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# Simple, Yet Complex: Pre-Service Teachers' Conceptions of Plagiarism at a Norwegian University

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## ABSTRACT

In recent decades, research on plagiarism has helped to raise awareness of the complex and multifaceted nature of plagiarism. Yet despite these strides, several influential academic contexts have yet to be examined. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine pre-service teachers' conceptions of plagiarism at a university in Norway, a country largely excluded from these studies, in part because of its non-EU membership status. Results showed that while students understood several basic elements of plagiarism, their own definitions were narrow in scope, highlighting traditional viewpoints such as plagiarism as transgression. Results also revealed that students' concerns regarding plagiarism aligned with establishing a moral identity as a writer rather than situating plagiarism within the greater context of proper academic writing. Pedagogical implications are discussed.

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## Introduction

A central tenet in research on academic or source-based writing is the role of plagiarism. Conventional takes on plagiarism have deemed it a “scourge” (Paterson, 2007), an “evil” (Appiah, 2016), and “theft” (Maddox, 1995), thus rendering the phenomenon as a transgression committed by students whose sole aim is to achieve success through unscrupulous means. A more progressive body of research, however, has adopted a more holistic approach, in which the multiple variables, perspectives, and stakeholders at play are examined, resulting in a much richer understanding of the causes of plagiarism, one which gets at the heart of academic writing and therefore encourages educators to establish sound pedagogical practices in order to help their students hone their academic writing skills. In recent years, plagiarism research has in fact made such great strides that some scholars have begun to question what meaningful research is still needed (Pecorari, 2015).

Despite these strides, it is nonetheless important to determine how or whether different educational contexts – namely those with a strong academic presence but with minimal scholarship conducted within the realm of plagiarism – do or do not align with the extant findings of plagiarism studies. Conducting such studies has the potential not only to help institutions of higher education ascertain how its faculty and students construct meaning of plagiarism, but also to aid those institutions in effecting pedagogical and systemic changes that can help faculty and students reach a mutual understanding regarding academic expectations.

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This study addresses these concerns by examining the perceptions of plagiarism of university students in Norway, a context that scholarship has largely ignored. Specifically, twenty undergraduate pre-service students in the Department of Teacher Education at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) in Trondheim, Norway, completed a survey intended to gauge their conceptions of and concerns with plagiarism. The timing of the study was opportune, as the students were in the third year of a five year program; during the semester in which the study was conducted, the students were writing their FOU Oppgave (forskning og utviklingsarbeid, or research and development paper), an evidence-based paper based on a mini-study students were required to conduct.

## Scholarship on Plagiarism

Since the notion of plagiarism is a human construct, namely a Western one (Pennycook, 1996), much of the scholarship on plagiarism has, in essence, attempted to examine all variables that pertinent stakeholders must negotiate. Traditional views regard plagiarism as a transgression, one in which a student uses another's work without affording them credit, and as part of a larger effort to achieve individual gain that they knowingly do not deserve. Yet more progressive studies – in recognizing that avoiding plagiarism requires time and effort as students acclimate to a variety of disciplinary discourse communities – examine plagiarism within the broader context of the complexities of learning academic writing (Merkel, 2020).

Recent studies on plagiarism have thus investigated numerous variables that function as a rampart to student learning and progress. Examples include the nature of students' intent (Bamford & Sergiou, 2005), the challenges of paraphrasing (Keck, 2014), student versus professors' conceptions of plagiarism (Shi, 2012), and cross-disciplinary issues (Pecorari & Shaw, 2012). In turn, plagiarism scholarship has advocated for new terminology that distinguishes between acts of cheating and acts of learning, e.g., transgressive and non-transgressive intertextuality (Chandrasoma et al., 2004). Though discussion on plagiarism is naturally still rife with controversy, research widely suggests that plagiarism is an integral stage in the education process through which most students must pass (Pecorari, 2015).

Despite these breakthroughs, institutional mindsets are often at odds with the progress and trajectory of recent research. For instance, several studies examining university plagiarism policies have spotlighted the fact that the predominant discourses in these policies are steeped in the language of law and ethics, and thus label plagiarism as a transgression by placing it alongside other academically immoral behaviors such as cheating and purchasing term papers online (Hu & Sun, 2017; McGrail & McGrail, 2015; Sutherland-Smith, 2011). Perhaps not surprisingly, students who attend institutions of higher learning often assume writerly identities that zero in on matters of morality rather than the production of quality writing.

## Plagiarism as Situated Within Academic Writing

While research must investigate the phenomenon itself, any scrutiny of plagiarism must also consider the circumstances in which plagiarism is often situated, namely academic or source-based writing. It is critical for students to develop an understanding that avoiding plagiarism, at least as a non-transgressive act, involves a complex and discursive process in which they must learn the purpose and expectations of academic writing as they are socialized into a new set of academic discourses. Though the principles of academic writing can differ greatly, three characteristics consistently come to the fore: in-depth knowledge of a subject, the preponderance of reason and logic over emotion, and the anticipation of an imagined reader who critiques a text for flaws in logic and disconnect between research and observation (Thaiss & Zawacki, 2006). In order to successfully integrate these facets into their writing, students must collect, evaluate, and integrate information, transform it into their own

words, and finally create a product that not only pushes the boundaries of established beliefs but in doing so abides by a particular standard of citation practices (Hyytinen et al., 2017).

All of the aforementioned individual characteristics function to assemble a greater whole, namely a text that chronicles new perspectives by building on extant scholarship. In academia, writers who achieve this are able to “enter a conversation with others”; they learn not only to express their ideas, but to do so in relation to what others have said (Graff & Birkenstein, 2010, p. xvi). This process of synthesis gets at the heart of academic writing, which as Spatt (2011) suggests, contains “something of others and something of you” (p. ix).

However, as students acclimate to the respective discourses of their new academic communities – particularly as they transition between high school and university studies – they encounter a multitude of challenges. These include distinguishing reliable from unreliable and important from less important sources (Spatt, 2011) as well as adapting to academic register (Bailey, 2018). Because of the technical and contextualized nature of academic texts (Howard et al., 2010), students may have limited ability to comprehend and deconstruct their meaning (Hirvela & Du, 2013). While these challenges are part and parcel of academic writing, students may also encounter struggles that are unique to individual disciplines (or even courses within those disciplines), such as negotiating professors’ restrictive guidelines for assignments, which can in turn affect students’ efforts to incorporate sources properly into their texts (Merkel, 2020).

If the goal for students, then, is to fuse existing scholarship with the thesis or trajectory of a new text, then it is critical for students to learn the minutiae of how the old and the new come together. They must learn to support their arguments and pose counterclaims, and they must develop strategies to integrate summary, paraphrase, and direct quotation into their writing. If students can learn these skills, then plagiarism will be avoided because they have become competent academic writers, not because they have followed APA citation to a fault or developed a heightened sense of morality as they wrote. In short, they form an academic identity (Ivanič, 1998) as a writer rather than an ethical one.

## Geographic and Political Context

Geography is a vital consideration in plagiarism research. On one hand, the lion’s share of research has been conducted at Western institutions of higher education. Several seminal studies, particularly in North America, have thus been conducted in these contexts, such as Blum’s (2009) three-year case study of US undergraduates’ conceptions and behaviors regarding plagiarism and cheating in higher education. On the other, with the increase in the matriculation of international students in recent decades, it behooves Western institutions to accommodate these students’ needs by encouraging their socialization and bolstering their opportunities for success in a new academic environment. These studies thus examine the conflict that arises between international students’ linguistic, cultural, and academic backgrounds with their efforts to study abroad (see, for instance, Bamford & Sergiou, 2005; Hayes & Introna, 2005). Further studies have arisen in countries where English is not a mother tongue, but has assumed an increased role in higher education due to English-medium instruction (e.g., Hu & Lei, 2016) or institutions’ adoption of Western education models, such as plagiarism policy (e.g., Hu & Sun, 2017).

The aforementioned research has been critical to understanding the gap between institutions’ regulations and expectations regarding plagiarism and students’ conceptions as students embark on their journeys towards attaining their degrees. In Europe, studies on plagiarism have investigated the contexts of individual countries (or institutions within those countries) as well as a composite of EU member states, such as Foltýnek and Glendinning’s (2015) three-year project, the Impact of Plagiarism in Higher Education Across Europe (IPPHEAE). The IPPHEAE examined extant plagiarism policies and procedures for handling cases of student plagiarism at various higher education institutions across the EU’s member states.

One context that has been largely ignored in plagiarism studies, however, is Norway, in part because of its political isolation as a non-member of the EU. Yet Norway has dozens of colleges

and universities, many of which are recognized internationally for their academic excellence; research on plagiarism in Norwegian higher education is therefore merited. While studies in conjunction with plagiarism have been conducted in Norwegian contexts, their participants' educational backgrounds vary greatly, ranging from undergraduate engineering students (Chirumamilla et al., 2020) to post-graduate medical students (Hofmann et al., 2013). However, in these studies, plagiarism is necessarily considered a transgressive act, as it is grouped with other forms of academic misconduct such as cheating on e-exams and fabrication of data, respectively. In perhaps the most comprehensive study conducted in Norway in recent years, Nierenberg and Fjeldbu (2015) explored Norwegian university first-year students' information literacy. While many of the study's survey questions inquired about students' experience with writing from sources, several also asked students to determine whether a textual scenario constituted plagiarism or required citation of sources. In this way, the study centered more on testing students' knowledge than determining their conceptions of plagiarism. Further, the study covered a wider array of topics than plagiarism, including critical evaluation of sources.

The purpose of this study is thus to examine, via qualitative analysis, plagiarism-related issues at a university in Norway. Specifically, the conceptions of plagiarism of 20 pre-service students in the Department of Education (Institutt for lærerutdanning) at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet) (NTNU) were examined. Because of the study's focus on students in the third year of their studies, it provides insight into the conceptions of more experienced students. The research questions for this study are as follows:

- What are students' conceptions of plagiarism?
- How might students' conceptions of plagiarism be situated within the larger context of academic writing and university education?

## Method

### Context

With nearly 42,000 students, the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (hereinafter NTNU) is Norway's largest university. Its main campus is located in Trondheim, the country's third-largest city. The status as Norway's largest university stems from the 2006 merger of several higher educational institutions in Trondheim. Today, the university is comprised of nine faculties and 55 departments. The Department of Teacher Education, the largest such university department for teacher education and educational research in Norway, is part of the Faculty of Social and Educational Sciences. The Department offers BA, MA, and PhD degrees, as well as continuing education for in-service teachers.

### Participants

Until 2016, NTNU students enrolled in teacher education pursued a 4-year BA degree. All four years of the program were at the BA level, and a thesis was written during the third year. In 2016, the program expanded to five years, and is now an integrated MA program in teacher education for primary and lower secondary schools. The first three years are now at the BA level, while the final two years are at the MA level. Despite this modification, the theses for both programs remain intact. In other words, in the second semester of their third year, students must still write an FOU Oppgave (forskning og utviklingsarbeid, or research and development paper), and before completing the entire degree, students write during their fifth year an MA Oppgave.

Students enrolled in the program can pursue one of two tracks. The first track is for students who plan to teach in elementary school (grades 1–7 in Norway), while the second track is for those who plan to teach in lower secondary school (grades 8–10). Although students in these two tracks often

take separate classes, they can be combined on occasion – as was the case for this course, titled Engelsk 2 – when the course goals for each group are the same.

Roughly 360 students are accepted into the teacher education program each year, or about 180 per track. The 20 participants<sup>1</sup> (4 male, 16 female) who took part in this study were all in the second semester of their third year. During this semester, students attended class for roughly five weeks before embarking on a six-week teaching practicum, in which student-teaching can occur domestically in Norway or abroad in Canada, Australia, England, or Zambia. Upon returning from their practicum, students attend class for another seven weeks. The purpose of the Engelsk 2 course is to teach students how to write an academic paper based on a small study they conduct during their teaching practicums. The teaching schedule thus aligns with both the students' practicums and their FOU Oppgave, the latter of which is due at the end of the spring semester. For instance, units taught early in the semester focus on using databases, locating reliable sources, writing research questions, and data collection methods, while units taught later in the semester (i.e., after students' practicums) include data analysis and distinguishing the findings section from the discussion section.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The purpose of this study was to establish students' conceptions of plagiarism. The unit on plagiarism taught in the Engelsk 2 course, therefore, was taught only after students had completed the survey for this study, so as not to influence students' responses. Data collection consisted of a survey of seven semi-structured questions (see Appendix 1 for survey questions). All students voluntarily took part in the survey; all surveys were deidentified. Two salient features of the survey deserve mention. First, survey questions entailed the explicit absence of any reference to plagiarism as transgression (e.g., "What moral issues do you associate with plagiarism?"). Such questions may have skewed students' responses; if students felt that plagiarism was indeed a transgression, then such a determination would arise holistically from students' responses rather than biased questions. Second, the survey entailed the absence of any questions that would have prompted students to determine whether or not a sample text constituted plagiarism; such questions – while still related to conceptions – would have drawn attention to students' abilities to identify instances of potential plagiarism rather than situate their conceptions of plagiarism holistically within their own learning experiences.

Critical discourse analysis (hereinafter CDA) (Fairclough, 1992) was adopted to examine students' survey responses. As an approach, CDA scrutinizes how discourse is shaped, and shaped by, affiliations of power and ideology. In turn, CDA also examines the attendant consequences of these affiliations, namely how they affect the construction of social identities as well as individuals' knowledge and belief systems (Fairclough, 1992). Within the context of this study, CDA was employed as a means to help pinpoint the derivation of students' conceptions of plagiarism.

Using the constant comparative method (Merriam, 2009), I read the data multiple times for plagiarism-related themes. Data analysis was then conducted via three stages of coding: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). Open coding entailed identifying recurring themes across students' survey responses. The next stage, axial coding, involved aligning the themes from students' surveys with variables that are commonly investigated in plagiarism research (e.g., paraphrase, intent). While one goal of this study was to determine students' conceptions of plagiarism, the alignment of the themes of students' surveys with variables or points of discussion common in research also enabled me to situate students' conceptions of plagiarism in relation to that scholarship. The third and final stage of coding, selective coding, involved a process of determining which themes of the axial coding repeated with enough frequency to justify their inclusion in the findings.

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<sup>1</sup>Participant gender was not considered during data analysis.

## Findings

Two schools of thought tend to emerge in discussions regarding plagiarism: one of plagiarism as artful deception, the other of plagiarism in tandem with a learning process. A challenge that arises, however – particularly in the case of the former – is that this ideological positioning often seems to “predict the empirical claims or assumptions that are put forward” (Skaar & Hammer, 2013, p. 17). In other words, if the foundation of a study is based on the notion that plagiarism is a moral transgression, then the evidence required to support such a claim or perspective is likely to surface. It is thus important for ideological positioning, in as much as possible, to play a minimal role in influencing participants’ responses.

To this end, the findings of this study constitute two themes: first, students’ raw conceptions of plagiarism, and second, the situatedness of those conceptions within academic writing. Because the survey questions neither asked explicitly nor alluded to plagiarism as a matter of ethics, this allowed for students’ responses – whether they discussed plagiarism as transgression or not – to be measured specifically from the students’ viewpoints rather than pre-conceived notions that were embedded in the survey questions. In turn, the unadulterated nature of students’ responses provided an avenue for understanding how they accorded or clashed with some of the basic tenets of academic writing.

### *Students’ Conceptions of Plagiarism: A Narrow Understanding*

A first theme that emerged was students’ restricted definitions of plagiarism. This finding is exemplified by the mention of transgression, such as copying someone else’s work without giving them credit, which was prioritized in many of the definitions. References to transgression included “straight-up stealing all or parts” of a text; “stealing of someone’s work”; and “deliberately using other people’s ideas and work, without citing them, and showing them off as your own.” The wording of the definitions also expressed transgression; for instance, the most common verbs students employed were “steal” and “take.”

Limited understanding was also showcased through students’ concerns regarding plagiarism. Nearly half of the responses mentioned the concern of abiding by reference rules; one moralistic response also expressed fear of being accused of plagiarism because plagiarism “is frowned upon.” Similarly, nearly three-fourths of responses noted that a prevalent cause of plagiarism emanates from a lack of understanding of the system of rules. Examples included “not knowing how to [cite sources] properly” and “incorrect referencing.” As one student aptly wrote, “People haven’t gotten enough education about how to cite correctly and make the bibliography list.”

Just over half the responses also declared that plagiarism stems from cheating. Several responses centered on reasons for cheating, such as laziness, poor time management, or a shortcut to success; other responses focused on the minutiae of the transgression itself (e.g., copying from a hodgepodge of sources so that plagiarism is more difficult to identify) or even the intelligence of the transgressor, e.g., “People are just stupid and believe they won’t get caught.” A final cause of plagiarism was honest mistakes, listed by nearly half the students, such as forgetting to write down sources or recall where sources were found.

Limited understanding was also manifested in the steps students recommended to avoid plagiarism. Not surprisingly, their recommendations aligned firmly with the simplicity of the aforementioned student definitions, concerns, and causes of plagiarism. For instance, 80% of responses suggested that proper citation practices must be adopted. Several students also revealed that they overcited as a compensation strategy to avoid plagiarism. As one student noted casually, “I make sure that whenever I cite or talk about what someone else has stated, I slap on a quick reference.” Other strategies to avoid plagiarism included making a list of sources immediately to avoid forgetting it later. Finally, some strategies seemed to be driven by fear. One student confessed to never sharing an entire paper with fellow students, as “you never know who will copy your work,” while another declared that on the rare occasion they used direct quotations, the quotations are “not too long.”

### ***Students' Conceptions of Plagiarism: A Rich and Complex Matter***

Although students' conceptions of plagiarism were at times simplistic, these occurrences were countered by responses that were rich and complex, which firmly situated them within the larger framework of academic writing. In other words, the responses suggest that several students recognized – at least subconsciously – the overarching purpose of academic writing and the nuanced role that plagiarism plays within it.

On the whole, students' definitions of plagiarism were restricted to issues of transgression and not providing proper credit. Yet a few definitions were more expansive, noting the role of paraphrase. One response also moved beyond a restrictive definition by providing a range of potential texts that could be plagiarized, such as photos or images. It was not until students began to express their concerns, however, that rich and consistent patterns of their conceptions emerged. Nearly half the students expressed concern, for instance, about committing unintended plagiarism. As one student wrote, "I can sometimes be unsure if I refer the correct way, and then it can look like plagiarism without it being my intention." Another student fretted "that I unconsciously will do something 'wrong' in terms of citing." Yet another noted that "I am sometimes concerned if I write down the sources right, but I have never copied anything from someplace else without a source." This response is telling, in that the student suggests they don't know all the rules, but then defensively and moralistically notes that they have, at the very least, always included a source.

Students voiced their concerns by raising other critical components of plagiarism as well. One such theme was the challenge of rewriting something in one's own words, or paraphrasing. This concern tied both to the source, which "has already been written well," and the student's attendant fear of not possessing the writing skills to "find the right words or make it 'different' enough." The latter quotation emerged from a student who also noted that rewriting a text in their own words was problematic both in English and in Norwegian. Common knowledge also factored into students' anxiety, namely whether or not a student must cite something that they had read yet already knew. As one student asked, "If I read a simple sentence such as 'She smelled the flower,' and then write the same sentence in my own article, would that count as plagiarism?" A final matter that arose pertained to the ability to recall information. Specifically, one student worried that they could unintentionally conflate someone else's ideas with their own, noting, "Sometimes it's hard to know if some of my ideas are from my own head or if I have been unconsciously affected by the articles I have read."

While several responses noted that the cause of plagiarism originated from students looking for a shortcut, others expressed more problematic issues. Roughly one-third of the students alluded to issues of learning and knowledge. As one student suggested, "I feel like it's often an accident, and the person who did it does not know the rules of the sources." Though some of these responses touched upon cosmetic issues, such as learning citation rules, several others were more compelling, addressing issues such as a lack of knowledge about plagiarism. One response in particular was relevant to the inherent difficulties of producing a proper paraphrase: "I think that you're not actually thinking that you are doing it, you think that you have rewritten it enough, but it still is too much like the original." Another potential cause suggested that students may not know what to write, a dilemma that often arises in the early stages of academic writing.

Students' responses suggested, however, that the cause of plagiarism stems not only from a lack of knowledge, but from limited or nonexistent pedagogy on plagiarism. This took form in both policy and practice. Only 3 of 20 students were more than "somewhat" familiar with the NTNU policy, for instance. The attendant comments regarding the policy centered exclusively on transgression; the judicial and moralistic parlance included "strict", "expulsion", "failure", and "illegal". Only one response suggested that students could turn to the policy to educate themselves on plagiarism rather than learn about the consequences of committing it. Similarly, students pointed out that the education they had received from both school teachers and university instructors was limited. According to the students, their school teachers would cursorily define plagiarism or mention



that a source should never be directly copied, before noting that plagiarism was forbidden, often correlating it with cheating on exams or assignments. The discourse of students' responses regarding pedagogy also hinted at both ethics and extant power structures; as one student noted, "It was a one-way discussion where we were told not to do it."

Instruction on plagiarism at the university level was not much better, as several students noted that professors seemed to expect them to already know about plagiarism because they were now university students. While a few students noted that professors mentioned that the purpose of referencing was to support an argument, roughly half noted that their professors had not discussed plagiarism at all. Of those who did, most discussed only appropriate citation practices; few discussed the concept of plagiarism or how it fits into argumentative writing. One student also questioned the role of plagiarism as an ongoing predicament: "I am not sure if I truly understand what or how [professors] assess plagiarism. I have always wondered if the professors that read my paper check every reference throughout my paper."

A final illustration of students' understanding of the complexities of plagiarism revealed itself in the strategies students proposed to negotiate plagiarism. One student described reading through summaries and paraphrases to assure they do not mirror the original text, while another provided a detailed process: "I will maybe write a paragraph, then come back the next day, or an hour or two afterwards and write the same paragraph again out of memory, that way, I will be able to figure out what is the most important part of the paragraph, and it will also be my words." Another student outlined a similar process, but added the step of "explaining it to someone else" before inserting it into their own text.

## Discussion

Based on this study's findings, several noteworthy themes deserve discussion. On the one hand, themes pertaining to the relative uniformity and narrowness of students' conceptions of plagiarism can provide insight into the critical components of plagiarism that students seem to be unaware of or misunderstand. On the other, themes pertaining to students' intimations of the complexities of plagiarism have the potential to inform future pedagogical instruction on academic writing for students.

### ***Lessons: Learning from What Students Don't Know***

The restricted nature of students' conceptions of plagiarism suggests that these conceptions are detached from the context and purpose of academic writing. Students' definitions of plagiarism, for instance, were typically simple and in a sense "traditional"; in other words, the definitions portrayed plagiarism as a straightforward phenomenon. Of course, it may be excessive to expect students to inject the richness of their concerns into definitions of plagiarism, but at the same time, it is surprising that there was nearly complete misalignment between the simplicity of how students defined plagiarism and the bewildering intricacies of negotiating it.

Students' descriptions of plagiarism were also restricted by an overriding moralistic tone. While copying someone else's work without giving them credit could be construed as an honest mistake, this sentiment was often steeped in ethical discourse; for instance, several students used the word "take" or "steal" (rather than "borrow" or "reuse"), implying ownership on the part of the writer, and therefore inappropriate use by the student. This tone also shone through via students' detailed descriptions of the penalties for committing plagiarism (e.g., failing a course, expulsion). These limited and overwhelmingly moralistic conceptions of plagiarism may have been informed both by *de jure* policy (e.g., university policy) and *de facto* policy (e.g., ethically-infused pedagogy from teachers and professors) (Johnson, 2013). Their conceptions thus assumed a punitive or regulatory discourse rather than an educative discourse, and favored points that align with punitive definitions of plagiarism found in university policy (Sutherland-Smith, 2011).

Students' conceptions of plagiarism as an ethical dilemma likely informed their enactment of plagiarism. In other words, because students theorized plagiarism as a transgression, the role of ethics was thus instantiated in students' application of writing strategies to avoid plagiarism. Over-citing, for instance, suggests that students cite sources not to support an argument but to avoid being accused of plagiarism; students who approach academic writing in such a manner are likely to assume an ethical identity rather than a scholarly identity as a writer (Ouellette, 2008). Consequently, by citing out of fear to avoid plagiarism rather than to firmly support a stance, students are in essence practicing knowledge telling – which entails a basic reproduction of established scholarship – rather than knowledge transforming, which involves a deeper analysis of and engagement with knowledge (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987). Similarly, worrying about their paraphrasing ability to make their own text “different enough” implies that students are writing from sentences rather than larger texts, a strategy which “does not compel the writer to understand the source” (Howard, et al., 2010). Further, a compressed focus on paraphrasing may induce a “close appropriation [of texts] at the micro level of lexis and syntax” (Abasi & Akbari, 2008, p. 270), a practice that – while arguably not an instance of plagiarism because of a lack of intent – reveals the writer's novice and still-developing skill as an academic writer.

A final revelation regarding students' conceptions of plagiarism is what they *lacked*. Though students expressed concerns about proper citation rules and adopting strategies to avoid plagiarism, they seemed to consider plagiarism within a vacuum, not as something connected to a larger picture or motive. In other words, avoiding plagiarism is a matter of following rules perfectly, rather than about understanding a text and reconfiguring it so that it fits the argument or purpose of the text the student is writing. Perhaps unsurprisingly, no responses thus tied causes of plagiarism to underdeveloped reading comprehension skills (Hirvela & Du, 2013). And while several students did connect the difficulties of avoiding plagiarism to particular variables (e.g., paraphrase), none touched upon the overarching goals or challenges of academic writing, such as providing evidence to support an original perspective (Blum, 2009). In short, there was no allusion to the learning process. While students' responses touched upon many of the variables of plagiarism, the responses were bound by a constricted understanding and thus gravitated towards the rudimentary. In turn, a pattern emerged of students focusing on an allegiance to systemic rules and adopting writing strategies that are heavily regulated by a moral code.

### **Lessons: Learning from What Students Think**

As noted, critical themes of the study emerged when students' conceptions about plagiarism were off the mark. Likewise, themes emerged when students' conceptions were sophisticated, suggesting that students are aware that plagiarism is not always a straightforward issue. These themes can also be linked to scholarly contributions (see Table 1), which in turn can inform pedagogy.

One notable instance pertained to intent. As mentioned previously, a student mentioned “that I unconsciously will do something ‘wrong’ in terms of citing.” On the surface, this quotation expresses a fairly common concern, but the quotation marks that bookend ‘wrong’ suggest students are aware they may be accused of committing plagiarism, despite the fact that they have no intention to deceive. This dilemma gets at the heart of intent, namely determining whether an instance of alleged plagiarism has been committed deliberately or unwittingly (Bamford & Sergiou, 2005). Allusions to plagiarism as something more than a simple phenomenon also surfaced through students' charges that the pedagogical instruction they received from teachers and professors tended to be insufficient; specifically, the fact that students recognized this insufficiency – illustrated by the questions and concerns they raised – signals a heightened awareness that the notion of plagiarism is far from simple.

Students' perceptions of plagiarism also tended mirror the variables under scrutiny in plagiarism research and aligned with studies' findings. References to the challenge of writing a text in one's own words tie to studies on paraphrasing, namely what constitutes a proper paraphrase (Shi,

**Table 1.** Connecting the complexity of students' concerns to variables of plagiarism.

Student Quotation/Concern	Connection to Plagiarism Variable	Sample Studies
"I can sometimes be unsure if I refer the correct way, and I don't then it can look like plagiarism without it being my intention."	Intent – deliberate or accidental	Bamford and Sergiou (2005)
"I'm sometimes worried I'm not finding the right words or making it 'different' enough."	Paraphrase/Patchwriting	Keck (2014)
"I use ideas or write something that someone else already has written without knowing it. Sometimes it's hard to know if some of my ideas are from my own head or if I have been unconsciously affected by the articles I have read."	Cryptomnesia	Defeldre (2005)
"The policy is strict, especially with exams."	Policy concerns	Sutherland-Smith (2011)
"If I read a simple sentence ... and then write the same sentence in my own article, would that count as plagiarism?"	Common knowledge	Shi (2011)

2012), as well as patchwriting, a developmental strategy in which novice writers restructure syntax or swap out terms from an original text with synonyms that – despite the alterations – still render the revised text as too close to the original to be considered a proper paraphrase (Howard, 1992). The dilemma of whether to cite common knowledge also surfaced, e.g., the student who questioned whether copying a statement such as 'She smelled the flower' from an article would constitute plagiarism. Although this example oversimplifies the issue, it does beg the question of when – or if – more advanced writers who are nearing the end of their studies have been members of their program long enough to be considered "insiders" to the field-specific common knowledge of their discipline (Shi, 2011). In other words, when have students earned the right not to cite a general concept that is common knowledge in their field and they have known about for years? A final connection between students' concerns and the complexities of plagiarism relates to the notion of forgetting knowledge, or not recognizing that one's knowledge was actually learned from another source. This dilemma, referred to as cryptomnesia, occurs when an individual considers a particular point of knowledge to be their own rather than recognizing and citing its origin (Thomas, 2004). This dilemma has the potential to become more common (and thus problematic) as students progress through their studies and begin to internalize increasingly more technical information.

In sum, rather than regurgitate the simplistic discourse espoused by policy or offered forth by teachers and professors, many of the students in this study – through the chronicling of their concerns, potential causes, and strategies for negotiating plagiarism – demonstrated an awareness and knowledge of the complexities of plagiarism. Specifically, many students seemed to recognize plagiarism as part of a complex learning process in the mastery of academic writing (Chandrasoma, et al., 2004) that belies the traditional definitions and instruction to which they have become accustomed.

## Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

The purpose of this study was to determine the conceptions of plagiarism of a cohort of pre-service education students at a university in Norway. Findings revealed that students' conceptions of plagiarism were often confined to issues of transgression and the adoption of proper citation rules. Students' concerns regarding plagiarism also hint at students' understanding of plagiarism as a complex phenomenon. Though the students are correct in asserting that avoiding plagiarism is often tied to these features, what they have tended to overlook is that another sign of plagiarism having been avoided is that a very good academic text has been produced. In other words, not only have sources been referred to correctly, but they have been integrated into a paper in such a manner that the writing is strongly and strategically supported by the evidence of previous scholarship. Therefore, it stands to reason that the narrowness of students' conceptions of plagiarism will likely manifest itself in students' writing. Put another way, students may, for instance, correctly

abide by APA standards when inserting a direct quotation into their writing, but be less likely to integrate this quotation in a meaningful and logical way into their argument.

Based on these findings, discussion of several pedagogical implications is warranted. First, though a common thread regarding plagiarism policy linked to moralistic and judicial discourses, most students confessed to not referring to or even knowing about the policy at all, a frequent phenomenon (Power, 2009; Brown & Howell, 2001). That is, policy does little to educate students about the role of plagiarism in academic writing. The relatively ineffective role of policy begets the second implication, namely the burden of responsibility. Where does responsibility fall – on instructors, entrusted with designing robust and explicit teaching methods, or on students, who simply must learn to navigate the academic systems and discourse communities of higher education on their own? The solution is presumably both. On the one hand – over time – students must develop the skills to maneuver independently through the source-based writing assignments and exams of their coursework, as no level of instruction can possibly address or prepare them for the adversity they will face (Merkel, 2020). On the other, university-wide workshops and guidance provided by individual lecturers and professors should also play a pivotal role.

One future route for universities such as NTNU to consider is the establishment of a course – perhaps as part of a broader, mandatory orientation program for first-year students – that offers lectures, exercises, workshops, and other resources in conjunction with plagiarism and academic writing (see, for instance, The Swinburne Project; Devlin, 2003). Such a program could be beneficial in addressing and reducing the misconceptions of plagiarism brought forth by the students in this study. For example, through interactive, hands-on instruction, students could learn that avoiding plagiarism is more than a matter of not forgetting, or of following rules properly, and that a paper – despite an absence of plagiarism – can still be poorly written if the evidence cited has not been strategically recomposed to support an argument or fit the purpose of a paper. These efforts would invariably aid the students in becoming seasoned writers who avoid plagiarism not out of caution or fear but because they have something meaningful to say.

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## Appendix 1

- 1) How would you define plagiarism? Please be specific.
- 2) What concerns, if any, do you have about plagiarism when it comes to your own writing? (your writing can be written either in English or Norwegian)
- 3) What do you think are the causes of plagiarism?
- 4) Are you familiar with Norway's or NTNU's policy on plagiarism? Please explain.
- 5) Did your school teachers ever discuss plagiarism with you? If yes, what did they say?
- 6) Have your professors ever discussed plagiarism with you? If yes, what did they say?
- 7) What steps do you take to ensure you don't commit plagiarism?