Students who engage in plagiarism present a problem for all educators, especially those at the secondary and post-secondary levels. To those teaching at the university level, the ever-increasing availability of electronic material must certainly be making plagiarism easier for students and may also be contributing to its prevalence. A large body of research has been conducted on cheating behaviors across all disciplines. There has been a significant amount of inquiry at the college level, particularly in the fields of English, Business Management, and Psychology. Fewer studies have focused specifically on plagiarism as a separate issue from other cheating behaviors, however.

Of the studies that assess trends in plagiarism alone, most utilize self-reporting of plagiarism by students (see McCabe, 1999; O’Connor, 2003; Scanlon & Neumann, 2002, and many others for examples). As we shall see, students have such a confused notion of what actually constitutes plagiarism that such self-reporting cannot be taken as entirely reliable. To complicate the issue, some studies have found that students tend to under report plagiarism or cheating behavior (Genereux & McLeod, 1995), while others suggest that students over report it (Brown & Emmit, 2001; Karlins, Michaels, & Podlager, 1988).

There is no doubt that plagiarism is a problem at our universities. Why do students do it? Is the number actually increasing? Why are students still apparently confused about the subject, despite all of our efforts to educate them?
Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of some of the ways first- and second-year university students understand the phenomenon of plagiarism. Because the question involves a subjective state of knowing—an exploration of the meaning of these students’ experiences as they interpreted them—a qualitative study was the most appropriate choice. It is to be hoped that this study will provide the literature on university plagiarism with a new perspective: one from within the student’s own understanding and experience.

Research Design

A basic interpretive qualitative study on students’ perceptions and understandings of plagiarism was performed. The study was informed by elements of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A grounded theory is “discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis. Therefore, data collection, analysis and theory stand in reciprocal relationship with one another” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 23).

The elements of grounded theory utilized were primarily its strengths: its systems of coding and data analysis which occur simultaneously with data collection (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The codes and themes that emerged were inductively derived from the data, and the data was constantly compared: people, ideas, theories, codes, incidents, and categories. Such a close inspection of students’ responses to questions about plagiarism certainly uncovered some insights about their perceptions of plagiarism.

In many ways the study drew on the tradition of phenomenology as well as on grounded theory—exploring a phenomenon in great depth from the perspective of those who experience and live within it (Merriam, 2002). But as Ashworth, Freewood, and Mcdonald (2003) found, interviews about plagiarism would not have been effective if they are left as open as is the case with phenomenological research (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Participants needed some structure in the form of questions to explore their perspectives. In addition, grounded theory’s system of coding data was utilized, while the discipline of phenomenology generally uses a less systematic process of analysis (Patton, 2002). But the concept of plagiarism is a phenomenological one, and the tradition certainly provided some inspiration for my work.
Sample

The participants involved in this study were first- or second-year undergraduate students at a small university in southern Maine. Freshmen or sophomore university students were targeted for this study for a number of reasons. First, all of these students have had some exposure to the concept of writing and plagiarism by their very experience of having completed high school and started on their post-secondary education. They were expected to be “typical cases” as recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 28). Second, according to Sims (1995), university students are increasingly less likely to plagiarize as they get closer to graduation. Sims speculates on a number of reasons for this: The students have more invested in their education and therefore have more to lose; they have had more practice at writing with sources; and they have been either socialized or educated to believe that academic dishonesty is unacceptable. Sims also found that the closer a student gets to graduation, the more closely aligned his views are with the faculty’s. High school students are generally more accepting of cheating behaviors than university students at any level (McCabe & Drinan, 1999), and the consequences may be less severe.

Undergraduate university students in their freshman or sophomore year were selected for this study because they are perceived as more likely to engage in plagiarism or to be “tolerant” of it, but for them plagiarism has serious consequences. This particular sample of students’ perceptions and understandings of the issue are noticeably absent from the literature. The literature does show that they do not understand the many subtleties of plagiarism (Howard, 1999; Roig, 1999), but it does not explore in their own words what their understandings are. Therefore I set out to talk with students in both private interviews and focus groups.

Data Collection

I selected two writing courses for the focus groups. Their professor was not present during the confidential group discussion, and students were allowed to opt out of the focus group if they so chose. I obtained volunteers for the individual interviews by means of campus flyers. Several who contacted me were concerned about what they might be expected to say or how the information might be used. When I told the students that I was interested in hearing about the topic of plagiarism from their point of view, and that I would protect their confidentiality, they were quite willing to be interviewed. Once potential participants understood that their participation would not harm them in any way, and that
they might be helping faculty and others to understand students’ perceptions about plagiarism, they were surprisingly willing to talk honestly. Since this institution is situated in southern Maine, a state with very little ethnic diversity, all participants were Caucasian, therefore the subtopic of cultural differences in plagiarism perceptions was not included in this study.

I began with a 90-minute-long focus group of five second-semester freshmen in a required freshman writing course (see Appendix for a list of interview questions). I then conducted 11 private interviews, each 60–90 minutes in length. Finally, I conducted a second focus group consisting of 15 students in another section of the required writing course to confirm or disconfirm findings. Thus there were a total of 31 students participating in this study. The focus groups and interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed for coding and analysis.

**Data Management**

After the first focus group of five students and the first two individual interviews, all data was transcribed, and preliminary coding began. With grounded theory, transcription, coding, data collection, and data analysis all take place simultaneously (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis was inductive using open coding, axial coding, and constant comparison. Like data collection and transcription, coding and analysis were ongoing and continuous (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). At this point some commonalities emerged from the codes, and codes were consolidated into categories and subcategories. In grounded theory, this process is known as axial coding, which is a process of figuring out the relationship between categories and subcategories. Categories are actually naming of phenomena (Strauss & Corbin).

**Analysis**

In terms of interpretation, themes were derived inductively from categories, which were themselves derived, again inductively, from codes grounded in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Themes, categories, and codes were constantly compared to one another. Data analysis began with open coding. Codes were then reduced to categories, which then were reduced to themes. Finally the themes were reduced to two core themes: Agency and Externalization.

It must be remembered that the emerging descriptions and themes were “limited to those categories, their properties and dimensions, and statements of relationships that exist[ed] in the actual data collected”
University Students’ Perceptions of Plagiarism

(Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 112). Any relationships between concepts that were identified were based on thick description and outlined by an audit trail for verification by any interested persons (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The 11 themes that emerged—Power, Intellectual Capital, Financial Capital, Student Agency, Quest for Agency, Lack of Agency, Externalizing, Developmental, Motivations for Plagiarizing, Motivations for Not Plagiarizing, and Misunderstandings/Gray Areas—are all worthy of examination prior to a deeper discussion of the two core themes.

Eleven Themes

Power was defined as something the professors controlled. If a student felt powerless to control a situation, or felt like a professor could exert a decision that affected the student, including punishment or consequences of plagiarism or perceived plagiarism, that remark was placed into the Power category. This is an extrinsic category—students felt little agency in these situations. In fact, Student Lack of Agency, another of the themes, can be defined as the opposite of Power. Beth provides typical examples of expressing an idea under the Power category when she says: “They scared us into thinking, we’re going to jail! We’re going to jail!” and “They made you feel like you were stealing all of the time.”

Intellectual Capital refers in part to the ownership of material. Whenever students referred to some benefit gleaned from a person using another’s idea, or a sense of loss from someone using another’s idea, this response was placed under the category of Intellectual Capital. This is different from intellectual property in that it is not just about ownership, but also about either gaining or losing something from the use of that idea. Lance provides an example:

But if I were to use your works, use your information, and pass it off as my own, to the audience that I’m passing it off to, it’s not yours anymore, it’s mine now. Unless someone recognizes that you published that, that you said that, no one knows that it’s yours.

Financial Capital is similar to Intellectual Capital, but naturally it refers to money in some way, either in the form of compensation for published material or lack of compensation. This theme showed itself surprisingly often in a study intended to look at academic plagiarism, and so is worthy of note.

The next three themes are related to one another and need to be treated together. They are all about students’ sense of agency. Agency can be defined as a feeling of power or ability to influence a situation. Students often identified a sense of a lack of agency when they were discussing their perceptions of plagiarism. For example, Beth said, “I was
just always worried. It wasn’t that I was doing it. It was just that I was anxious. I was worried that I wasn’t doing it right. And they just, they make such a big deal about the style and the format.” In another way, Mike reported a lack of agency when he said, “I was bitter. Um, I resented the fact that he was making us do a paper that required no thinking whatsoever.”

Students were coded as having Student Agency when they made decisions for themselves, even when those decisions led to what would generally be considered negative choices, such as plagiarism. If a student deliberately decided to plagiarize, or chose not to read the student handbook’s plagiarism policy, those actions were defined as student agency, just as would a comment about supporting a point or writing an excellent paper. Therefore Student Agency can be defined as a student taking control of the situation, feeling a sense of power, and making decisions for him/herself.

Students’ comments on actions were labeled Quest for Agency when they were attempting to gain some power over a situation for themselves but as yet had failed to achieve agency. For example, Jake spoke of a situation in which he was accused of plagiarism (in his mind, unjustly):

I mean, I explained to him that I didn’t do it on purpose. But it was completely accidental. I told him that. I told him that I didn’t read that part of the paper. I don’t sit down and read the entire article or something. Because even if I did, I wouldn’t remember it word for word. For a little bit he gave me some crap for it, but he eventually backed off. I mean it was accidental. It didn’t change my behavior because it was an accident.

Table 1 provides some visual examples of items at different points along the continuum of agency.

It should be noted here that all of the themes described thus far, Power, Intellectual and Financial Capital, and Student Agency, Lack of Agency and Quest for Agency are all about power. Let us remember that we are talking about students’ perceptions of plagiarism. Thus the major core theme emerging from these first five themes is power and who has it when it comes to plagiarism.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lack of agency</th>
<th>Quest for agency</th>
<th>Agency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• given “busywork”</td>
<td>• trying to word things differently</td>
<td>• making points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• unjustly accused of deliberate plagiarism</td>
<td>• being allowed to think/decide for self</td>
<td>• understanding sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• thinking for self</td>
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</tbody>
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TABLE 1
Sample Items along the Continuum of Agency
The next theme that emerged from the data is students’ sense of distance from the topic they were discussing: Externalizing. A remark was placed into the Externalizing theme if it seemed to be completely separate from the student himself. Accounts of other students who have plagiarized, remarks professors have made, and other events outside of the student’s own experience that were considered extrinsic to the student’s self were placed into the Externalizing theme, including things they were told by professors about plagiarism, but that had no apparent connection to themselves. Gina provides a brief example: “The way I have been taught it is, because you’re taking somebody else’s words.” Here it is about what she has been told, not how she understands it.

The theme Developmental did not appear in the students’ remarks nearly as often as the others, but it did appear on occasion. For example, Beth said, “. . . so I think plagiarism, some people are confused by it, but I think it’s just because, a lot of it is reasoning, and a lot is just developing that state of mind when you can physically grasp and comprehend what it is.” Unlike some of the other themes, which were derived in vivo, meaning in the students’ own works, the theme Developmental was noted in some of the students’ perceptions, even though they themselves did not identify it. For example, “That’s tough for me. I like everything black and white. I don’t want grays . . . I just want one way” (Amy). So in other words, an item was placed into the Developmental theme if students said something about maturity being important to understanding intellectual property, either in the positive sense as in Beth’s example, or negatively, as in Amy’s example, when someone was deemed not developmentally ready to understand the complexity of the issue.

The next two themes can be treated together: Motivation for Plagiarizing and Motivation for Not Plagiarizing. Here students gave their reasons for the choices that they make while writing. The following concepts provide a sampling of the reasons students gave for their decision to plagiarize: It is easy to do; they are confident they won’t get caught; laziness (usually attributed to others); there is no victim; an assignment is deemed busywork; they don’t like or don’t understand the class or topic; they feel pressured for grades; they procrastinate; they don’t know how to avoid it; they are unaware that they are plagiarizing; they have a sense that plagiarism in school is more acceptable than in the real world; they lack the ability to rephrase; and finally, they feel the professor didn’t give enough time to complete the assignment.

Similarly, there are a number of reasons students provided for their decision not to plagiarize: they fear getting caught; it is easier to actually do the assignment; they respect the professor; they enjoy writing papers; they feel guilty if they plagiarize; they can’t afford to buy a
paper; the papers online are not specific enough to the topic; and they have a sense of morality. The concept of fear is worthy of a quick mention. Thirty of the 31 students questioned identified fear of being caught as a primary reason to avoid plagiarism. Interestingly, three students (all young men) stated that they did fear being caught but they plagiarized at times anyway. Only one student cited morality and two cited guilt as reasons not to plagiarize, but all three of those students first named fear as a reason.

The two themes Motivation for Plagiarizing and Motivation for Not Plagiarizing, while important, quickly became subsumed as a dimension of one of the core themes, Agency. They are worthy of examination, however, on their own merits. These are the questions that educators at all levels are most interested in: why do their students plagiarize? It should be noted that several of the reasons these students cited for choosing either to plagiarize or not to plagiarize have confirmed other findings in the literature (see Alschuler & Blimling, 1995; Crown & Spiller, 1998; Roig & DeTommaso, 1995; Sims, 1995; and Wilhoit, 1994).

When students voiced an incorrect statement about plagiarism, that statement became part of the theme Misunderstandings/Gray areas. For example, Gina said, “If you read a page and summarize it in your own words, I don’t feel that’s plagiarism. I mean, that’s not copying word for word. If you, you know, use a direct quote, you have to . . . you know, cite it.” Sometimes a student was aware of her confusion, and when she voiced it, it also went into this theme, as in this example from Lauren: “I’m not sure which one you have to make reference to the name of the person or the publication that you are citing or you are quoting. It’s kind of hard. I’m not sure. I think of them [quoting and citing] as interchangeable.” In fact, this lack of ability to tell the difference between quoting, citing, and paraphrasing became a frequently- recurring phenomenon among the participants. This finding was supported by a separate, impromptu survey of 61 incoming freshmen, most traditionally-aged. They were asked this question: “If you rewrite something you get from a book completely in your own words, do you need to cite that?” They voted by a show of hands (see chart below for results).

The surprising result was that only 14 of the 61 students answered this question correctly. This serves to support the finding that although most students can define plagiarism acceptably, “taking someone else’s words or ideas and using them as one’s own,” they have only a superficial understanding of what that means and a therefore a difficult time applying that definition in real situations.
Core Themes

What do these 11 themes have in common? They are all about power and agency. In addition, there is a peculiar sense of externalization of plagiarism from the students’ point of view. It is as if it is somebody else’s problem or regulation with which they have to comply, but one that does not have any intrinsic meaning in and of itself. Both of these core themes, (a) Agency and (b) Externalization deserve a closer look.

Agency

A university education can be a humbling experience for students. They are exposed to ideas that shake the foundations that have always held their worldview erect. In addition, they are faced with a highly educated faculty who (arguably) know more than they themselves are ever likely to learn in their particular subject area. As if that is not daunting enough, now they must grapple with the mysterious and ever-changing notion of intellectual property as they learn within each subject area. Not only is each student’s body of knowledge questioned, but also his
autonomy. Students must acclimate themselves to the idea that their professors have power over their daily lives and ultimately, their professional lives in a way that their secondary teachers did not.

The students interviewed for this study indicated that their motivations for plagiarizing or not plagiarizing are embedded within that power structure. Their misunderstandings are a part of it too, because if they don’t understand it (or if the professors seem to be always changing the rules), then they have less agency. They fear being accused of plagiarism. When they make a deliberate choice not to plagiarize, they generally do so out of fear, not a personal sense of morality or personal agency. Rebecca Moore Howard (1999) has argued that professors’ views of students as immoral plagiarists is a way to keep what she terms “the Great Unwashed”—that is, inexperienced college students—from becoming a part of the intellectual elite. Beth puts this sense of a hierarchy succinctly:

You can’t come in here, thinking you’re so knowledgeable, you know so much about the subject, and I’m that much better than you, and then they teach in a way that they are trying to project how great they are, and they don’t . . . step down at all to try and help you understand.

Beth is frustrated by her professors’ assumption that warnings of dire consequences are the best means to prevent plagiarism. She, and others like her, craves the skill (or agency) to know when and how and why to cite sources to support her own voice. Mike expresses the same thing when discussing his freshman year professors:

. . . it was less “this was why you shouldn’t do it” and more “this is what will happen if you do it” like “these are the consequences.” . . . as opposed to “don’t do it because it’s wrong.” . . . it’s kind of a cop-out to just scare people into doing something as opposed to giving them a, a valid reason.

Such comments are examples of students’ quest for agency.

The majority of the participants share the perception that different professors have vastly different expectations and enforcements of plagiarism from one another. (It is important to remember that what is being measured here are students’ perceptions of their professors’ expectations, not their professors’ expectations, which were not measured in this study. The distinction is an important one.) Amy voiced this perceived discrepancy of enforcement: “Because some teachers are OK with some, and then you go to other teachers and get caught plagiarizing, and you don’t even know it.” Interestingly, every student voiced this perception except Ella and the two focus groups. Of those, while the first focus group (end of second semester freshmen) did not mention different expectations specifically (nor did I ask this group
that question), they did report that only one of their professors had mentioned plagiarism explicitly, a couple had had warnings on their syllabi, and the rest were silent on the subject. The students in the second focus group were interviewed during the first day of their second week of classes at the university. These novice students reported that most of their professors had included a plagiarism warning on their syllabus. These students predicted that their professors would be consistent about their enforcement of plagiarism policies even though they reported that they felt their high school teachers had not been. This sense of getting mixed messages represents a lack of agency because students often do not feel on solid ground when they are writing, and waste some of their creative and rhetorical energy on fear and anxiety about being caught in a perceived arbitrary system of rules and consequences.

In addition to plagiarism knowledge, both financial and intellectual capital are signs of power. The students here interviewed believe that plagiarism in school is less significant of an offense than plagiarism in “the real world” where one may be paid or otherwise glean some reward such as respect from the intellectual work. The following are some comments that demonstrate this perception:

I can’t get over the fact that people get so upset if someone takes a paragraph and uses it for school. You know? I think people getting that upset about it is ridiculous. Maybe if they printed it in The New York Times and played it off as their own would be a big deal. But playing it off in a small school? I think that’s ridiculous. (Beth)

And from Ella:

I guess if I was a professional and I did a peer-reviewed journal, and some kid that was in 8th grade took, like a paragraph. I wouldn’t get mad. It wouldn’t bother me. I would just be like, whatever. I mean I would obviously be like, that’s too bad that he can’t put it in his own words, but probably to each his own. I wouldn’t really . . . but like, obviously, if it was in the professional world and it was something big like curing cancer, I’d obviously be bummed.

It seems apparent that at the college level at least, students see plagiarism as a bit of a power trip. Professors and college administrators seem to often tell students not to plagiarize, and warn them of the consequences, but these students don’t believe they do as well at helping students understand why not to plagiarize, or how not to plagiarize. Mike was one of the students who took his own quest for agency the most seriously. He sums up the power struggle between students and professors this way:
I think a lot of it has to do with the idea of respect. The student/teacher relationship. And if the teacher feels like he or she is wrong, they hesitate to back down, even if they know, you know, chances are they might be. Just because they don’t want to show that vulnerability. That’s just my theory.

While the core theme of Agency is present in all of the participants’ experiences, it is not the only one. A second core theme, Externalization, is also part of each student’s experience with plagiarism. In fact, the two core themes are very much bound together, and their separate treatment here is certainly an artificial construct. It is possible that the reason plagiarism seems to cause such a power struggle in the students’ minds is that the students simply do not perceive the problem in the same way as their professors. Many understand what their professors are telling them about plagiarism, but they are much less clear about why it is seen as such an important issue. The concept of intellectual property is not intrinsic to most of these students; it is imposed on them by authorities or other people in power outside of themselves, hence the second core theme Externalization.

Externalization

Kraus (2002) stated that students viewed plagiarism as a “quaint” concern of their professors, “something in the order of jaywalking or sneaking a grape while shopping for produce” (p. 82). In the spirit of this metaphor, if students identified plagiarism as a crime, I asked them whether plagiarism was a crime more similar to stealing a grape from a salad bar or to committing a murder. If the murder comparison seemed excessive to students, I identified the worst crime as stealing a car. In nearly every case, students identified plagiarism as more similar to stealing a grape, especially if the assignment was for school rather than for “the real world.” Most students simply did not innately see the importance of plagiarism avoidance, but they were very aware that their professors did.

A few students were comfortable with the externalization of the concept of plagiarism, and avoiding plagiarism just because they were told to do so. Danielle (in Focus Group 1) said she would be most comfortable if her professors would “You know, tell us what is acceptable and what’s not and exactly what to do.” However, many others expressed a stronger need for agency. In other words, an external reason for following a rule just didn’t seem enough. Again, Mike was the most articulate in expressing this idea:

But I think that whether or not we plagiarize, it should be, it should be based on reasons that we decide for ourselves. You know, sort of educate ourselves on what we think it is, and why we think it’s bad or acceptable and then, go
from there. As opposed to letting, you know, a third grade teacher tell us that it’s wrong, and then never doing it. Because I don’t think we’ll get anywhere as a society that way. I would say that the most important thing would be to prompt, um, just that type of thinking. Because I don’t think that students think about that type of thing. It’s just, it’s just, not on a conscious level. It’s just been such a long time, don’t do it, it’s bad. So I think that if you brought it to a cognizance, and thought about it in a different light, then you could understand it better.

Clearly Mike resents the externalizing paradigm and even resorts to deliberate plagiarism if he feels a lack of investment in an assignment.

While many students reported that their professors told them briefly at the beginning of the semester that they should not plagiarize, it generally was just a warning rather than an explanation. “They just expect us to know,” reports Beth. When asked whether that was a reasonable expectation at the college level, only about half reported that it was. According to Amy:

I don’t think teachers teach it well enough. I don’t think they teach well enough citing, and what to do, and how to take the words, and how many words you can take without being considered plagiarism. They just say, “Don’t plagiarize.” But they never tell you what to do to not plagiarize.

Other students, such as Gina, felt that while they themselves did know what to do to avoid plagiarism and why, many other students did not.

The current, almost universal policy of plagiarism prevention among university professors—informing students that there is a plagiarism policy, or telling them to refer to it if they have any questions—is a method of externalizing. Every student in this study knew that the plagiarism policy could be found in the student handbook. However, not 1 of the 31 students had read it. In fact, only two had read any part of the handbook at all.

When asked why their professors got so upset about plagiarism, most of the participants responded in some variation of this comment from William (Focus Group 1): “Because they can’t tell if you’re actually learning if you’re just plagiarizing everything.” However, only a handful of people seemed to have an internal sense of plagiarism as an undesirable behavior in the sense that plagiarism is unfair to the original author. Among those students, only three specifically mentioned a personal sense of morality. A few made comments similar to the following: “I guess if I wrote something that I was proud of and that I really had invested a lot of time, I’d be pretty mad if someone said, took a paragraph of mine and said it was theirs” (Beth).

Only Gina seemed to have a sense of intellectual property outside of her own experience: “I mean, some of these teachers have written books
and journals. They could be stealing from them. And I don’t think they would appreciate it. My philosophy teacher is an author. And we had to do reports from his books. And he would know if we were stealing because he wrote it!” Yet even here, she is making the comparison with her own professors, not with intellectual property in general. It is curious that while students externalize the concept of plagiarism as something coming from others that is imposed on them, it does not occur to them that intellectual property relates to the world of ideas, not just their own, or in the case of the most sophisticated student (in this sense, at any rate), their professors. In fact, many seem to have an attitude similar to Amy’s. She, like William and others, said that professors object to plagiarism because they can’t tell what the students are actually learning. When asked whether plagiarism was unfair to the original authors, this was her response: “Um, no, I can honestly say that that would not even be in my head. It would never pop up, I don’t think . . . They [the professors] probably just want to see how much you know.”

For the students here interviewed, plagiarism is sometimes a moral issue, but more often, they expressed it in terms of something that people in authority imposed on them. Several were content to obey without question, several obeyed out of fear, and several chafed at the rule and regularly broke it: sometimes because they didn’t understand it, and sometimes because they didn’t agree with it. Unfortunately for us, there were no clear limits encompassing each student’s stance on plagiarism. People moved back and forth between agency and lack of agency, a sophisticated or elementary understanding of plagiarism rules, and their own feelings about intellectual property. However, inevitably when students were asked the question—Can ideas be owned?—they were taken aback and forced to think about intellectual property in a way that they never had before. This is the beginning of agency: thinking about a concept and deciding how it has meaning for oneself.

Discussion

Plagiarism is a subject that every university student knows he or she should care about. However, in this study students did not seem to care about it intrinsically, as a matter of concern stemming from themselves. It was almost always a function of their professors and what they cared about. As Jake pointed out:

But if they made it out to be so bad, they would teach it, too. They wouldn’t just, mention it. They say, it’s bad, don’t do it. A lot of ramifications if you do it, so don’t do it. But they don’t really elaborate on how to and how not to. So it’s just like, students in one ear and out the other because they don’t
pound the point through that it’s as bad as it is. So if it’s as bad as they make it out to be, then maybe they should teach it more. Maybe they’re just saying that to scare you.

Jake’s comments highlight the fundamental frustration many students voiced: a sense of someone denying them agency over an issue that they are told is important but about which they fail to see the importance.

The findings demonstrated that these students differ from their perceptions of their professors in important ways. The students reported that they take plagiarism less seriously than they think their professors do. They have their own sense of morality surrounding plagiarism, and it often does not match what they believe their professors’ to be. Many of them have some profound misunderstandings of what constitutes plagiarism, especially when it comes to issues of paraphrasing and original ideas.

As we have seen, students maintain a curious sense of separation from the phenomenon of plagiarism. They do not claim it as their own. For these students, plagiarism is very often couched in terms of otherness: It is seen as something outside of themselves that is imposed on them, told to them, even demanded of them. Only rarely did the students express a thought about plagiarism that came from within themselves.

In addition, the students expressed (either directly or indirectly) varying degrees of agency, a phenomenon that was labeled Agency. Because the students saw the issue as outside of themselves, or externalized, they often felt little agency over issues surrounding plagiarism. Some reported that in the past they had plagiarized by mistake, or believed that they had been unjustly accused of plagiarism. Some communicated a desire to achieve agency, such as when they tried to find ways to rephrase a source’s ideas to their own satisfaction, or when endeavoring to approach an assignment in a way that was meaningful to them. A few reported a real sense of agency surrounding writing if they knew what they were trying to communicate with a particular writing assignment and considered it worth communicating. A couple of students reported deliberately plagiarizing assignments if they considered them to be “busy-work,” a phenomenon that was also considered to reflect student agency, because the students were taking control of the situation, albeit in a way that faculty certainly would not approve.

As we have seen in our exploration of students’ perceptions about plagiarism, they may not share with their professors the same alarm about plagiarizing. In their minds, writing a paper may be about using sources and quotes, not creating and supporting original ideas (DeVoss & Rosati, 2002; Whitaker, 1993). Indeed, for them, it may seem as though there are no original ideas left—undergraduate education is about estab-
lished ideas and facts to be learned (Ashworth, Bannister, & Thorne, 1997). On tests, students give back information that has been fed to them, and this is considered desirable behavior. There are subtle and often unarticulated characteristics to good writing behavior that students must learn to navigate. Complicating the issue is that their own ideas must fall within a realm of what faculty consider “correct.” For example, DeVoss and Rosati point out that if a student writes about an interpretation of *King Lear*, that interpretation must be within the realm of what is currently acceptable thought about *King Lear*, or else supportable to a level of sophistication not available to most undergraduate students. While the student is learning to write a paper within certain confines for one course, he may be enrolled in other courses that require self-reflection or other personal writing, or collaborative writing with other students, for which he must internalize an entirely different set of criteria about what constitutes original thought and moral behavior. Such mixed messages must certainly lead to confusion.

Perhaps teachers and university faculty should consider that their current methods of prevention are no longer working for every student. The literature on plagiarism abounds with stories of increasing plagiarism rates and decreasing moral integrity of university students. The study here indicated that students, even the ones who plagiarize, are not always creatures of depraved moral values. Some have a very strong sense of morality, some are questing for agency, some misunderstand intellectual property entirely, and most don’t understand why their professors consider plagiarism such an important topic.

We cannot assume a one-size-fits-all approach will work in preventing plagiarism. We must open wide the dialogue about power, judgment, and student agency. We need to improve our strategies for helping our students to discover the importance of intellectual property and the sharing and ownership of ideas. Perhaps we should also re-examine the concept of intellectual property for ourselves as well. The postmodern perspective of intertextuality and the ubiquitous nature of ideas at the beginning of the twenty-first century have certainly led to the ever-increasing concern about plagiarism. As our worries about students’ plagiaristic behavior evolve with changing times, perhaps our own view of intertextuality is due to evolve as well.

In our insistence on original ideas from our students, we must ask ourselves, is our own work original? Do we not learn from scholars who have gone before us, even internalizing some of what we have learned so that it is no longer distinguishable from our own ideas? This concept of the ubiquitous blending of ideas, of intertextuality, is not a new one. Let us consider what Emerson wrote one hundred years ago:
Our debt to tradition through reading and conversation is so massive, our protest or private addition so rare and insignificant,—and this commonly on the ground of other reading or hearing,—that, in a large sense, one would say there is no pure originality. All minds quote . . . By necessity, by proclivity, and by delight, we all quote. (1889, p. 170)

And:

Our knowledge is the amassed thought and experience of innumerable minds; our language, our science, our religion, our opinion, our fancies we inherited. Our country, customs, laws, our ambitions, and our notions of fit and fair,—all these we never made, we found them ready-made; we but quote them. (1889, p. 190)

Here Emerson uses the word “quote,” but he certainly is not talking about citing. He is talking about intertextuality: the combination of others’ ideas that have become an inextricable part of ourselves.

There is another important view we must consider that stems from this study of students’ perspectives of plagiarism. The students here reported that their professors all regularly say similar things about not tolerating plagiarism, but they have widely different ways of enforcing (or in some cases, not enforcing) plagiarism policies. The students see these differences as arbitrary. It could even cause them to construe that our statements about plagiarism are not truly as important as we say they are, which, indeed, at least one student interviewed here expressed explicitly. If they were, in their view, there would be more consistency between their professors and across disciplines. One future venue for exploration would be how incidences of plagiarism vary based on a clear policy and consistent enforcement. Another would be a study of actual faculty attitudes about plagiarism rather than students’ perceptions of faculty attitudes.

Conclusion

Plagiarism is an intriguing topic with many avenues for exploration. Students’ perceptions of plagiarism certainly differ from their professors’ and it is valuable to attempt to listen in some small measure to what those perceptions are. Here we have learned that students who plagiarize cannot simply be labeled as immoral; such a labeling lacks a deeper understanding of what actually motivates them to plagiarize or not plagiarize. Many students crave a sense of agency surrounding the issue: they desire to own it rather than merely to “borrow” it from their professors. Most of the students interviewed here had not adopted the concept of plagiarism as part of their own moral toolkits; it was something external to themselves, imposed on them by their professors. The body of plagia-
rism literature that views plagiarism as a question of incidences due to deteriorating morality is certainly important, but it must be supplemented with theorists such as Miguel Roig, who, while exploring incidences, also seeks to advocate for formative plagiarism instruction; Ashworth, Freewood, and Mcdonald (2003) who present three students discussing plagiarism in their own words and revealing their fears; and Howard (1999), who, like Roig, writes about a formative approach to teaching plagiarism prevention.

James Britton (1993) writes about what he terms “the hidden curriculum” which rations knowledge to students, minimizes perspectives they may be exposed to, and creates hostility to change. Howard (1999) would apply Britton’s hidden curriculum to universities’ construction of plagiarism: “[it] is designed to bar the Great Unwashed from membership in the intellectual elite” (p. 14). She suggests a different perspective toward students: that inadequate paraphrasing, at least, is an outsider’s membership application—an attempt to become part of the university community—and therefore those who inadequately paraphrase are neither unethical nor ignorant nor thieves: they are merely unfinished learners. Perhaps with a greater understanding of students’ morality, their rhetorical intent, and their understanding of intellectual property (or lack thereof), we can share the vast world of intellectual material with them, allowing them to join the conversation of the academy more effectively.
Interview Questions

1. How do you define plagiarism?

2. What is your university’s plagiarism policy?
   a. How did you learn about it?

3. What did you learn about plagiarism in high school?
   a. What do you know about the topic that you learned elsewhere?

4. What are the steps you take when you set out to write a research paper?
   a. When you find a source you want to use in a research paper, what do you do next?
   b. How do you manage/organize your sources?

5. Describe the circumstances in which you have copied and pasted from electronic text.
   a. Does this constitute plagiarism?

6. Have you ever deliberately plagiarized a paper?
   a. Describe the circumstances.

7. Have you ever deliberately plagiarized part of a paper?
   Have you ever inadvertently plagiarized a paper?
   a. Describe the circumstances.

8. Have you ever been accused of plagiarism?
   a. Under what circumstances?

9. In your opinion, what are the pitfalls of plagiarism?
   a. Describe the muddy, confusing, or difficult-to-understand parts.

10. Have you heard stories about other students who have plagiarized?
    a. What were the circumstances?

11. Why is plagiarism wrong?

12. Tell me about some incidences of plagiarism you have heard about in “the real world.”

13. What do you do when your sources are very difficult to read?

14. Why do professors care about plagiarism?

15. What advice would you give faculty to help students prevent plagiarism?

References


