what they did know. They may have felt that, given the serious consequences for plagiarism that they described, it is a concept that they are responsible to understand.

While the novice writers may have felt responsible to understand the concept of plagiarism, they were not entirely sure how to identify it in practice. They also recognized it as a nuanced concept, particularly with respect to collaborating with others. Relationality appears to be an important aspect of defining plagiarism, at least for novice writers. The findings of this study can inform approaches to policy development in terms of acknowledging the complexity of safe-guarding ‘originality’ in an intertextual and even, interpersonal, world.

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