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Contract cheating and academic literacies: Exploring the landscape

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Abstract

The phenomenon of contract cheating in higher education is complex and a growing concern for those invested in the delivery of high-quality education and positive educational outcomes. This research explores the academic literacies practices, exchanges, and tensions between and among academic ghostwriters, students, and teaching staff, within the Canadian post-secondary sector. Dominant approaches to academic misconduct have not addressed the institutional and socio-cultural factors underlying the growth of the contract cheating industry. Academic institutions lacking a coherent, holistic strategy will continue to undermine the public confidence, and teaching and learning frameworks. Given the dominance and prioritizing of reading and writing in higher education, this study adopts an "academic literacies" conceptual approach (Lea & Street, 1998), which foregrounds literacy as a social practice (Street, 1984). This approach provides a lens that includes the social, cultural, and institutional, while supporting a critical gaze on the literacy practices of students, ghostwriters, and teaching staff. This qualitative study used a multiple case studies orientation, and conducted semi-structured interviews with 11 ghostwriters, 7 students, and 8 faculty members to provide the data for analysis. Texts such as advertisements, and sample ghostwritten assignments were also considered. Through the rigorous coding of literacy social practice building blocks (e.g., practices, events) (Hamilton, 2010) the data were used to create a "Literacies Landscape Map." This map explored the "scape" (Appadurai, 1990), or "eduscape" (C. Luke, 2006) of how multiple literacies are practised and reflected in the phenomenon of contract cheating. In addition, drawing from Bourdieu's (1972/1977, 1979/1984, 1983/1986, 1984/1988) notions of capital, habitus, and field, the study revealed findings around the practices

of collaboration and literacy brokering, arguing that some students and ghostwriters are engaging in "assessment brokering" within a "fourth space" (Thacker, in press-a). This study offers a more nuanced view of contract cheating, finding a tension of exchange beyond the financial, and having implications for higher education policy. The study concludes with a call for academic institutions to consider the development of transformative, institutional strategies to support academic integrity.

Keywords: academic literacies, assessment brokering, assessment literacy, Canada, collaboration, contract cheating, literacy brokering, fourth space, higher education, eduscapes

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to Ian and Rex. Thank you for supporting me to finish my goal. #persistence

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .... **II**

DEDICATION .... **IV**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .... **V**

LIST OF TABLES .... **IX**

LIST OF FIGURES .... **IX**

LIST OF ACRONYMS .... **X**

CHAPTER 1–INTRODUCTION **1**

BACKGROUND 5

APPROACHES TO ACADEMIC MISCONDUCT 9

PREVALENCE OF CONTRACT CHEATING 10

RESEARCH OPPORTUNITY 12

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY 14

THESIS STRUCTURE 16

CHAPTER 2–LITERATURE REVIEW **18**

CONTRACT CHEATING 18

Attitudes and Perceptions *21*

Prevention by Pedagogy *23*

Deterrence and Detection *26*

The Business of Contract Cheating *30*

Ghostwriters *32*

LITERACY BROKERING 35

ASSESSMENT LITERACY/IES 36

CANADIAN RESEARCH AND INITIATIVES 40

CONCLUSION 41

CHAPTER 3–THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK **43**

CAPITAL, HABITUS, AND FIELD 43

Capital *43*

Habitus *46*

Field *47*

ACADEMIC LITERACIES 48

Academic Literacies Model *50*

DIGITAL LITERACY/IES 54

LITERACY SOCIAL PRACTICE BUILDING BLOCKS 58

CHAPTER 4–RESEARCH METHODS 62

RESEARCH QUESTIONS 62

MULTIPLE CASE STUDIES 63

DATA COLLECTION 65

Method One: Semi-Structured Interviews *65*

Method Two: Document Collection (Literacy Texts and Artifacts) *74*

Method Three: Follow-Up Survey *75*

Method Four: Concept Mapping *75*

DATA ANALYSIS 77

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS 79

Informed Consent *79*

Anonymity and Confidentiality *80*

Minimizing Risk *81*

POSITIONALITY 81

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY 83

CONCLUSION 85

CHAPTER 5–COLLABORATION AND BROKERING 86

COLLABORATION 86

LITERACY AND ASSESSMENT BROKERING 94

Brokering Triggers *97*

Ghostwriter as Literacy Broker ... *103*

Assessment Brokering Themes ... *106*

Conclusion ... 123

CHAPTER 6–IDENTITY AND PERCEPTIONS ... 125

Ghostwriter as Helper and Writer ... 125

Ghostwriter's Perceptions of Student Motivations ... 140

Student Perceptions of Contract Cheating ... 146

Cognizance ... *146*

Student Motivations ... *150*

Teaching Staff Perceptions of Contract Cheating ... 156

Essays and Morals ... *156*

Assessment Design ... *165*

Conclusion ... 169

CHAPTER 7–DISCUSSION ... 171

Brokering and Assessment Literacies ... 171

Digital Literacies and Techno-Capital ... 185

Surveying the Landscape and a Fourth Space ... 188

CHAPTER 8–POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION ... 197

Transformational Approach ... 197

The Centre for Teaching and Learning ... 201

Quality Assurance ... 202

Institutional Governance ... 205

Suggestions for Future Research ... 206

Conclusion ... 208

APPENDICES ... 251

Appendix A. Literacies Landscape Map ... 251

Appendix B. Ghostwriter Vignettes ... 252

APPENDIX C. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.. 257
Interview Questions: Teaching Staff *257*
Interview Questions: Student.. *260*
Interview Questions: Ghostwriter *263*
APPENDIX D. FOLLOW-UP SURVEY QUESTIONS 266
APPENDIX E. PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEETS.. 267
Information Sheet: Teaching Staff *267*
Information Sheet: Student.. *271*
Information Sheet: Ghostwriter.. *275*
APPENDIX F. PARTICIPANT CONSENT.. 280
APPENDIX G. SAMPLE: CODED TRANSCRIPTION 283
APPENDIX H. ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER.. 284
APPENDIX I. SAMPLE: INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH STUDY.. 286
APPENDIX J. DEDUCTIVE CODES AND DEFINITIONS 287

List of Tables

Table 1 69
Table 2 72
Table 3 73
Table 4 287

List of Figures

Figure 1. 51
Figure 2. 59
Figure 3. 189
Figure 4. 193

List of Acronyms

AICO - Academic Integrity Council of Ontario

ASA - Advertising Standards Authority

CTL - Centre for Teaching and Learning

CMEC - Council of Ministers of Education, Canada

EDC - Education Developers Caucus

EES - Essential employability skills

HEA - Higher Education Academy (now called Advance HE)

HEQCO - Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario

ICT - Information and Communication Technology

MAIN - Manitoba Academic Integrity Network

MCU - Ministry of Colleges and Universities

OUCQA - Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance

PLO - Program learning outcomes

QA - Quality assurance

QAA - Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

TEQSA - Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency

TRC - Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada

Chapter 1–Introduction

This study explores as its main topic contract cheating in higher education. Although this area of research has grown considerably since 2018 (see Ahsan et al., 2021; Eaton & Edino, 2018), very little scholarly attention has been paid to ghostwriters and the exchanges between them and their student clients in the Canadian context. Contract cheating, a term first coined by Clarke and Lancaster (2006), refers to a process whereby a student outsources their academic work, and then submits that work for academic credit or advantage. The individuals who take on writing the outsourced assignment are typically referred to as "ghostwriters."

The importance and the originality of this study are that it has employed four research methods to generate the largest empirical, experiential dataset regarding contract cheating and ghostwriting in Canada to-date. This study design is equally original as it made use of several qualitative modes of inquiry in the aforementioned Canadian context, notably multiple case studies, that included interviews with 11 ghostwriters, 7 students, and 8 faculty members. In addition to the creation of ghostwriter vignettes (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and a follow-up survey, written texts such as advertisements and sample ghostwritten assignments were also considered. Finally, this doctoral study employed a data collection and analysis technique that is novel to the research field, notably concept mapping which led to the creation of a "Literacies Landscape Map." (see appendix A for Literacies Landscape Map). This method is another important contribution to the field as it utilizes a unique technique and advances a deeper understanding of the landscape of contract cheating.

This study aims to bolster the development of contract cheating reduction strategies, and ultimately to support transformative academic literacies approaches within an increasingly digital teaching and learning framework. After all, scholars and

academic integrity practitioners need such context specific research analysis and results to inform the development of strategies to reduce contract cheating. In Canada, there is a particular urgency to support such a holistic academic integrity approach (Academic Integrity Council of Ontario [AICO], n.d.) to reduce contact cheating. This holistic approach is promoted by scholars in the field (e.g., Bretag, 2013), national quality assurance organizations (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education [QAA], n.d.; Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency [TEQSA], 2017) and Canadian provincial academic integrity associations (e.g., Manitoba Academic Integrity Network [MAIN], 2021).

To undertake its broad aims, this research study used qualitative interviews with ghostwriters, students, and teaching staff to explore contract cheating and ghostwriting as a socially constructed literacy practice (Street, 1984). It also foregrounds the context of these practices with a global education framework, paying attention to the different resources available to various stakeholders (Bourdieu, 1983/1986). Contract cheating is situated at the nexus of technology and higher education. Easy access to technology, and to the resources available on the internet, expose more students to more opportunities to engage in it (Lancaster & Clarke, 2016).

Digital literacies have made an impact on all aspects of the education sector—from the admissions process to course design—and digital research scholarship. Academic literacies have been fundamentally changed by a digitally mediated world (Goodfellow & Lea, 2013; Lankshear & Knobel, 2008). It is in this context, therefore, that contract cheating must be explored. The term "academic literacies" (Lea & Street, 1998) is used to describe the academic literacy practices, or academic literacies, that occur and that are required in higher education, such as citation or writing. By

contrast, the term “Academic Literacies” (with capital letters) is used to describe the critical epistemology and methodology (Thesen, 2017) adopted as part of the theoretical frame for this study. The epistemological questions that this thesis raises requires a theoretical framework that responds to issues around the tensions emerging from these changes to the higher education landscape. Furthermore, the epistemic nature of contract cheating brings into question the systemic conditions which have upended how knowledge is perceived and negotiated within the academy. Structural changes to the nature of higher education, including massification and global marketization, have reshaped and reoriented the education sector. Higher education is now positioned in the global market, encouraging the commercialization and commodification of education, leading to the rise of credentialism (Tomlinson & Watermeyer, 2020). Kezar & Bernstein-Sierra (2016) suggested that these trends have shifted student focus away from learning and academic integrity, toward the demand for the status of the degree itself.

While the focus of this study will be on the Canadian higher education sector, it is important at this early stage to situate the phenomenon of contract cheating as an international issue and one carried out within a global marketplace. Higher education is a system that supports both local and global knowledge economies. Although contract cheating can be understood as situated locally between two parties, it is also a practice fundamentally connected to a global industry. This study uses the notion of landscapes to both explore the “scape” (Appadurai, 1990), and the “eduscape” (C. Luke, 2006) of how academic literacies are utilized, navigated, and leveraged in the global phenomenon of contract cheating. Appadurai’s (1990) notion of scapes is thus a helpful construct when considering the landscape of higher education, and how literacies intersect globally.

Globalization is a system that creates interconnections, intersections, and exchanges. Scapes themselves are characterized by their "cultural flow" of exchanges, inequalities across local and global contexts, and the crossing of boundaries. They are also deeply infused with the omnipresence of technology. Eduscapes—those scapes of higher education—are concerned with global literacies and learning communities connected by information and communication technologies or ICT (C. Luke, 2006). This study will operationalize the notion of eduscape, or higher education landscape, by concept mapping the multiple literacies of contract cheating. Barton (2009) explained that "[in] relation to globalization, the examination of literacy practices provides a way of interrogating the complex changes in specific sites, tracing links between local and global practices and documenting local forms of appropriation and resistance" (p. 50).

This exploration of the scape of contract cheating in Canada therefore requires an in-depth qualitative inquiry with post-secondary teaching staff and students situated in Canadian academic institutions, in addition to the ghostwriters who write for these institutions. The qualitative data for this part of the inquiry was collected using four methods. The first was semi-structured interviews which were conducted either using internet-based methods like video-calls or over the telephone. Second, the collection of documents were downloaded from online spaces used by ghostwriters and collected from the ghostwriters themselves. Third, a follow-up survey was conducted with several key informant ghostwriters, to support a focused inquiry into themes emerging from the transcribed interviews. Lastly, the study employed the method of concept mapping (Novak et al., 1984) which is novel in the contract cheating research arena. This method provided a means to understand the exchanges, dependencies, spaces, and connections in academic ghostwriting, which is critical to

the development of strategies to reduce the evolving phenomenon. It is important to note that although Canadian postsecondary institutions are the study focus, the sample size is not representative of the Canadian education sector, nor is it representative of all ghostwriters in Canada.

Background

The phenomenon of contract cheating is a growing concern to academic institutions, as it undermines the quality and reputation of degree programs, and places both students and the integrity of scholarly work at risk (Amigud & Lancaster, 2019a; Bretag, 2019; Page, 2004). In addition to the term contract cheating, scholars have used the term "academic outsourcing" (Awdry, 2020) to describe this form of academic misconduct. Clarke and Lancaster's (2006) definition has since evolved and some suggest that a financial exchange is not necessary for the behaviour to be called contract cheating (Harper et al., 2019). For example, a financial exchange may not occur between family members or close friends, yet the outsourcing behaviour still exists (Amigud & Lancaster, 2019a). The term contract cheating is, therefore, multifaceted. It refers to several contract cheating types and various outsourcing behaviours. There are several options for contract cheating. For example, students can engage with commercial contract cheating companies, peer-to-peer or pay-to-pass websites and services, such as Chegg (Chegg, n.d.) or Course Hero (Course Hero, 2020); pay for an exam impersonation; or choose bespoke assignment writing services.

The term contract cheating may also apply to inappropriate collaborative behaviours sometimes referred to as "collusion." Researchers and institutions use the term collusion to describe the collaborative efforts for the common purpose of creating an academic text, where the efforts of the two parties may not be equal, and

the collaboration is expressly prohibited by academic institutions (Barrett & Cox, 2005). Collusion is a term commonly found within academic misconduct policies, and it is typically applied to prohibited collaboration between two or more students (McGowan, 2016; Sutton & Taylor, 2011) as opposed to a student and ghostwriter. Seven different outsourcing behaviours have been described in the existing literature, and they are often viewed as being on a spectrum (Bretag et al., 2019). The spectrum does not include collusion, although collusion itself begins with sharing behaviours, such as trading course notes, and moves along the spectrum to cheating behaviours, such as arranging for another to take one's exam (Bretag et al., 2019). Bretag et al. (2019) have showed that the role of collaboration in contract cheating and outsourcing behaviours is "an important area of further research" (p. 1840). Not only has it been under-investigated, but "curriculum and pedagogy could better reflect the realities of working in a highly connected and networked world, in which sharing and collaboration are an increasing part of professional practice" (Bretag et al., 2019, p. 1850).

Within the research community, the term "contract cheating" is preferred over the term "academic outsourcing." Scholars have suggested, for reasons of best practice, to include the term "contract cheating" within institutional academic integrity policy (Miron et al., 2021; QAA, 2020a). This is to place emphasis on the element of cheating (Bertram Gallant, 2016), which is important when those benefiting from the business of contract cheating are also working to normalize the behaviours. Medway at al., (2018) provided the example of the use of student testimonials and the overt display of university logos on contract cheating websites as a means to normalize the behaviour. The emphasis on cheating has also been argued to be more appropriate, given that it is considered an intentional form of academic

misconduct. This is different from plagiarism, which can be inadvertent or unintentional (Sutherland-Smith, 2008). Similarly, Eaton (2021a) has argued that the term “supplier” should be used over “ghostwriter.” The term ghostwriter is contested because professional ghostwriting is now an established and generally accepted practice (e.g., political speechwriting), and Eaton suggests that using the same term will “normalize the practice” of contract cheating (Eaton, 2021a, p. 132). Eaton (2021a) argued that this normalizing, therefore, contributes to its sustained use. The term “academic writer” is another term for contract cheating work (Walker, 2019) found in the existing literature.

Noting the nuances within these terms, this research refers to the overall phenomenon as “contract cheating” and uses “outsourcing” to describe the sharing and cheating behaviours of those involved. The study also uses the term “ghostwriter” rather than “supplier,” because of its qualitative and critical scope. Chapters 6 and 7 include participants’ narratives which suggest that ghostwriters do indeed perceive themselves as writers, and ghostwriter perspectives and identities must be understood to have insight into the motivations and interactions in the world of contract cheating. “Supplier” as a term, takes on an othering effect, and both constricts and diminishes the ghostwriter’s attributes to simply a consumer/demand narrative, whereas this study is positioned to explore beyond this somewhat simplistic framing. The ghostwriter participants in this study are, after all, freelance writers unaffiliated with contract cheating companies, essay mills, tutoring services, or teams of writers. The focus, instead, is on the independent, freelance ghostwriter who provides bespoke written assignments, such as essays or other written assignments, typically arranged through web advertisements. These ghostwriters exchange their academic literacies, such as research skills and disciplinary insight, for compensation, which is usually

financial. As it will be shown in Chapter 6, they identify as writers. Writers who work within a socially constructed world, mediated by text and digitized social networks. As such, the contract cheating "landscape" explored and explained in this study, speaks to a subset of ghostwriters, unaffiliated with larger essay mill companies. This is not to suggest that this study is indifferent to the problems of contract cheating and ghostwriting. Indeed, ghostwriting and predatory contract cheating services—euphemistically called "essay mills"—may place students at risk for blackmail (Yorke et al., 2020; Draper et al., 2021) and breach of academic integrity policies which may have severe repercussions for their future.

Public and institutional reaction to these concerns have reinforced the creation of a binary construct with which to view contract cheating and those engaged in the practices. In the literature contract cheating is referred to as the "corruption of the learning process" and a "premeditated deception" (Eaton 2020a, p. 132), and even "morally reprehensible" (Bertram Gallant, 2016, p. 2). Further, it has recently been characterized as "organized crime" (Grue et al., 2021), and "more than academic misconduct that passes into the realm of criminal wrongdoing" (Steel, 2017, p. 129). Some scholars have referred to this response to contract cheating as a "moral panic" indicating an "overreaction" to the issue as a threat to institutional values (Walker & Townley, 2012, p. 41). Either way, contract cheating has become, under this aspect, typically framed with two oppositional views—honesty and dishonesty, or more specifically, moral and immoral behaviour. This oppositional binary is a social construct, and when applied to contract cheating, the students and providers (i.e., essay mills, ghostwriters) are characterized as dishonest and immoral. Binary constructs establish boundaries, privileging what is understood as ethical, and thus limiting the exploration of the interstitial and liminal spaces of the contract cheating

phenomenon. The literature too reflects this binary attitude (e.g., Bertram Gallant, 2016; Rundle et al., 2020; Steel, 2017; Tauginienė & Jurkevičius, 2017) and it is carried into research framings, and institutional policy.

Valentine (2006) discussed this ethical binary as it relates to plagiarism. She noted that "[b]inaries are so confining in discussions of plagiarism particularly because they tend to obscure the work of identity negotiation and the performance of identity through literacy" (p. 95). Building on Valentine's (2006) work, this study extends this discussion of binaries to the phenomenon of contract cheating. I contend that students, teaching staff, and ghostwriters alike exist and work within power structures and systems that require a nuanced understanding, a critical response in context, and that they deserve to be understood without the mantle of an absolute (moral) binary. This study ultimately challenges these binary discourses found within current approaches to academic misconduct.

Approaches to Academic Misconduct

Dominant approaches to academic misconduct, including contract cheating, are either preventive or responsive (Thacker, in press). Preventive strategies can be either educative or exist as a deterrent. Text-matching software such as Turnitin (2021) has saturated the higher education sector, and is used as a deterrent, as it is marketed as a plagiarism detection tool. Educative approaches are, by contrast, proactive, and focus on teaching and learning (e.g., academic integrity modules for students) (Bertram Gallant, 2008). Responsive approaches are often punitive and rely on an academic integrity policy to determine process and sanctions. Strategies and policies adopted by institutions not only reflect the underlying priorities of an institution, but also reflect context and values (Miron et al., 2021; Stoesz et al., 2019). Punitive approaches thus fail to address the underlying structures that fuel outsourcing

behaviours and sustain the contract cheating industry.

A single strategy is inefficient, as is the implementation of various approaches to academic misconduct without consideration of the social and cultural elements of integrity and misconduct as, after all, “academic integrity” is a social construct. As such, scholars and academic integrity practitioners have called for a holistic approach to support academic integrity through the integration and enhancement of various approaches (e.g., deterrence, detection, education, punitive, and policy). This approach thereby considers the *whole* institution (Bretag, 2013; Macdonald & Carroll, 2006; Morris & Carroll, 2016; Sutherland-Smith, 2008).

This holistic approach should include a transformational ideology (Lillis et al., 2016; Lillis & Scott, 2007; Sutherland-Smith, 2008), including multiple stakeholders across the university institution and higher education sector. It highlights systemic issues, whilst also providing knowledge to support necessary change to existing systems, strategies, and structures in higher education such as policy, course and assessment design, and faculty development (Thacker, in press). A transformational approach includes a focus on both social and power relations, a framework for inclusive excellence, and offers a critical stance on writing in the academy. Any adopted strategy must also be considered in context, and this includes having an awareness of the size and scope of the problem of contract cheating.

Prevalence of Contract Cheating

Contract cheating has found its way into the media spotlight through several high-profile investigations and university scandals (see Bomford, 2016; Canadian Press Staff, 2020; Tomas, 2012; Visentin, 2015). Contract cheating made Canadian national headlines as far back as the 1970s and 1980s (Eaton, 2021b). In part, this media attention fuelled further investigation and advocacy, and provoked questions

about the scope of the issue worldwide. The global pandemic caused by the coronavirus (COVID-19) has further brought the issues and concerns of academic misconduct into the spotlight (Lancaster & Cotarlan, 2021; Weale, 2021). Bowers (1964) was one of the first to survey the prevalence of outsourcing behaviour in which it was found that 14% of students admitted to the submission of work written by another. Later, Curtis and Clare (2017) estimated that about 3.5% of students pay another to complete their academic work while Newton (2018) suggested that just over 15% of students worldwide have paid others to do their schoolwork. Regardless of the levels of student demand, research has, nonetheless, indicated an overall increase in online services (Lancaster, 2020a) and "increasing penetration and spreading of ghostwriting" (Sivasubramaniam et al., 2016).

Services are advertised on the web, on campus, by word-of-mouth, and increasingly through social media (Lancaster, 2019). Not only are services explicit with their language and means of invitation, but there are also nefarious unauthorized aids embedded within more legitimate off-campus services such as tutoring and editorial services. This blurring of the lines helps to normalize the behaviour, manipulate students, and help ghostwriters and service providers to convince students of the legitimacy of their services (Medway et al., 2018). Although some media sources have indicated that the global academic writing industry is estimated to be worth £770 million (GBP) annually (BBC News, 2019), others have estimated much lower amounts of £20–£50 million (GBP) annually (Lancaster, 2017) and $100 million (US) annually (Ownings & Nelson, 2014).

A well-publicized UK essay-mill owner, Mr. Barclay Littlewood, who owns the popular essay mill named UK Essays (UK Essays, 2020), reportedly earned £1.6 million (GBP) annually in 2006, suggesting a £200 million (GBP) global industry

(Taylor & Butt, 2006). Ghostwriters and essay mills are profiting, and business is booming, causing alarm among academics, and prompting scholars and institutions around the world to place more emphasis on contract cheating in their research agendas (see Bretag, 2020).

Research Opportunity

Given the trepidation around this evolving form of academic misconduct, there has been a recent increase in research about contract cheating around the world, particularly in Australia (e.g., Bretag et al., 2019; Curtis & Clare, 2017; Ellis et al., 2019) and the United Kingdom (e.g., Lancaster, 2020b; Medway et al., 2018; Newton, 2018; Sivasubramaniam et al., 2016). Several other countries have published regional findings regarding contract cheating (Foltýnek & Králíková, 2018; Shala et al., 2020).

Researchers have produced less with regard to the Canadian higher education sector; however research has increased significantly over the past few years (e.g., Eaton et al., 2019; Miron et al., 2021; Stoesz et al., 2019). Despite this increase, Canadian research is still lacking; it is held back in part due to the absence of a national strategy, lack of funding grants for the research area, and underdeveloped research agendas on the issue. By contrast, the United Kingdom has the support of its Quality Assurance Agency (QAA),[1] who are driving initiatives regarding contract cheating. For example, the QAA has urged universities to block essay-mill websites (see Marsh, 2017), coordinated a national "Academic Integrity Charter" (QAA, 2020b), and "successfully lodged a complaint to the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) against the essay-mill company UK Essays" (QAA, n.d.). This broad support and the ongoing research framework have also impacted the political arena, as seen by

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[1] The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is an independent body that oversees the quality of the United Kingdom's higher education sector. They provide institutional and program review and provide quality guidance to its member institutions.

the recent announcement to ban essay mills in Britain (BBC News, 2021). This legislation will be introduced under the *Skills and Post-16 Education Bill* (BBC News, 2021).

Furthermore, much of the extant literature has largely looked at the business of contract cheating (Ellis et al., 2018) and attitudes and perceptions of staff, faculty, and students (Bretag et al., 2019). Although there has been some qualitative attention paid to ghostwriters themselves (Sivasubramaniam et al., 2016; Walker, 2019; Zheng & Cheng, 2015), studies have not applied an Academic Literacies framework as an approach, nor considered Bourdieu's (1983/1986) concepts such as capital in their scope. Currently, qualitative research concerning contract cheating in the Canadian education context is also limited (e.g., Eaton et al., 2019). What does exist provides little perspective from the ghostwriter's position, which is important in developing a critical, transformational response to the issue.

Literacy, like education, is a social and cultural phenomenon involving reading and writing practices. Literacy is patterned by different contexts–the social, institutional, economic, cultural, and historical (Bourdieu, 1983/1986)—and therefore it is plural i.e., "literacies." When researching literacies practices, the context is foregrounded so as to understand the patterns of the units of analysis of literacy–the literacy events, texts, and domains, including the digital domain (Barton et al., 2000; (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008). Issues of power, inequity, and broader social relations must be considered in the definition of literacy—as it is not neutral or value-free, and it is certainly not neutral within the phenomenon of contract cheating. Literacies must be considered within a range of contexts that situate modality, knowledge, and information. One literacy practice that has been helpful to investigate these often-hidden contexts and structures is literacy brokering.

Literacy brokering in an academic context is a process that occurs when students seek informal help (from peers or non-peers) with the texts and literacy practices they encounter within education (Perry, 2009). Literacy brokers "bridge linguistic, cultural, and textual divides for others" (Perry, 2009, p. 256). Contract cheating requires a stronger understanding of the exchanges within it—such as literacy brokering. Exchanges that are more than just financial exist beyond the academy's binary perspectives and extend to the cultural, textual, and symbolic. It is also important to cast a critical eye at the participants within the phenomenon of contract cheating to understand deeply the perspectives, circumstances, and systems at play that are, perhaps unknowingly, supporting the business of contract cheating.

Research Questions and Purpose of the Study

Emerging from both the mounting concerns about contract cheating, and the scarcity of qualitative research in the Canadian context, both outlined above, this study was designed to address the following research questions:

1. What kind of literacy brokering exists between ghostwriters and their clients in Canadian higher education institutions?
2. What are the perceptions of contract cheating held by ghostwriters, students, and teaching staff?
3. What does the mapping of literacies reveal about the eduscape of contract cheating in the Canadian context?

The larger purpose of this study is to provide a critical reframing of the phenomenon of contract cheating through an exploration of academic literacies. With much of the best contract cheating literature currently coming out of Australia (e.g., Bretag et al., 2019, Curtis & Clare, 2017; Ellis et al., 2019) and the United Kingdom (e.g., Lancaster, 2020b; Medway et al., 2018; Newton, 2018; Sivasubramaniam et al.,

2016) these findings will add to the lamentable dearth of qualitative research in my home country of Canada.

Recommended strategies to disrupt academic outsourcing behaviours typically focus on detection, discipline, and education (see QAA, 2020a). Education includes awareness-raising campaigns and the provision of training to students, and teaching and administrative staff (Khan et al., 2020). Education also refers to the many ways that curriculum and courses can be re/designed to reduce instances and opportunities for cheating (TEQSA, 2017). The literature is clear that to reduce contract cheating, there must be more than a single strategy (e.g., Manoharan & Speidel, 2020; Morris, 2018). Strategy must be holistic, bringing about transformation, as academic integrity policy alone will not reduce it, nor will legislation. While some writers frame contract cheating as a social issue (Khan et al., 2020), it is the contention of this study to build upon Bretag (2019) who argued that it is critical to conceptualize contract cheating as a symptom rather than a problem in Canadian academic institutions. If we are constrained by the systemic issues that have brought about this phenomenon, then something transformational must take place to address it. This study challenges the current binary definitions applied to students and ghostwriters in the public discourse and in the scholarly literature on academic misconduct, and offers, instead, a more nuanced characterization of the participants in the phenomenon of contract cheating.

The findings of this research project will have the potential to inform academic integrity policy making, governance, quality assurance, course and assessment design, and, more broadly, the development of faculty initiatives in Canadian Teaching and Learning Centres (CTLs).[2] That being said, I nonetheless

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[2] First established in 1962 (at the University of Michigan), CTLs are academic units that provide teaching staff with support and professional development opportunities to improve teaching and learning praxis.

agree with Lillis et al., (2016) and acknowledge that “working towards transformative design in higher education is a large and challenging project, possible only through extensive collaboration” (p. 11). The project’s findings will, therefore, support the proposition to move beyond the holistic, aspiring to the transformational, which must engage academic leadership. This transformational approach offers the hallmarks of a holistic, multifaceted approach, yet also “requires an institution to confront the dominant and privileged systems in higher education, when considering how to strengthen various pathways to support academic integrity and reduce misconduct of all kinds” (Thacker, in press). Before moving to the exploration of the existing literature on contract cheating in chapter 2, this chapter provides a brief overview of the thesis structure.

Thesis Structure

This introductory chapter has provided an overview of the problem of contract cheating, and points to the insufficiently researched area of ghostwriting in the post-secondary sector, setting the context for the study’s research questions. The next chapter looks in-depth at the body of scholarly research, presents the current contributions to our understanding of contract cheating, and identifies how and why insufficient attention has been paid to ghostwriting and its literacy practices within the context of contract cheating.

Chapter 3 presents the theoretical framework of the research, followed by a specific discussion of methodology in chapter 4. The findings of the research are then presented across two chapters, reflecting emerging themes drawn from the rich data set of interviews with students, teaching staff and ghostwriters, documents, survey responses, and the Literacies Landscape Map. Chapter 5 discusses the practices of collaboration and brokering, with chapter 6 moving on to consider how participants

framed their identities and perceptions of ghostwriting. Each of these findings chapters will draw upon a framework of Academic Literacies (Lea & Street, 1998; Thesen, 2017) and Bourdieu's (1983/1986) notions of capital, habitus, and field, to present and summarize the findings. The thesis concludes with both a discussion chapter, and a concluding chapter with recommendations with respect to policy implications for higher education.

Chapter 2–Literature Review

This chapter presents a critical discussion of the relevant literature regarding contract cheating and literacy brokering, with an overview of the relevant studies, perspectives, and definitions in the field. Academic integrity and forms of academic misconduct have been studied from various disciplinary perspectives for decades (e.g., Knowlton & Hamerlynck, 1967; McCabe et al., 1999). Nevertheless, the inter- and multidisciplinary area of inquiry has, in the last 15 years, developed into its own field of study, with several peer-reviewed journals being founded which focus specifically on the research topic. For example, the *International Journal for Educational Integrity* (International Journal for Educational Integrity [IJEI], 2021), and the *Canadian Perspectives on Academic Integrity* (Canadian Perspectives on Academic Integrity [CPAI], 2018). The past few years have also seen significant interest from quality assurance agencies and research-intensive universities, which has included research funding for inquiries into the field (e.g., Ellis et al., (2019) was funded by the Australian Government Department of Education and Training). This review of the literature, therefore, discusses the scholarly works found to-date on contract cheating in higher education. This includes a thorough examination of the options presented in the literature to prevent, detect, and deter contract cheating. This chapter also describes the contract cheating research landscape in Canada, and closes by defining literacy brokering and assessment literacy, situating the concepts in the current literature.

Contract Cheating

The phenomenon of contract cheating is not new. Accounts of “term paper factories” and “term paper ghostwriting” have been documented in the media for many years (Hammer, 1976; Gray, 1977; Thornton, 1977). There has also been

discussion within scholarly journals published as far back as the 1940s (Curtis, 1940; Stavisky, 1973). Eaton (2021b) has assembled a Canadian history of contract cheating, detailing the "history and development of contract cheating in Canada over the past 50+ years" (p. 1). Sadly, many points raised years ago are still a concern today, with ghostwriters claiming that they support students who "are not prepared properly to do research work" (Stavisky, 1973, p. 452), claiming that if students can afford it and would "rather watch Gilligan's Island (on television) than spend his time knocking off a paper, that's their business" (p. 452). The Stavisky (1973) article also noted the need for ghostwriters to have adept citation and referencing skills which were as desirable then as they are now.

Contract cheating continues to make media headlines across the globe, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (see Blackstock, 2020; Kennedy, 2020; Rossiter, 2020). As discussed in the previous chapter, the prevalence of contract cheating is a common topic of discussion and much cited output of research inquiry (e.g., Curtis & Clare, 2017; Foltýnek & Králíková, 2018; Newton, 2018; Rigby et al., 2015; Shala et al., 2020). Bowers' (1964) American study surveyed the prevalence of the behaviour found that 14% of college students admitted to having submitted work "written by another student" (p. 43), with 9% admitting to "writing a paper for another student" (p. 47). A more recent survey with focus on a Canadian high school reported that 10 to 18% of student participants had interacted with contract cheating services (Stoesz & Los, 2019). Contract cheating providers offer services in many languages, and to all school-age cohorts (Eaton & Dressler, 2019) making it more difficult to accurately assess the volume of cheating. With evolving definitions of contract cheating, the prevalence data is therefore debatable. Methodologies to determine prevalence of student engagement with contract cheating include self-

reporting surveys and the synthesis of various other forms of study data. Self-reporting of behaviour is known to have established reliability issues. Due to this, a 2021 Australian survey by G. J. Curtis and colleagues (Curtis et al., 2021) used an "incentivized truth-telling method" (p. 1) and found that, depending on the contract cheating method used, 7.9% to 11.4% of students admitted to outsourcing their academic work. Overall, it is understood that between 3.5% (Curtis & Clare, 2017) to just over 15% (Newton, 2018) of students have engaged in contract cheating worldwide. Although the prevalence of student engagement in Canadian higher education has been estimated based on other studies, these numbers have not been verified (Eaton, 2018).

Several scholars have situated the rise of contract cheating within the larger frame of systemic trends reshaping the higher education sector. As such, one will find discussions of trends such as the commercialization of higher education, the increasingly precarious nature of academic work, and the rise of online learning (Bretag et al., 2018, Eaton, 2020a; Kezar & Bernstein-Sierra, 2016; Walker & Townley, 2012) in the literature. The massification of higher education—that is, the rapid transformation of a closed, elite education system to an open system during the late-twentieth century (Scott, 1995)—has also had an impact on class size and student experience (Page, 2004; Walker & Townley, 2012). Other transformations to the sector have been brought about by technology, which is largely considered to be a factor in the proliferation of commercial contract cheating services (Rigby et al, 2015; Sivasubramaniam et al., 2016), and the constant evolution of the academic misconduct landscape (Peytcheva-Forsyth et al., 2018). The literature suggests that until systemic issues in higher education are addressed, the individual strategies employed to address contract cheating will continue to have little or only fleeting

impact. That said, researchers continue to seek to understand the factors that contribute to contract cheating. Motivations to cheat are often understood by seeking a deeper understanding of perspectives and attitudes. Attitudes and perceptions influence student experience and learning. As such, a significant portion of the literature focuses on understanding students' attitudes and perceptions about contract cheating, as well as providing empirical data to support effective teaching and learning practices to address contract cheating.

Attitudes and Perceptions

Surveys are a common methodological tool to explore attitudes, perceptions, and motivations. Bretag et al. (2018) surveyed Australian students and found three variables that contribute to contract cheating: speaking a language other than English at home (when the academic institution's language of instruction was English); perceptions that there are ample opportunities to cheat; and a dissatisfaction with the teaching and learning environment. These findings were also important in clarifying that it was not a student's visa status (i.e., international, or domestic) that was relevant, and that the universities should work to increase the quality of the teaching and learning environment. Similarly, an even earlier study found that students studying in a "non-native language" coupled with lower risk aversion were more likely to purchase essays (Rigby, et al., 2015, p. 1). The 2015 Rigby study also noted that students who study in a non-native language were more likely to outsource from friends and family. Other surveys with teaching staff have led to several pedagogical recommendations to reduce contract cheating such as increased teacher training related to assessment design, increased education for students with respect to scholarly literacy practices such as citation, and training for teaching staff to detect contract cheating through various methods (Awdry & Newton, 2019; Harper et al.,

2019). While these studies suggest that an improvement of the teaching and learning environment is critical to reduce cheating, it is also noted that this is a broad responsibility which falls to more than just the teaching staff to implement. While the results are valuable and the survey datasets large (e.g., Bretag et al., 2018 survey was $n = 14{,}086$), it is unclear if the results can be easily imported to the Canadian education system.

Through discourse analysis, Amigud and Lancaster (2019b) explored social media posts, finding that students' un-sustained perseverance and academic aptitude (i.e., subject preference, skill and/or knowledge gap) in the assignment or subject area are two of the top factors influencing a student's decision to outsource (Amigud & Lancaster, 2019b). The authors suggest that students are likely to engage in outsourcing when they perceive failure to complete assignments and failure in their academic program.

Wang and Xu (2021) maintain that understanding both student and teaching staff perceptions is critical given the nature of the learning process, along with understanding ethical attitudes (Orim & Awala-Ale, 2017), motivations to not cheat (Rundle et al., 2019), as well as the experiences of students facing contract cheating allegations (Pitt et al., 2020). While many scholars and practitioners have called for the development of a culture of academic integrity as an institutional response, studies provide conflicting evidence that this is a viable solution. For example, one noted that "the main reasons students refrain from engaging in contract cheating is due to their sense of morals, perception of norms, and their motivation to learn" (Rundle et al., 2019, p. 11). In contrast, another study reported that the "ethics of justice or integrity ranks second" to friends and family, and that "interpersonal relationships override any moral obligation" to the academic institution (Orim & Awala-Ale, 2017, p. 567). This

challenges the notion that inculcating the values of academic integrity (International Center for Academic Integrity [ICAI], 2014)—which dominates many Canadian post-secondary academic integrity policies (Stoesz et al., 2019)—is solution enough. Given the multitude of motivations for cheating, multiple solutions, with a holistic framework, must be used to address the phenomenon. Qualitative data is, therefore, needed to contribute to this growing area of importance within the literature.

What is missing in these studies is the inclusion of identity as part of the research design and survey questions. Although Rundle et al., (2020) explored psychological personality traits, what is demonstrably absent in this body of work on attitudes and perceptions is a socio-cultural perspective of identity, and how identity relates to academic literacies and the practices of the academy. In response to the current literature, this research employs an Academic Literacies approach in a bid to reveal the power relations, underlying behaviours, attitudes, and perceptions, providing a more nuanced understanding to inform prevention strategies.

Prevention by Pedagogy

Many pedagogical recommendations have been proposed to reduce contract cheating. Recommendations without an empirical basis have motivated scholars to, instead, study the value of certain assessment designs, and the role of assessment design in contract cheating (Baird & Clare, 2017; Bretag et al., 2019; Ellis et al., 2019). These studies attempt to substantiate the claim that “designing out” cheating is an effective method to reduce or stop contract cheating. Assessment design is a common recommendation as a strategy to reduce the outsourcing of academic work with many suggestions to do this found across the literature. Most common is the recommendation to move away from traditional assessment design, which can include standardized tests and exams, and largely text-based assignments, such as the standard

essay, to more authentic forms of assessment (Medway et al., 2018; QAA, 2017).

Authentic assessment, also referred to as staged assessment, typically refers to the measurement of performance or the demonstration of skills in context, either in practicum or in a simulated environment. Given this definition, authentic assessment may not be suitable for every course, or discipline. Another definition is broader; it includes assignments that draw upon student reflection and personal experience, and connects in-class learning to contexts outside the classroom. Both definitions require “higher-order thinking” (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001)—a notion contested in the New Literacies literature, as it foregrounds the cognitive, and excludes the socio-cultural practices of literacy (see Gee, 1991; Scribner & Cole 1981). Pedagogically, authentic assessment has also been criticized due to the increased workload for teachers (i.e., to develop and grade), and its application in a culturally and linguistically diverse classroom. Despite the frequency of recommendations to use authentic assessment to stop or reduce contract cheating, Ellis et al. (2019) reported that authentic assessments are “routinely ordered by students on academic custom writing websites” (p. 461); however, they were not able to determine if this type of assessment still functioned to reduce outsourcing. Ellis et al. (2018) also suggested that the probable inequities brought about by authentic assessment design may contribute to the temptation to outsource an assignment to another who has perceived familiarity with professional terminology, locality, and practices.

Given the reliance upon grading in higher education to award credits and credentials, studies continue to focus on assessment type to support academic integrity. An Australian student survey found that four assessment types were considered less likely to be outsourced (Bretag et al., 2018). These include

- assignments which are personalized and unique to the student;

- oral defence or viva (that speak to a written assignment);
- student reflections about practical placements; and
- assignments that are completed in-class, therefore supervised (also see TEQSA, 2017).

Studies that seek to understand the role of assessment type and detection have also provided insight into exams and written assignments, finding that "third-party cheating was reported by students as occurring most commonly in exams, yet [it was] detected most commonly by staff in assignments" (Harper et al., 2021, p. 1). This research, then, challenges recommendations to reduce text-based assessments in favour of exams to reduce contract cheating (e.g., Page, 2004). A shift away from text-based assignments has further increased the call for oral assessment practices (Lancaster & Clarke, 2016; Lines, 2016; Orim & Awala-Ale, 2017). It is argued that face-to-face assessment is more challenging to contract out; however, research indicates that exam impersonation is not uncommon (Amigud & Lancaster, 2019a).

The literature is therefore teeming with recommendations to reconsider traditional assessments design as a strategy to address contract cheating. Ellis et al. (2019), however, reported a lack of empirical evidence to support those assessment designs that are claimed to be effective in minimizing contract cheating. Some suggestions stem from a desire to minimize the opportunity, others to minimize a student's temptation. As such, some recommendations support and enhance the teaching and learning environment, and others less so.

The literature advocates for assessment (re)design and provides many recommendations and suggestions. Some recommendations speak to timing, including establishing flexible assignment submission deadlines (Amigud & Lancaster, 2019b); increasing timed and invigilated assessments (Baird & Clare, 2017; Moriarty et al.,

2016), providing assessment progression checkpoints (QAA, 2017); using ePortfolios (Slade, 2017); and requiring drafts and/or submission of the assignments in stages (Mahmood, 2009; Walker & Townley, 2012). Other recommendations surround assessment type and content, such as offering personalized assignment topics (Mahmood, 2009; Walker & Townley, 2012); preparing new assignments for each course offering (Mahmood, 2009; Rogerson, 2017); including specific contextual requirements in an assignment (Rogerson, 2017); requiring localized knowledge (Lancaster & Clarke 2016); increasing assignments that require teamwork and collaboration (Lancaster & Clarke, 2016); offering a diverse mixture of assessment types and methods (Newton & Lang, 2016; QAA, 2017); and avoiding assignments or questions included with textbooks (Moriarty et al., 2016). Lastly, other suggestions focus on education and training (Harper et al., 2021); providing exam re-sit opportunities (Amigud & Lancaster, 2019b); improving relationships between teaching staff and students (Harper et al., 2019; Tomar, 2012); and considering assessment security measures (Dawson, 2020).

One concern that has been raised with these recommendations is that, without research evidence to support their value, they may act as a false proxy. With such focus on assessment design, the literature also speaks to the development of shared assessment standards and practices, or rather the development of "assessment literacy" among teaching staff (Morris, 2018, p. 8), as well as the development of an ethical assessment culture (Page, 2004). These pedagogical considerations are typically offered as solutions to be implemented alongside other approaches, such as deterrence and detection.

Deterrence and Detection

As universities grapple with questions about why students choose to outsource

their assignments, concerns have also been raised regarding the instances of cheating that are going unnoticed, often without penalty or discipline. Particular concern has been raised regarding professional degrees (such as nursing and engineering), where graduates who play a role in public health and safety and may work among vulnerable peoples are not appropriately trained for practice (Draper & Newton, 2017; Ellis et al., 2019). That said, the scholarly literature has not explicitly demonstrated how contract cheating has, at this time, affected the safety and wellness of any person or group of persons. Detection is likewise identified as “the priority” strategy within the United Kingdom’s Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) best practice document (QAA, 2020a, p. 2). Although detection is a critical component of any strategy, other approaches, such as education, should also be emphasized.

Detection approaches are multi-pronged, offering several methods and garnering various opinions. Detection by technical surveillance has created tension across the academic community. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified issues of student privacy, accessibility, and the ethical use of contentious methods for assessment. The ethics of surveillance in assessment is contested, and fairness has become part of the broader discussion (Langenfeld, 2020); however, it still attracts its share of studies and recommendations. Institutional choices made during the pandemic confirmed that “the coronavirus moral compass can be informed by many narratives” (Stefanovic, 2020, p. 1). Some scholars have noted that contract cheating providers and platforms are also a vulnerable space for privacy and security (Ellis et al., 2018) especially in the digital domain. It is then no surprise that technology has also been sought as a response in the context of contract cheating detection and deterrence. Several detection techniques and options exist such as

- digital forensic techniques (Johnson & Davies, 2020);

- learning analytics (Trezise, et al., 2019);
- student authentication (Fisher et al., 2016);
- remote proctoring (Dawson, 2020; Langenfeld, 2020); and
- authorship analysis (Dawson et al., 2020; Ison, 2020; Swain et al., 2017).

Scholars suggest that students who might otherwise have engaged in bits of “cut and paste” plagiarism must now seek alternative methods and produce bespoke assignments that will likely not be picked up by detection software or by teaching staff without experience and knowledge of the patterns and clues (Walker & Townley, 2012; Rogerson, 2017). Text-matching software companies have responded to this detection gap. For example, Turnitin has launched a contract cheating platform titled “Authorship Investigation” (see Turnitin, 2019). Unicheck has developed an authorship verification assistant, named “Emma” (Unicheck, 2020) which uses artificial intelligence. Artificial intelligence software of this type is however debated in its value, as there are questions about how it will permanently change the landscape of the contract cheating business (Carmichael & Weiss, 2019). Simply put, as technology is introduced, a counter mechanism is put in place.

That being said, the role for software as a technical response to contract cheating continues to be promoted (Lancaster & Clarke, 2014; Lee, 2021) and projects funded by the software companies themselves persist (see Dawson et al., 2020). Some suggest that most contract cheating is uncovered by using a manual approach when marking assignments (Lancaster & Clarke, 2016). This may change if detection software becomes more the norm across higher education. For now, studies continue to determine that faculty awareness and training is critical to the success of any detection approach (Dawson & Sutherland-Smith, 2019). While detection overall

is an important part of a holistic approach, its use must be implemented in conjunction with the ongoing goal of developing and supporting a learning community.

To support better manual detection processes, studies have attempted to understand the detection elements of ghostwritten assignments (Clare et al., 2017; Dawson & Sutherland-Smith, 2019; Rogerson, 2017), and their quality (Lines, 2016; Medway et al., 2018; Sutherland-Smith & Dullaghan, 2019). Rogerson (2017) identified several referencing and citation irregularities as a marker pattern to detect for contract cheating. The study goes on to suggest that supporting student skills with citation managers (e.g., RefWorks) would "take the pressure off collecting, collating, and formatting reference material" (Rogerson, 2017, p. 15). Notwithstanding detection options at the assessment level as well as further studies to suggest that "detection is not the primary problem" (Harper et al., 2021), further approaches, such as legislation at a national level, have been introduced in several locations.

The criminalization of commercial contract cheating is another practice that has been put in place in several countries, such as Australia, Ireland, New Zealand, and various states in the United States. This approach is not new, as contract cheating has been framed within a criminological and legal discourse in the literature (see Baird & Clare, 2017; Grue et al., 2021), and within academic policy (Miron et al., 2021). Recommendations for legislation, and its enactment has led to increased discussion surrounding legal approaches to contract cheating (Draper & Newton, 2017; Newton & Lang, 2016; Steel, 2017; Tauginienė & Jurkevičius, 2017). The notion of criminalization for contract cheating is debated and contested in the literature, with scholars such as Amigud and Dawson (2020) questioning the efficacy of legislative measures, and, along with Groves and Nagy (2022, have queried if legislation actually functions as a deterrent. Legislation aspires to deter the activities,

clarify a position, and offer punitive consequences. In Australia, legislation is intended to criminalize the "provision or advertising of academic cheating services by individuals and business" (Groves & Nagy, 2022, p.1). Groves & Nagy (2022) have argued that "legislation will have the effect of exposing university students, their peers, friends, and families to negative and criminal consequences" (p. 314). Through these debates, some reports have noted that following enactment of legislation in Australia "many of the biggest and best-known essay mills are ending their operations there" (Newton, 2020, p. 1).

The Business of Contract Cheating

Ellis et al. (2018) have made the point that to improve detection of outsourced assignments it is imperative to understand the business of contract cheating. Business models vary and typically offer a web presence to support online business transactions and the advertisement of services. Some businesses are limited to an individual freelance writer, while others group writers across disciplines to meet higher demand. Whatever the business size and format, websites and/or social media platforms are leveraged, and reflect an established, polished presence. Assignment services may be tailored to various academic disciplines or geographic locations. Some offer an interface for students to chat, using 24-hour live chat functionality. Those sites with an established presence may also provide quality assurance and dispute resolution mechanisms, and other perceived values such as writer status information (Ellis et al., 2018), student testimonials, client guarantees, and instant quotes (Medway at al., 2018). Students have several options for payment, such as PayPal, an online payment transfer system, or they may compensate for services with items other than money, such as gift cards (Amigud & Lancaster, 2019a; Ellis et al., 2018). Students may also be incentivized with discounts and gift coupon codes (Sivasubramaniam et al., 2016)

and other business aspects such as quick product turnaround time (Wallace & Newton, 2014). The literature continues to demonstrate that contract cheating companies and providers are organized, and expert at locating and persuading students to use their services (Rowland et al., 2018). Given the manipulative and covert nature of essay mills, studies have sought to understand the particular role of advertising.

Advertisements have been shown to promise high grades, quick turnaround time, and un-plagiarized work (Sivasubramaniam et al, 2016). Ghostwriters are aware of student fears about text-matching software (e.g., Turnitin), and often promise that papers will be expertly written and plagiarism free. Medway et al. (2018) characterized these as “reassurance cues,” which they found evident in much essay-mill advertising. Cues in the reassurance discourse also included ghostwriter expertise, quality, and price, which offered confidence in moving students toward a purchase. Further to this, Medway et al. (2018) also highlighted the use of “risk reduction cues” (p. 409) such as legal disclaimers. Strategies to market services will also speak to the well-being or lifestyle of the student, such as claims to reduce stress and increased time to socialize (Kaktiņš, 2018). Kaktiņš also discussed the implication for international students, who may be particularly affected in the academic socialization or acculturation process by foregoing the opportunity to complete their own assignments. She further suggested that this negatively affects the academic identity development of students and may develop “habitual academic dishonesty” practices (Kaktiņš, 2018, p. 277).

Curtis & Clare (2017) have also reported on the likelihood of students who have outsourced to repeat the behaviour again. Their study frames repeat student outsourcing with a criminal justice discourse, citing “re-offence rates,” thereby

reinforcing the moral oppositional discourse. The study, which used "previously-collected datasets" (Curtis & Clare, 2017, p. 2), of which none were Canadian, confirmed that students who engage in contract cheating are likely to do it again (see also Guerrero-Dib et al., 2020).

Social media use has become a growing area of inquiry as its use intensifies globally (Amigud & Lancaster, 2019a; Lancaster, 2019). Amigud and Lancaster (2019a) conducted an analysis of social media communications and identified the prevalence of students seeking contract cheating providers' help in mathematics, English, and history. This study also highlighted the role of family in a student's journey and pointed out that "academic institutions are competing against family loyalty" (p. 12). This point underscores the role of power relations, social networks, and digital literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008) in contract cheating.

Ghostwriters

Aside from a focus on the business itself, the literature has also considered the ghostwriters themselves (Lancaster, 2018) including some qualitative studies (see Sivasubramaniam et al., 2016; Zheng & Cheng, 2015), and a recent qualitative doctoral thesis with a specific focus on Kenyan ghostwriters (Walker, 2019). In addition, some journalists have interviewed ghostwriters in Africa (e.g., BBC News, 2019; Bu, 2016) as well as Canada (DiRisio, 2019). Tomar (2012) was interviewed many times for his groundbreaking book, *The Shadow Scholar*, which exposed the contract cheating industry through his insider perspective, based on a decade long career as a ghostwriter.

Since then, Tomar has written other guides and documents in an effort to help others understand the industry by describing its inner workings (see Tomar, 2014, 2016). His writings discuss many facets of the business–from pricing to client types.

For example, Tomar (2016) explained that his clients were either “English-language learners”, “composition/research deficient”, “lazy”, or a combination of the three (p. 13). The discussion regarding his use of Google tools (e.g., Google search, Google Scholar, Google Books) to write essays illuminates the role of digital literacies, and easy-access technology to support the work and industry. He suggested that the industry is a “symptom of systemic flaws in the structure and culture” of higher education (Tomar, 2014, p. 2). He offered suggestions around design, deterrence, and detection to reduce outsourcing, albeit without empirical evidence to support these suggestions. Yet, as an insider to the industry his suggestions resonate. Tomar also pointed out that the quality of outsourced essays varies, and that many ghostwriters view themselves as academics. He commented that, “ghostwriting succeeds where schools are failing” (2016, p. 39). Tomar is but one ghostwriter in the system, and so others have tried to classify ghostwriters by type. Lancaster’s 2018 work provided a classification of types of ghostwriters, which range from business opportunists to student peers. Such groupings help to demonstrate the varied motivations for ghostwriting, such as lack of success in gaining an academic position, despite high qualifications. The identified typologies also point to financial desperation due to unemployment as a motivation, and to the flexibility of ghostwriting work as a draw.

Walker’s (2019) ethnographically oriented fieldwork dives much deeper into the ghostwriter’s life and experience. Her study included interviews with 27 ghostwriters working in Kenya, a country in which it has been estimated that there are upward of 20,000 ghostwriters (Bu, 2016; Walker, 2017). The study provided a view of the digital academic writing economy of Kenyan educated youth. Walker’s study speaks to the lived experience and writing processes, including concepts like patchwork writing, paraphrasing, and Google-based research of ghostwriters.

Walker's (2019) study differs in its geographic location and theoretical orientation to this study, yet still provides a strong account of the practices of ghostwriting.

Zheng and Cheng (2015) interviewed several international students and one student ghostwriter at an American university. The students explained that using ghostwriting services was mutually beneficial to them and the ghostwriter, and therefore a cooperative practice. The ghostwriter indicated that the work improved their own "writing skills" (p. 128), which was also confirmed by Walker (2019). They also noted that a drawback of the work was challenging clients who demanded rewrites, and the need to "imitate their clients' writing styles" (p. 129). Sivasubramaniam et al. (2016) interviewed 10 ghostwriters, each interview lasting 15 minutes. Comments from the interviews highlighted the ghostwriters' high level of understanding about assessment and the education sector. Interviewees noted their "university acquired analytical and vocabulary skills" (p. 6) and an "understanding of academic writing and plagiarism avoidance" (p. 8) which supported their work. Another remarked that they were "accustomed to marking criteria, learning objectives and outcomes and the overall style of assignments" (p. 8). A common theme to the study was the ghostwriter's belief that they were helping the students by filling a support role that is lacking in the education system. Ghostwriters commented, for instance, on a level of "collaboration with the customers" (p. 10) to fulfill the learning outcomes. This study was seminal in considering how ghostwriters and their clients may interact and exchange in ways that challenge the notion that contract cheating student clients are not seeking any learning at all. Sivasubramaniam et al. (2016) concluded by recommending a holistic approach including a shift to "evaluate the learning process through constant student engagement and input" (p. 12). More generally, these qualitative studies recognize some of the academic literacies held and

leveraged by ghostwriters. The ghostwriters use these literacies to research and write, to navigate academic assessments, and institutional writing culture with each client, which raises questions of collaboration and literacy brokering around assessments.

The research focus, as presented here, builds upon, and directly contributes to the ghostwriter literature, adding a rare and much needed insight into the lived experience of ghostwriters, academic staff, and students through a qualitative lens.

Literacy Brokering

"Brokering" is an informal learning practice that involves an intermediary to bridge the gaps of knowledge related to various elements of language. It can occur in all domains and contexts, and across a wide range of ages, as well as across social and cultural groups. "Language brokering" and "literacy brokering" are two terms used in the existing literature with slightly different meanings, although both are often applied to investigate informal lingual learning in immigration and migration communities (Alvarez, 2017; Dorner et al., 2007; Perry, 2009; Tse, 1996), and in student mobility contexts (S. Lee, 2017; Raslie & Keong, 2017). The term "literacy mediator" is also found in the literature, and this term includes formal literacy help (Baynham, 1995).

Language brokering has focused on the literal translation and interpretation of language and text, while literacy brokering means something more and extends to the unfamiliar underlying meanings and implications of text (Perry 2009). Perry (2009) noted that literacy brokering is multifaceted and grounded in literacy as a social practice (see also Street, 1984, 1995). It may not involve mobility or immigration, or even the navigation of two or more languages. Literacy is situated in, and changes across, domains, not just geography. Literacy brokering may "involve one aspect of a text, such as translation of word meanings, mediation of cultural content, or explanation of genre aspects of a printed text, or it may involve many of these aspects

all at once" (Perry, 2009, p. 257). Lillis and Curry (2006) found that literacy brokers often "influence the texts in different and important ways" (p. 1), calling into question the nature of "differential power relations" (p. 1) in knowledge and text production. Academic literacy brokering maintains the socio-cultural underpinnings of the Academic Literacies approach.

The literacy brokering lens has also been used as a tool to investigate literacies in educational settings (S. Lee, 2017; Raslie & Keong, 2017). Academic literacy brokering is a "help-seeking social interaction" (S. Lee, 2017, p. 200) that involves a broker, or intermediary, who interprets and explains academic texts for students so they can navigate the unfamiliar and can make meaning. These interactions are informal, bridging gaps in knowledge to clarify the meaning of texts (Perry, 2009). Brokering practices are "fluid and unpredictable" (S. Lee, 2017, p. 203) and include the transfer of resources or capital (Yoo, 2019), typically in the form of academic literacies, from the broker to the student. Brokers possess "some particular academic expertise derived from having prior academic experience" (S. Lee, 2018, p. 45), and support the transfer of knowledge that might otherwise be rendered invisible. Although Amigud and Lancaster (2019b), found that contract cheating services were, "brokered by family members or friends on behalf of students" (p. 106) in their study of messaging on the social media platform, Twitter (Twitter, 2021), literacy brokering, theoretically underpinned by its relationship to capital (Bourdieu, 1983/1986), has not surfaced within the contract cheating research, this presenting a knowledge gap and opportunity to investigate the phenomenon with this lens. The next chapter provides a deeper exploration of Bourdieu's concepts to support this inquiry.

Assessment Literacy/ies

This section presents a brief overview of the term "assessment literacy" used in higher education, and provides the definition adopted for this study. Assessment has a dominant place in higher education, with its express purpose being to determine a student's level of understanding, and to support the awarding of grades, credits, and credentials. Yet assessment is not a neutral endeavour, as it can also function to simultaneously include and exclude students (Yusun & Gagné, 2021). As outlined in the previous chapter "prevention by pedagogy," assessment has also played a role in the development of strategies to reduce contract cheating. Educational organizations (e.g., Higher Education Academy [HEA], 2012) have been calling for a deepening of assessment literacy across higher education, and more recently organizations with a focus on excellence in higher education have made explicit the connection between assessment design and its role to "promote academic integrity" (AdvanceHE, 2020, p. 6). AdvanceHE (2020) has reported that the "assessment literacy of staff is paramount for such [assessment] transformation to take hold and be sustained" (p. 6), further calling for the "integration of assessment literacy into course design" as a core tenet of transformation (p. 16).

Assessment literacy generally refers to an "individual's understanding of the fundamental assessment concepts and procedures" (Popham, 2011, p. 267). The practices of assessment—both in-class and online—have shifted recently as part of wider discussions in academia about inclusive pedagogies, although inclusive pedagogy is understood inconsistently across the education sector (Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2020). Another catalyst to these wider discussions was the unplanned pivot to online teaching throughout the COVID-19 pandemic (Elsalem et al., 2021). Part of this discussion included the landscape of teacher training and faculty development. At some institutions, faculty development includes academic integrity

education,[3] yet it is “not clear whether academic integrity features prominently in the education of academics themselves” (Ransome & Newton, 2018, p. 1). Nor is it clear if assessment concepts are more broadly taught consistently across countries, programs, and disciplines, despite frequent suggestion that assessment literacy is inadequate (Popham, 2011; Price et al., 2012), especially regarding academic integrity education (Ransome & Newton, 2018).

The formulation and use of the term “assessment literacy” can be traced back to the early 1990s (Stiggins, 1991, 1995), although the scholarship and literature on student testing has been steady since the 1960s (see Phelps, 2012). Stiggins (1995) proposed three levels of assessment literacy—functional, practical, and advanced—and argued that unless educators were proficient in assessment, they would be “unable to assist students in attaining higher levels of academic achievement” (p. 1). The concept of assessment literacy has also extended to students themselves (Price et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2013; AdvanceHE, 2020), with the understanding that it was not sufficient for educators to provide quality assessment design, but that students must also understand assessment as part of the context for their own learning, and must be able to judge the “purposes of assessment and the processes surrounding assessment” (Smith et al., 2013, p. 1).

Assessment literacy scholarship exists at all levels of education, from K–12 (Wolsey et al., 2020) to college (Massey et al., 2020), and university (Athimni, 2018). Many definitions[4] exist across disciplines. Terminology used in assessment and course design frameworks such as constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2011), backwards design (McTighe & Wiggins, 2005), and Bloom’s Taxonomy (Anderson &

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[3] See the University of Waterloo, Centre for Teaching Excellence for several examples: https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/workshops-and-events

[4] See Pastore & Andrade (2019) for a list of definitions of assessment literacy (1999–2013).

Krathwohl, 2001) have become part of the mainstream discourse of teaching and learning, educational development, and instructional design. Assessment continues to both shape ongoing research as well as driving discussion and critique. It also has implications for both policies, and teaching and learning practice.

In Canada, academic institutions have been aware of the need for the training of teaching staff around teaching and learning for decades, as evidenced by the rise of CTLs since the 1960s and their evolving role and scope-of-practice in faculty development (Forgie et al., 2018). More recently, academic integrity researchers and practitioners have been making the link between academic misconduct, specifically contract cheating, and the notion of assessment literacy (Morris, 2018). To reduce academic misconduct in the classroom, some scholars are calling for the introduction of academic integrity knowledge as a “threshold concept” (Meyer & Land, 2003) for students (Cutri et al., 2021). The idea of a threshold concept is relevant to the findings presented in this thesis, as it relates to the concepts of transformational learning, and the notions of identity embedded in academic literacies. A threshold concept is the notion that some scholarly knowledge and ideas are conceptually challenging, unfamiliar, or “troublesome,” and a “continual struggle” (Kent, 2016, p. 2) for students. While some topics are a struggle, these threshold concepts, once grasped and mastered, bring about a transformation, or “reconstitution of self” (Meyer & Land, 2006, p. 200). If academic integrity knowledge was adopted as a threshold concept, students would benefit from a sustained focus on these concepts, ensuring the mastery of the knowledge that can be applied to their assignments, and will enhance the academic literacies needed for academic success.

In light of ‘threshold concepts,’ this study adopts two multifaceted conceptualizations of assessment literacy, which reflect the social construct of the

concept. The first definition is adopted from Xu and Brown (2016) who offer a "conceptual framework of teacher assessment literacy in practice" (p. 155) and include several components notably: knowledge base, teacher conceptions of assessment, institutional and socio-cultural contexts, teacher learning, and teacher identity (re)construction. The second conceptualization frames assessment literacy as a social literacy practice "that involves teachers articulating and negotiating classroom and cultural knowledge with one another and with learners in the initiation, development and practice of assessment to achieve the learning goals of students" (Willis & Klenowski, 2013, p. 1). Very little of the academic integrity literature includes the notion of the threshold concept, although it is making some strides (see Cutri et al., 2021; Hersey, 2012; Warner, 2011). This study expands the literature and provides timely findings for institutions that are responding to both contract cheating and assessment needs in a rapidly changing education landscape.

Canadian Research and Initiatives

The Canadian academic integrity research community has been slower to grow than in other countries; however, it has made significant strides in the last several years (e.g., Eaton, 2021a). It is still largely an unfunded area of study, and this has had an impact on the pace and volume of output; however, this is changing (Eaton & Edino, 2018). Academic integrity research in Canada can be traced back to 1992 (Eaton & Edino, 2018), with key seminal academic integrity research conducted by scholars with Canadian ties (see Bertram Gallant, 2008; Bertram Gallant & Drinan, 2008; Christensen Hughes & McCabe, 2006).

Canadian contract cheating research is also growing. Several recent studies have examined Canadian post-secondary academic integrity policy reporting that, by and large, the policies reflect a punitive approach with very infrequent use of the term

"contract cheating" within the policies (Miron et al., 2021; Stoesz & Eaton, 2020; Stoesz et al., 2019). The studies do note that contract cheating behaviours are typically subsumed under plagiarism or other misconduct type descriptions in the policy. Qualitative studies have examined educators' and researchers' perspectives on contract cheating in three Canadian institutions (Eaton et al., 2019), as well as student perspectives in similar settings (Chang, 2018; Stoesz & Los, 2019). In addition to this, other work has looked at the blocking of contract cheating provider websites (Seeland et al., 2020).

The small but growing contract cheating research community and scholarly engagement (e.g., Gedajlovic, 2020) in Canada should not, however, be misconstrued as a lack of attention or academic focus. Canadian provincial academic integrity organizations such as the Academic Integrity Council of Ontario (AICO) are mounting strategies, and organizing, and raising awareness (Thacker et al., 2020). Many Canadian institutions are also involved with international collaborations and awareness-raising campaigns, such as the *International Day of Action Against Contract Cheating* (ICAI, 2020). There are also increasing calls from Canadian scholars to advocate for legislation (Eaton, 2021b), which was previously proposed in Ontario, Canada in 1972 (Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 1972). This bill, titled 'An Act respecting Ghost-Written Term Papers and Examinations, 1972" was not passed, however intended to bring civil action and "stop the operations of a corporation, or business, which deal in ghost-written term papers or examinations" (Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 1972, p. 3651)

Conclusion

Academic literacies have been touched only peripherally within the current scholarly body of work around contract cheating, for example with a study focused on

assessment design (Bretag et al., 2018). The literature is worryingly silent with respect to any analysis of the academic literacies and literacy practices of ghostwriters and how this links to broader social and academic practices. Peer reviewed research studies with a qualitative focus on ghostwriting for Canadian academic institutions are scant in the literature. That said, there is one unpublished undergraduate thesis with a qualitative focus on ghostwriters at Canadian institutions (see DiRisio, 2019). While studies exist that provide a certain "profile" of those who engage in contract cheating, the epistemological underpinnings to the literacy practices are lacking in the literature, along with theoretical analysis. Given the omnipresent role of information and communication technologies (ICT) in higher education, the inclusion of digital literacies in research is equally important to address.

Context is critical for policy development (Ozga, 2000), redesigning assessments, and for reframing contract cheating as a social literacy practice. These links become critical when considering how ghostwriters perceive our academic institutions, the knowledge that institutions create and favour, and the value that is attached to various academic texts and practices. This chapter has highlighted the gaps in the literature and pointed to the need to understand what ghostwriters do in their practices and how they interact with students. This understanding must inform prevention strategies.

The next chapter provides further discussion of the Academic Literacies model, (re-)placing digital literacies in context, and discusses the theoretical units of analysis–the literacy social practice building blocks (Hamilton, 2010). The literacy building blocks will be defined and aligned with Bourdieu's key concepts of capital, habitus, and field (Bourdieu, 1983/1986; Bourdieu & Wacquant,1992), that are pivotal to this study's data analysis and discussion.

Chapter 3–Theoretical Framework

This chapter describes the theoretical framework that underpins the study. It begins by introducing a number of theoretical perspectives specific to literacy practices, beginning with Bourdieu's (1983/1986) core thinking tools, followed by a discussion of "academic literacies," which provides a critical perspective on the social nature of literacy practices (Lea & Street, 1998; Street, 1984, 1995). This framework offers an opportunity to consider the empirical data gathered through the lens of "capital," and also pays attention to the social spaces, or "fields" in which contract cheating takes place. Further, Bourdieu's 1979/1984 work offers a way to conceptualize frameworks of understanding, developed through experience and practice, through the notion of "habitus." The theories, concepts, and notions selected align with my experiences and thus reflect my position within the research - drawn from a critical, interpretive, intellectual paradigm. Given the significant role of writing in higher education, this theoretical frame builds upon a social constructivist (Vygotsky, 1978) approach to learning as it relates to the research questions.

Capital, Habitus, and Field

Bourdieu's key concepts—his "theory of practice," including capital, habitus, and field (1979/1984, 1983/1986, 1982/1991)—provide thinking tools to deconstruct the local and global exchanges of contract cheating. These interrelated concepts have provided a theoretical orientation for research into many aspects of society, including education, and more recently, have been applied to digital literacy practices by scholars (see McGillivray & Mahon, 2021) and online spaces (see Costa, 2015).

Capital

Bourdieu's notion of capital has many layers, as he saw the social world as engaging in a "continual symbolic exchange" (Grenfell et al., 2012, p. 56). The

premise of capital is predicated on the belief that capital is unevenly distributed, and that this unequal distribution can lead to social inequity. Capital can be material or symbolic and is transmissible. Grenfell et al. (2012) suggested that for Bourdieu, education inequalities stem from a person being attached to their own historical, socio-cultural past, viewing capital as a source of social power and using the exchange of capital to explain social patterns of behaviour. His key essay, *Forms of Capital* (Bourdieu, 1983/1986) conceptualizes three forms of capital, to which I turn next.

The first form of capital is "social capital." Social capital can be understood as the "sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 119). The term social capital speaks to the network of social relationships one can draw upon, which can function as a positive resource through trust and reciprocity. The second form of capital is "economic capital." Economic capital includes money and assets such as property. The third form is "cultural capital." Cultural capital is utilized in this thesis as a means to explore resources and to consider acquisition and exchange in the ghostwriter literacies world. Cultural capital amalgamates both status and skill, or ability (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). Bourdieu further breaks down cultural capital into subcategories. These include "embodied" capital, such as a person's linguistic accent. He also discusses "objectified" capital, such as the ownership of technology. This study will refer to this as "techno-capital," which is defined as cultural capital related to technology, and the use of technology for social gain (Choi et al., 2020; Rojas et al., 2003). Techno-capital is an important element of the digital literacies landscape, especially in higher education. Finally, "institutional" capital is more

symbolic, and can be gained through the acquisition of credentials through education. Bourdieu's (1983/1986) notion of capital revealed itself in a recent BBC video exposé about ghostwriting in Kenya in which a ghostwriter said, "I can work, you are lazy, you have money, I do it, I get money" (BBC News, 2019). This description of contract work both highlights a typical ghostwriter perspective portrayed in the media, but also the power imbalances, even notionally, that permeate the business. The ghostwriter profits from the privileged position of the student who can afford to spend money to secure their grades.

Bourdieu's ideas around cultural capital have resulted in a significant body of work in educational research. Cultural capital, when applied to the education setting, provides a framework to explore the impact of capital on the ghostwriter and students' abilities, deficits, and affordances, especially in terms of academic literacies. This is in part due to how nimbly the concept of capital can draw attention to social institutional structures with implicit power imbalances, hierarchies, and social tensions. For Kalantzis and Cope (2000), "literacy represents a kind of symbolic capital" (p. 121), and as such is an effective tool to explore the two notions in context. Bourdieu's concepts have been further used by researchers to study literacy practices (e.g., Carrington & Luke, 1997; Handsfield, 2006), while his notions of cultural capital have been used to study plagiarism (Robillard & Fortune, 2007; Strangfeld, 2019). The concepts have not yet been used to study contract cheating and academic ghostwriting. Ee Loh and Sun (2019) explained that "cultural capital can only be understood in the light of the formation of habitus" (p. 1), (the socially and historically acquired self), and as part of a complex, dynamic social arena that also includes the notions of field (socially constructed space or domain).

Habitus

Academic literacy practices are entwined with the everyday routines and ways of being, or the “habitus.” Habitus and “embodied competence” with literacies (Bourdieu, 1982/1991) are created through social behaviour and engagement, including literacy practices and events. Habitus is shaped by our histories, our privileges, and inequities of socio-cultural structures like higher education. The notion of habitus commits the research to focusing on the individuals’ lived experience and reveals embodied characteristics, including those with power inequities. When we speak to the induction of students into the culture of the academic institution, we are also referring to events that may shape the student’s identity and habitus.

Lillis & Scott (2007) remind us that “ways of doing things with texts, become part of the everyday, implicit life routines both of the individual, habitus in Bourdieu’s (1982/1991) terms, and of social institutions” (p. 12). Student learning and writing is therefore always “filtered through identities” (Pahl & Rowsell, 2005, p. 96). Universities have traditionally expected students to acquire habitus as it supports their academic trajectory, however, there exists a gap between expectations, and the lived experience of developing a writer identity (Sheridan, 2011; French, 2020). This study adopts a socio-cultural theory of identity formation and is informed by Ivanič (1998). With this lens, we see identity as constructed through our social practices, and as such, our literacy practices embody our identity and habitus. Power relations and “power struggle” are also relevant in a critical view of identity construction (Ivanič, 1998, p. 13).

Ivanič’s (1998) work developed four “aspects of writer identity” (p. 23) which included the “autobiographical self, the discoursal self, self as author, and possibilities for self-hood” (p. 23). Two of these aspects are relevant to this study. First, the

autobiographical identity, which most closely relates to Bourdieu's notion of habitus (Bourdieu, 1972/1977). This self is constructed by a person's life history and experiences. Second, the discoursal identity which relates to the writer's values and context in which they write and is primarily "concerned with the writer's voice" (Ivanič, 1998, p. 25). Identity also exists in relation to context, bringing this discussion to Bourdieu's notion of "field."

Field

The concept of "field" speaks to the various social institutions, networks of public or private domains and how social spaces are grounded in differential power relations and resources. It is important to clarify the concepts of capital prior to discussing field, as for Bourdieu, the field is, in part, a configuration of economic, social, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1972/1977, 1980/1990; Ignatow & Robinson, 2017). Social spaces and relationships exist in various public, private or virtual domains. These domains are characterized by position, discourse, and social activity, sometimes overlapping with one another, but still with their own power structures (Bourdieu, 1982/1991).

A field critical to this study will be the "online field" (Levina & Arriaga, 2014), given the digital nature of contract cheating. Carrington and Luke (1997) have commented that "[c]apital is not capital unless it is recognized as such authoritatively in a particular social field" (p. 103). Fields are characterized by social moves and exchanges, discourse, and a person's activities in a specific context. As further noted by Carrington and Luke (1997), individuals "move through fields according to relative accumulations of capital" (p. 100), and as such, social conditions and context are important.

The conceptualization of field captures the social and historical spaces in

which people exist – both shaping and shaped by the habitus of those moving through them. Fields—which can be physical and/or virtual—have boundaries and entry/exit points, demanding a certain level of understanding and resources (e.g., "cultural capital") so they can be navigated successfully (Grenfell & James, 2004) and inclusively. The notion of field aligns with the concept of "domains." Domains are more than a place or space; they involve values and purposes, and the term speaks to the different social arenas of our lives (e.g., home and school), which may include digital spaces, and may be private or public (Barton, 2007; Hamilton, 2010; Pahl & Rowsell, 2005; Scribner & Cole, 1981). Bourdieu offered a wide framework where academic literacies concepts, such as literacy domains, can sit and dovetail. The following section discusses these, noting conceptual harmonies with Bourdieu's thinking tools. Together, Bourdieu and Academic Literacies as theoretical frameworks offer a rich set of conceptual tools to explore and frame both larger socio-political contexts and systems, and also foreground the human experience. Applying these notions in the analysis of the mapped concepts offers a powerful way to interpret literacy practices contributing to ghostwriter success.

Academic Literacies

This study is framed within an "Academic Literacies" (capital letters) (Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis & Scott, 2007; Thesen, 2017) approach. Academic Literacies offers a critical perspective which foregrounds the social (Street, 1984, 1995) and situated nature of literacies (Barton et al., 2000). This critical foregrounding takes into account patterns of institutional power relations that are embedded within social systems, especially within academic institutions. In contrast, the term "academic literacies" (lower case letters) refers to the diverse and multiple literacy practices found in academic and social contexts and institutions. Academic literacies are a

"product of socio-cultural interactions and relationships" (Hamilton, 2010, p. 13). Both concepts (i.e., capital letters and lower case) entwine to support the theoretical frame of this study. This perspective was born out of a body of literature referred to as the New Literacies Studies (Barton, 2007; Baynham, 1995; Heath, 1983; Gee, 1990; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1984; The New London Group, 1996). This socio-culturally sensitive study of literacies aligns well with Bourdieu who "wrote extensively about education, language, and academic discourse" (Grenfell et al., 2012, p. 3). Bourdieu's view was that academic inequality has more to do with social inequalities than economic, and that the academic interests are shared by some, but not all (Bourdieu, 1984/1988).

Central to this critical engagement with literacy is the framing of literacy as social and "inseparable from practices" (Pahl & Rowsell, 2005, p. 3). Street (1984) contributed two binary concepts to the field to understand literacy. He posited that there are two approaches to literacy— autonomous and ideological. The dominant, "autonomous" view is disconnected from the social and historical context, and considers literacy to be a learned set of skills. The New Literacies body of work, including work with academic literacies, challenges the autonomous model. In contrast, Street argued that the "ideological" view of literacy is concerned with how literacy/ies relate to practices and how they are situated within power structures. Within the ideological view, literacy becomes plural. Literacies exist within and across multiple contexts and domains. The framework also views academic literacies as transformative rather than simply a product of academic inculcation (Lillis et al., 2016).

These academic literacies (Lea & Street, 1998) may include, for example, research and writing competencies, student academic acculturation, consideration of

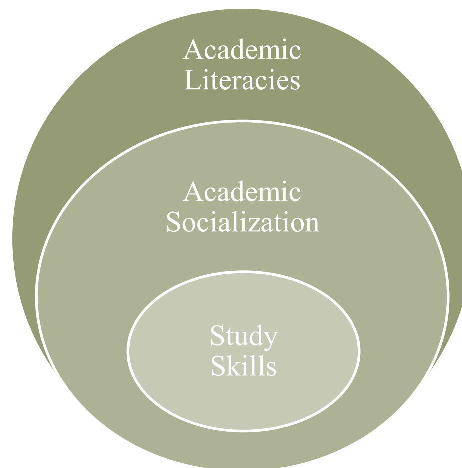
academic genre and discipline, the social navigation of academic assessments, and institutional writing culture. The academic literacies model (Lea & Street, 2006) explains that these literacies' characteristics are not mutually exclusive and, when viewed as a social practice, are negotiated within sites of power, inequity, and authority. This model contains within it the histories and social practices that make up the higher education experience, and draws upon key foundational work by Heath (1983), which considered the very units of literacy social practices, including literacy texts and events.

Academic Literacies Model

Building on the academic literacies model, this section will discuss Lea and Street's (1998, 2006) three models to understand writing practices in the university. These are: study skills, academic socialization, and academic literacies. These three literacy practice models make up the Academic Literacies framework (see figure 1). Study skills are subsumed under academic socialization, and academic socialization is subsumed under academic literacies. Each level of practice is patterned by the academic institution and power relations. In order to study student writing, Lea and Street use the approach to move away from an emphasis on texts and toward practice. This study is interested in the academic writing practices associated with the range of actors linked with contract cheating. As such, it will expand the focus of Lea and Street's model and apply it to three participant groups within contract cheating—ghostwriters, teaching staff, and students.

Figure 1.

Academic Literacies Framework (adapted from Lea & Street, 1998)



The "study skills" model of student writing assumes writing is an acquired, generic skill set. This model speaks to the autonomous approach (Street, 1984). This skill set can be learned and applied to various other contexts and situations. This perspective, however, overlooks the importance of context or field (Bourdieu, 1983/1986) in writing. An autonomous approach to literacy simply considers the lack of writing ability as a deficit that can be corrected remedially, without consideration for social conditions.

In 2018, the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) completed a research project that was "designed to measure the literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills of incoming and graduating college and university students" (p. 11). This demonstrated the acute policy focus on literacy skills/deficit and the suggested link between academic literacy skills and an ability to "participate in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential" (HEQCO, 2019, p. 16). While there is no doubt that reading and writing are empowering skills, *The Literacy Myth* (Graff, 1979) was important in arguing that the acquisition of dominant academic literacy skills are not critical for "upward mobility

and economic success" (Black & Yasukawa, 2014, p. 1). Street (1984) also challenges the "study skills" assumptions, arguing that we must take account of the multiple literacies found across domains, cultures, and contexts. He points out that literacy is not neutral— it is connected to our identities, histories, and social locations. The coarse definition of literacy study skills ignores the marginalized literacies and practices that make up our identity, and fails to illuminate the complex social nature of writing in the academy. Literacies scholars argue that when marginalized literacies are ignored, students are disempowered, and powerful "funds of knowledge" (Gonzalez et al., 2005; Moje et al., 2004) are devalued (Barton, 2007; Ivanič & Hamilton, 1989). Although we accept the role of skills in academic writing, such as citation practices, grammar, or spelling of disciplinary terminology, to see the skills as only a neutral and isolated competence makes assumptions about a homogeneous or linear journey of learning, and the privilege of skills acquisition across various contexts. This narrow focus of literacy is partly shaped by economic policy, but also partly a response to the changing nature of post-secondary education, which has increasingly focused on the attainment of employment, careers, and professionally (that is, not research) oriented programs.

The "academic socialization" model situates student writing within the processes of acculturation and enculturation, and the induction of students into the culture of the academic institution specifically, and higher education more broadly. Chiming with Bourdieu's 'field theory' (1972/1977, 1980/1990), this model considers how students acquire the various academic discourses for writing through inculcation and orientation. Academic socialization is often discussed in terms of developing a culture of academic integrity (Guerrero-Dib et al., 2020). Kaktiņš (2018) commented that "There is much disquiet on the part of universities generally about the failure of

such students to engage in the academic discourse socialization process and so distancing themselves from the academic community, as well as flaunting academic protocols which uphold the credibility of their university degrees" (p. 1). Those in higher education will be familiar with various initiatives to adapt students to their new academic literacies spaces or communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The socialization model acknowledges that practices of different academic disciplines can be viewed as different communities of practice. These communities are sustained by several factors; often, those that have embedded power structures, such as disciplinary knowledge and discourse (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995). These structures function to include - and therefore privilege, as well as exclude or marginalize - particular literacies. The academic socialization model assumes that university discourses and communities are both static and welcoming to newcomers. Socialization is also tied to the notion of identity, and the bridging of literacies, or "boundary crossing" (Lillis & Scott, 2007, p. 19) across social contexts.

Socialization as a process for supporting student writing must also consider issues of access. The socialization model is limited in its view given that students bring histories and marginalized literacies to the academy that are often not welcomed or enabled for learning. This marginalizing of literacies can create a "third space" in the university ecosystem. Third Space Theory (Bhabha, 1994) considers the spaces in between two domains or in between two, typically dominant discourses. Third space has been of particular interest in educational research to theorize literacy domains, such as home and school. It can show where domains intersect and explains the shift to informal learning practices (Gutiérrez, 2008). Moje et al., (2004) understood third space to be a bridge in between domains, where vernacular, hybrid, and dominant literacies can co-exist and merge. The term "vernacular literacies" speaks to the

everyday literacies of our lives (Barton, 2007), such as those literacies used with social media. Socialization processes, like Bourdieu's concept of field (Bourdieu, 1972/1977, 1980/1990) are saturated with inequality and imbalances in power relations, with research suggesting that "depending on their enculturation into disciplinary discourses, students exhibit different levels of awareness of the available and privileged identity options in the social contexts of writing" (Abasi et al., 2006, p. 1).

Lea and Street's (2006) third model—"academic literacies,"—allows researchers to negotiate these sites of contested power, and explore the liminality of literacies practices. This model encompasses, and overlaps with, the other two models (i.e., study skills and academic socialization). This model folds them in, while giving priority to literacies practices and events, and issues of social engagement and identity, as well as the nature of power and exchange. This model supports the research questions driving this thesis, as it highlights not only literacies practices, but also perceptions and attitudes. Perceptions are the thoughts, beliefs, and feelings about persons, situations, and events. Perceptions are a central element of an academic literacies approach (Lillis & Scott, 2007) and an important determinant aspect of behaviour. Understanding beliefs can inform differences of knowledge, culture, academic expectation, and assumptions. Understanding differences of perception is also critical to developing shared understandings and perspectives. An academic literacies model considers identity as critical to understanding literacy practice and education. Together, the study skills, socialization, and academic literacies models form the academic literacies framework (see figure 1).

Digital Literacy/ies

Given the significant role of information and communications technologies

(ICT) in education and contract cheating, this section defines and discusses "digital literacies." As Barton (2007) argued, when certain characteristics of literacy "cluster into coherent groups" (p. 38), they may be called "literacies," such as digital literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008). These are a set of technologically mediated, situated behaviours, practices, and identities, that are "supported by diverse and changing technologies" (Jisc, 2014, para. 1). ICT has had an impact on every aspect of higher education, and constructs literacies practices in certain ways. This study has adopted a multifaceted definition of digital literacies which includes ICT proficiency, digital identity management, and other elements such as social participation in digital networks and the production of digital communications (Jisc, 2014). From the online admissions application processes to the use of educational technology in course design, digital literacies play an extensive and broad role in higher education. Technology and global communication practices have also played a role in the globalization of the higher education market, and some scholars suggest that technology has played a large role in the evolution and growth of contract cheating (see Seeland et al., 2020; Walker & Townley, 2012). The term digital literacies is complex and contested. Like literacy, digital literacy is not neutral— for example, digital literacies form a part of educational and employment policy (McLean & Rowsell, 2019).

Although access to technology, and the "digital divide" is a consideration for success in higher education and employability, Prensky (2001) argued for the notion of "digital natives and immigrants" suggesting that a new generation was more technically savvy, and that education needed to adjust. This perspective was critiqued as elitist and lacking a critical view that addresses the unequal distribution of access and opportunity to technology (Brown & Czerniewicz, 2010; Southall, 2012).

Prensky's digital natives/immigrants argument falls under Street's (1984) autonomous model of literacy. Selwyn (2009) argues that digital literacies are far more dependent on one's social location and capital, rather than generation. Prensky relied on the deficit model of literacy. When scholars and educators assume that all students of a certain generation will bring digital literacy skills to their education environment and that they will be able to function within new digital genres, they ignore the complexities of meaning making and identity, and the many socio-cultural structures and practices framing the teaching and learning environment.

Gilster (1997) argued that digital literacy was about more than skills, suggesting that it was about an "assemblage of knowledge" and "mastering ideas, not keystrokes" (p. 1). Lankshear and Knobel (2006a) showed that Gilster's conceptualization focused on competencies, which exclude the critical, socio-cultural nature of digital literacies. The social increasingly drives digital literacies practices, and so must be sufficiently prioritized when reflecting upon literacies in contract cheating.

Digital spaces in the university are not neutral. For example, Open Education Resources (OER), scholarly publishing practices such as paywalls, pay-to-publish contracts, text-matching software, and assessment surveillance are all examples of power, control, and (lack of) trust in the academic digital space (McKenna & Hughes, 2013). By using a digital literacies lens, we make visible these contrasting values in scholarly writing spaces (McKenna & Hughes, 2013). The university values knowledge and ethics yet contributes to the unequal access to knowledge production and consumption. Technology has reinforced, but also broken down these power structures through new modes and models. Those who are kept out of traditional publishing spheres, may publish online—for example through blogs—unhinging the

dominant pathways to publishing success. Educational institutions are constantly being transformed by technology, as was seen through the COVID-19 global pandemic.

The relationship between higher education and technology is complex and ever evolving. Not only is education often delivered online, but institutions also use technology to research, house, and control access to knowledge, and create knowledge. The digital landscape of education affects all members of the academic community. The digital domain thus must be considered, as technologically mediated literacies are not simply a shift in practice; rather, they reflect a shift to new digital epistemologies (Lankshear, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006b). Often, digital literacy is framed as a set of skills or competences in the digital domain, some of which reflect much of everyday life for many (for example, searching the internet on a smart phone), and other activities such as blogging, or creating memes. In an academic environment, digital literacies range from using SPSS[5] to researching a topic using an online scholarly database. They are more than skills, and are also connected to the social, as "academic literacies in digital contexts encapsulate a multiplicity of social practices involved in creating, communicating and evaluating textual knowledge across this range of modes" (Goodfellow & Lea, 2013, p. 3). In a technology saturated space such as education, it comes as no surprise that digital literacies would play a role in contract cheating, providing both opportunities and challenges.

Digital literacies also intersect with geography (Thesen, 2017). As students are situated further and further away from campus, and student services are increasingly moved online, digital literacies necessarily change and evolve. Student cultures

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[5] SPSS is a statistical analysis software program, typically used in the social sciences.

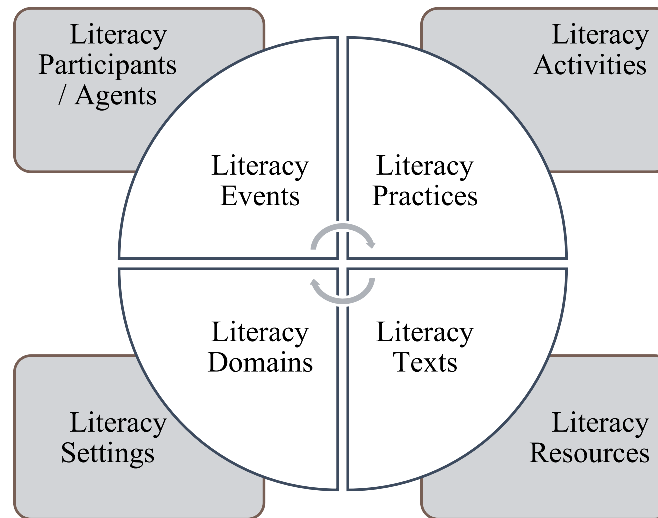
adapted to a digital space provide fresh opportunities to promote ghostwriting services. Digital literacies have also had an impact on student perceptions of authorship, access to resources, and understandings of authenticity (McInerney, 2010). One must therefore consider both sides of digital literacy— the socially situated literacy practices in a digital environment, and the skills and competencies associated with literacy in the digitally mediated context. Both perspectives have relevance to this study. Not only has technology and ICT changed academic literacies, but they have also changed what counts as knowledge, authorship, and collaboration (McKenna & Hughes, 2013). Boundaries have also been blurred, merged, and distorted through technology and digital literacies. This requires consideration of power, authority, agency, and institutional digital practices that shape the teaching and learning environment.

Literacy Social Practice Building Blocks

This study also adopts Hamilton's (2010) concept of "literacy social practice building blocks" (p. 12), as part of its theoretical and method framework. These building blocks include the concepts of literacy events, texts, and practices (Heath, 1983; Scribner & Cole, 1981) and literacy domains as literacy units of analysis (see figure 2). In addition, the building blocks also include literacy activities, settings, participants, and resources. When explaining the blocks, Hamilton (2006) pointed out that, "it is important to notice that these elements include the material technologies, and physical circumstances within which literacy is accomplished as well as the cognitive and symbolic resources of the encoded linguistic, visual, and other semiotic systems" (p. 139).

Figure 2.

Literacy Social Practice Building Blocks



Literacy practices are patterned activities which can be either dominant or less visible. For example, literacy brokering can be viewed as a literacy practice which is largely unseen. Literacies practices are patterned by social relations, institutions, and power relations. They are embedded in larger socio-cultural practices. These practices involve values, attitudes, feelings, and social relationships (Street, 1993, p. 12). They are "general cultural ways of utilizing literacy which people draw upon in a literacy event" (Barton, 2007, p. 37). Literacy events arise from practices and involve texts. These literacy events are socially situated (Street, 1995). A literacy event has social underpinnings and is the "moment of composing a literacy text" (Pahl & Rowsell, 2005, p. 9). An example of a literacy event would be composing an email or using Google Docs[6] to complete an annual report. An outsourced assignment (e.g., essay) would be an example of a literacy text. For this study, literacy domain refers to space— a particular space where literacy is patterned and practised (Pahl & Rowsell,

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[6] Google Docs is an online, word-processing tool. It supports user collaboration by allowing users to work in real time, while seeing each other's textual changes, instantly (Google, n.d.).

2005; Scribner & Cole, 1981), such as the home, campus, or online.

Academic literacies' concepts have been touched upon in the contract cheating literature. Lines (2016) considered an academic literacies frame when examining the quality of academic papers produced by ghostwriters. Lines (2016) found that ghostwritten assignments can be written at an appropriate level and quality that cheating can go unnoticed by teaching staff. She concluded her study noting that by, "[i]ncorporating some of the findings from the academic literacies approach in relation to teaching students the appropriate use and citation of sources may be beneficial" (p. 906). Amigud and Lancaster (2019b) looked at students seeking ghostwriters using social media, and found that academic aptitude, skill gaps, and perseverance are variables that may influence contract cheating behaviour. Another study pointed to variables such as speaking a language other than English at home, and dissatisfaction with the teaching and learning environment (Bretag et al., 2018) as contributing factors in contract cheating. Lancaster (2020b) also considered the marketing of outsourced essays by academic discipline, highlighting an academically nuanced approach to marketing services.

The building blocks operate in the social, and symbolic world. They humanize how texts are used within and across various domains. They open a window to how certain literacy events and practices hold tension and struggle. Bourdieu's notions of capital, habitus, and field (1979/1984, 1983/1986, 1982/1991) can be theoretically situated with these literacy building blocks. For example, the concept of literacy resources aligns with Bourdieu's (1983/1986) notion of "objectified capital." The consideration of literacy as symbolic and cultural capital (Kalantzis & Cope, 2000) is also useful as it can function as an "index of relative social power" (Carrington & Luke, 1997, p. 101). Grenfell et al. (2012) remind us that, "for Bourdieu, the social

world is a place of continual symbolic exchange" (p. 56). Literacies concepts and Bourdieusian frameworks have strong affinities, given their foundational, ontological conceptions of "realism and social constructionism" (Ignatow & Robinson, 2017, p. 950).

The theoretical framework presented in this chapter is grounded in educational fields and also has implications for the selection of research methods. Building upon the theoretical framework of capital and academic literacies, the following chapter presents the methodological study design, before presenting the study's findings.

Chapter 4–Research Methods

The previous chapter examined the theoretical framework that underpins the research study. This chapter provides an overview of the research methods chosen for this study, and an outline of the rationale for their use. It begins with an overview of the study design, including a description of the participants who took part in the study. The chapter then moves to discuss participant sampling and selection, as well as the data collection processes. The methods of data collection include semi-structured interviews, the analysis of documents (or texts), a follow-up survey, and concept mapping - which is explained as both a tool to support data collection and a tool for analysis. Finally, the chapter discusses the ethical considerations for the study. Given the nature of contract cheating, the ethical decisions were particularly critical for the ghostwriter participants.

Research Questions

In response to a review of the literature as presented in chapter 2 and the theoretical framework discussed in Chapter 3, this study explores the following research questions:

1. What kind of literacy brokering exists between ghostwriters and their clients in Canadian higher education institutions?
2. What are the perceptions of contract cheating held by ghostwriters, students, and teaching staff?
3. What does the mapping of literacies reveal about the eduscape of contract cheating in the Canadian context?

As the research questions and the study's aims involve a degree of exploration into participant experiences and perspectives, qualitative methods were required. The following sections present the methods used to collect the data.

Multiple Case Studies

This qualitative study was designed using a multiple case studies orientation, which included several data collection tools. The case studies method was selected for its established reputation in illustrating social phenomenon (Yin, 1984) and complex issues which, here, will include contract cheating. A multiple case studies orientation was also chosen to position an interpretive approach (Andrade, 2009) in responding to the research questions. Creswell (2007) defined the case study as an in-depth exploration of a single or multiple bounded system, "involving multiple sources of information" (p. 73). New Literacies Studies scholars (see Heath, 1983; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1984) called for studies to involve "descriptive, analytic and critical accounts" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003, p. 45) so as to fully consider the range of literacies that exist as part of a social or cultural fabric.

Case study methods also foster researcher reflection, which is important when engaging in a critical, qualitative study. This is important for this critical research, which is focused on uncovering structural power dynamics within contract cheating. Such reflexivity seeks to prevent author subjectivities from occupying and dominating findings, placing them above the experiences of participants, offering the reader insight into the standpoint/position from which the research has been produced. As such, the upcoming section on positionality explores reflexivity in greater detail, followed by a discussion on limitations of the research.

The phenomenon of contract cheating is not itself a culture or subculture (Hebdige, 1979). It does include several interdependent groups that are bounded by the same system or context (Baxter & Jack, 2008)—the system or context is education. The participants of this bounded system can be culturally disparate and are not necessarily included as part of the same social or academic community. To

understand literacy as a social practice, a methodology is, therefore, required that allows for “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973, p. 6) to illustrate the interconnectedness of the literacies practices, events, and texts. Thick descriptions move beyond the surface, and collect participant’s subjective perspectives and meanings, and offer a deeper context to behaviours (Geertz, 1973). This is also important given that the research questions sought to understand the social relationships and exchanges between students and ghostwriters.

Multiple cases—and thus cross-case analysis—provided a structure by which to uncover key themes related to participant’s attitudes, experiences, and practices—practices that can then be patterned, and connected to larger concepts and systems (that is, capital, influence, dominant systems). Perceptions and attitudes can be explained and described by participants through a semi-structured interview. The use of just one case study would provide only limited data, whereas many cases make it possible to illustrate the complexity of the phenomenon, and more fully address the research questions. Stake (1995) suggested that “qualitative or interpretive data have meanings directly recognized by the observer” (p. 60) which leads to the creation of each case description. This orientation to the research topic was supported by a method that was context-based and required meaning making through in-depth descriptions.

Qualitative research tools allow the researcher to unpack the constructed social world, apply historical realism, and create meaning and transformation from understanding the human experience (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Qualitative methods, such as interviews, offer the researcher an opportunity to consider feelings, values, and perceptions. Interviews allow the probing of participant responses, and the capturing of language and description, so that the researcher may better understand

the context and meaning of the data.

Data Collection

The use of multiple case studies can be effective when a phenomenon is complex, when it contains inter-relationships, and when extensive rich descriptions are needed to answer a research question. These rich descriptions were collected through semi-structured interviews, though, as Stake, (1995) showed, case studies must extend beyond the interview to yield robust data. To generate enough data to support the rigour of multiple case studies, several methods of data collection were used, including:

- semi-structured interviews;
- document/text collection;
- follow-up survey; and
- concept mapping.

Each data collection method is described and explained in detail next, beginning with the semi-structured interviews.

Method One: Semi-Structured Interviews

All the data sets (except for one interview) for this study were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, and all interviews were conducted online or by telephone. Three groups of participants were drawn from within the "bounded system" (Stake, 1995) of postsecondary institutions located in Canada. These groups were those of ghostwriters, students, and teaching staff. The study design suited a semi-structured interview format, providing opportunities to follow up on questions, probe more deeply, and to ensure that the participant understood the questions. Given that the research questions were broad, beginning with open-ended type questions allowed me to approach the topic in an exploratory fashion. Semi-structured interviews provided a

framework for consistency of questioning across the interviews, and also allowed customized questions and comments in response to the individual participant.

The interview questions had a focus on academic literacies, literacies practices, and events (see appendix C for interview questions). This was common to all three participant groups. In-depth interviews conducted with individual participants, allowed me to consider the lived experience of each participant. Stake (1995) referred to such interviews as the “main road to multiple realities” (p. 64) in multiple case studies research. Semi-structured interviews thus enabled me to modify questions, follow up on any emerging themes and unexpected ideas, and to build a general level of rapport. Throughout the interviews, open-ended questions supported a neutral and non-judgmental approach to reduce the possibility of influencing the participant’s response.

One pilot interview with a ghostwriter was conducted in March 2019, and its transcript was included in the data set. This initial interview required an ethics submission, which was approved in January 2019. The pilot interview formed part of the assessment of the taught portion of the Doctor of Education (EdD) program, where writing a report on the small-scale project contributed to understanding the feasibility of the method design.

Interviews were conducted beginning in March 2020 through to June 2021 and lasted between 30 minutes and 70 minutes. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, travel and face-to-face interviews were not feasible. A vast majority of the interviews were, therefore, completed using online video conferencing software—either Zoom or Skype. Several were completed over the telephone. On reflection, the online interviews were a practical and effective choice when participants were not easily accessible and wished to protect their anonymity. They also provided an easy

mechanism for consensual audio recording. The majority of the interviews were conducted without video. This was offered to the participants to increase their level of comfort and confidentiality, although diminished the collection of any non-verbal communication. Another critique of video interviews is concern for a strong internet connection; however, this did not materialize as a concern in the interviews. A transcription guide, adapted from Tilley & Powick's (2002) work with verbatim transcription conventions, was created. The interview audio files were transcribed into written form, printed, and bound into three volumes, for ease of analysis. A total of 390 pages of transcribed data were produced. A sample of a coded transcription can be found in appendix G.

The Participants

There are multiple stakeholders, systems, and actors that make up the phenomenon of contract cheating. To answer my research questions thoroughly, I determined that ghostwriters, students, and teaching staff should all be included as participants in the study. This increased the number of perspectives, as well as my ability to understand the exchanges and connections between and among the participants. While the Canadian education sector was chosen due to the identified gap in the research literature, it was also selected because contract cheating has not been regulated by legislation in Canada, which was helpful to note when recruiting ghostwriter and student participants. This was also a point of consideration in seeking ethical approval. In addition, I reside in Canada, making it a reasonable choice for access and efficiency, since I had access to a strong professional network in Canadian higher education, and a level of familiarity with web-based advertisement options for recruiting ghostwriters writing for Canadian institutions. Sampling was therefore driven by a combination of my research questions and access.

The following sections outline the sampling methods, recruitment methods, and demographics for each participant group.

The Ghostwriters

Each ghostwriter case study included one interview. A total of 11 ghostwriters were recruited through their own online advertisements. I used Google searches to find the two websites described below. Then I searched the two websites (Kijiji and Reddit) to find advertisements by the ghostwriters and to find their email or text contact information. While I am aware of several other websites that offer ghostwriting services worldwide, the significant use and familiarity of these sites within Canada supported the study's research scope, which was to interview ghostwriters who write for students registered at Canadian institutions. Both websites regularly post contract cheating services, with brief descriptions to follow.

Kijiji is an online classified advertising website (Kijiji, n.d.). Users can create a profile, post ads for services, or buy and sell items. It is a very popular service in Canada owned by eBay (eBay, 2020), an American e-commerce company. Kijiji is Canada's largest online classified marketplace (Asuten, 2015). Reddit is an American social news and discussion website, with over 50 million daily active users (Reddit, 2021). Members can create groups, communities, and content threads.

Independent ghostwriter advertisements typically provide an email address or another digital means to get in touch. Using their provided contact information (phone number or email), I contacted ghostwriters, and sent them an attached participant information sheet (see appendix E), a brief introduction of the researcher and study, and an invitation to ask any questions about the project. The communication also confirmed that a "small financial gratuity is offered as compensation for your time" (see appendix I).

Contract cheating service models and academic ghostwriter types have been profiled in prior research (Lancaster 2018; Sivasubramaniam et al., 2016). While there are multiple profile types, broadly speaking, there are ghostwriters who work for commercial essay mills, and there are independent, freelance ghostwriters. This study focused on the latter i.e., ghostwriters not associated with a larger commercial company.

To find independent ghostwriter participants, I pursued “accessible cases” (Creswell, 2007, p. 75), meaning that I opted to interview all the ghostwriters who responded to my invitation, and who fell within the following inclusion and exclusion criteria: adult (over 18 years of age); ghostwriting in any academic discipline, for compensation (financial or other); ghostwriting for post-secondary/higher education institutions in Canada (any level/credential); any/all genders; use technology of some kind to communicate with students.

In this study, the 11 ghostwriter participants were all independent, meaning they were not associated with an essay-mill company. They all worked in an online environment with students in Canadian post-secondary education, charging for the creation of academic assignments. The chart below provides information about the geographic locations of the ghostwriters, a general idea of how long they had been engaged in the work of ghostwriting, and information on their prior education. It is also noted if the ghostwriter was also a student at the time of the interview.

Table 1

Ghostwriter Participants’ Details

#	Name (pseudonym)	Also a Student?	Years Ghost writing	Country	Writing Discipline/s	Highest Education Level
1	Sam	No	8	Canada	Social Sciences	Bachelor
2	Jack	No	7	Canada	English	Bachelor (3 yr)

#	Name (pseudonym)	Also a Student?	Years Ghost writing	Country	Writing Discipline/s	Highest Education Level
3	Rowan	No	1 month	USA	unknown	High school
4	Terry	No	-	Kenya	Economics and Statistics	Bachelor
5	Pierre (since deceased)	No	8	Kenya	History, Business, Sociology, Psychology	unknown
6	Xander	No	4	UK	History, Social Sciences	Bachelor
7	Camille	Yes	4	Canada	Social Sciences, Humanities, Law	Bachelor
8	Sang	No	10	Canada	unknown	unknown
9	Sawyer	Yes	1	Canada	Social Sciences, Liberal Arts	Bachelor (in 4th year)
10	Louis	No	4	Kenya	English	Bachelor (engineering)
11	Preet	No	4	India	Arts	Bachelor

Ghostwriter Vignettes

Ghostwriter vignettes, as described by Miles and Huberman (1994), were also written to provide a vivid description of each ghostwriter case. Such vignettes were used here to provide a narrative that constructs the individual representation, perspectives, and identity of each ghostwriter. While each vignette is a “reduced account” (Erickson, 1986, p. 150) of the ghostwriter and their context, the writing afforded me an opportunity to reflect on the interview data and emerging themes, and form each case (see appendix B for ghostwriter vignettes).

The Teaching Staff

Each teaching staff case study included one interview. To find teaching staff participants, I pursued "purposeful sampling" (Creswell, 2007, p. 75). I recruited eight teaching staff members through my existing professional network. I have worked at both a Canadian college and a university and, thus, have a strong network of academic contacts who were able to refer me to teachers who may be interested and available. I recruited teaching staff from across the country, of any gender, and from across the spectrum of academic disciplines. One faculty member recommended other teaching staff colleagues to me and so this provided a snowball connection. The teaching staff members taught within Canadian post-secondary institutions, either at a community college or at a university. One participant taught at both. Two of the teaching staff were also completing their doctoral degrees at the time of the interview. The teaching staff all received an email similar to the ghostwriters (see appendix I). The sample of eight teaching staff participants were all (a) adults over 18 years of age, (b) teaching in any academic discipline, (c) teaching in a Canadian post-secondary institution (i.e., college or university—undergraduate through to graduate studies), and (d) any/all genders.

Table 2

Teaching Staff Participants' Details

#	Name (pseudonym)	Also a Student?	# Years Teaching	Canada: E, W, C	Discipline	Highest Education Level
1	Casey	No	25	East	English	Doctorate
2	Rita	No	12	West	Geography and Environmental Studies	Doctorate
3	Greta	No	10	Central	English	Doctorate
4	Sandy	Yes	30	Central	Criminology / Education	Master's
5	Ling	No	8	West	Mathematics	Doctorate
6	Lucas	Yes	7	Central	Creative Arts (Film)	Master's
7	Peter	No	53	Central	Physics	Doctorate
8	Brian	No	12	Central	Theatre	Doctorate

The Students

Each student case included one interview. Seven students were interviewed; however, it is also noted that two of the teaching staff members (Sandy and Lucas) and two of the ghostwriters (Camille and Sawyer) were also students. To find student participants, I pursued, again, "purposeful sampling" (Creswell, 2007, p. 75). Since I was located professionally and personally in the Canadian education domain, I was able to draw on my network for two initial student interviews. I reached out to two contacts in my academic network via email and asked if they would put me in touch with any students who may be interested in participating in the study. The students all received a similar email to the ghostwriters and teaching staff (see appendix I). From these two contacts, I then relied on "snowball or chain" sampling (Creswell, 2007, p.

127) to recruit several more, as the students were able to refer others.

The study also attempted to recruit students through the online message board community “Reddit,” posting in a student–ghostwriter sub-reddit community without any success. While it is unclear why no students decided to follow up on my Reddit interview invitation, it is reasonable to assume that students saw little reward, and perhaps some risk in the invitation.

Students’ ages ranged from 20 to 35 years of age. They attended school in locations ranging between the east and the west coast of Canada, as noted in table 3. All students were enrolled in a university program; however, three of the students had also attended community college prior to enrolling in university. There was also a mix of students completing undergraduate, graduate, research, and professional academic programs.

Table 3

Student Participants’ Details

#	Name (pseudonym)	Academic Misconduct?	Canada: East, West or Central	Highest Education Level
1	Morgan	Yes	Central	Just completed Bachelor’s
2	Elli	No	East	Completing (professional) Master’s, Also, completed Bachelors
3	Finley	No	Central	Completing (research) Master’s, Also, completed Bachelors
4	Jordan	No	Central	Completing Bachelors, Also, completed College Certificate
5	Alex	Yes	Central	Completing Bachelors, Also, completed College Diploma
6	Blake	No	East	Completing Bachelors
7	Mackenzie	No	West	Completing 3-year Diploma

The sample of student participants included (a) adults (over 18 years of age), (b) studying in any academic discipline, (c) registered at a Canadian college or university (any level/credential), (d) registered full-time or part-time, and (e) any/all genders.

Two of the students had engaged in academic misconduct (e.g., unauthorized collaboration on an assignment; unauthorized study aid) without receiving an allegation or sanction from their universities; however, none had paid, or at least admitted to paying, a ghostwriter to write an assignment.

Method Two: Document Collection (Literacy Texts and Artifacts)

The documents collected were literacy documents, or texts, received from participants or collected online. Ghostwriter participant advertisements were collected online through the recruitment process. Other documents were received or pointed to through the interview process. Although I initially found most advertisements on Reddit and Kijiji, I discovered additional sites, as the ghostwriters often advertise across social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook (Facebook, 2021), and their personal websites. Two ghostwriters shared several sample essays with me that I was able to view and download from their personal websites. The receipt of these texts from ghostwriter participants gave the study the chance to include inter-textual perspectives (i.e., linking the interview transcript with the document text), and to support contextualization, interpretation, and meaning from the texts. The texts received and reviewed replaced, in part, the observations or activity that I could not observe more directly (Stake, 1995). This study views texts as traces of social practices as formulated by Rowsell and Pahl (2007), with the understanding that literacy events are occasions when a written text is involved with people and is grounded in the social (Bourdieu, 1984/1988; Heath, 1983).

Method Three: Follow-Up Survey

In June of 2021, I contacted the ghostwriter "key informants" (Sam, Jack, Camille, Sang, Sawyer, and Xander) by email, and asked them to take part in a follow-up survey. All of the participants were asked at the end of their interviews if they were open to this, and all agreed. Key informants were selected based on their described geographic location (Canada and England), and the experiences they shared during the interview related to the study's findings. The follow-up survey used open-ended questions to elicit longer responses, giving participants the option to include examples and narratives of their experiences. The survey (see appendix D) was designed using questions regarding the key themes emerging from the data—including assessment issues, collaboration, and assessment brokering (Thacker, 2022). Two ghostwriters responded to the invitation: Sawyer and Xander. Given that ghostwriters change their email addresses quite often (to reduce their digital fingerprint and attract new clients), the low response rate may have been due to a loss of correct contact information, or simply lack of interest. Regardless, the two responses provided rich additional data.

Method Four: Concept Mapping

The project was designed to explore the literacies landscape of contract cheating with focus on independent ghostwriters. Concept mapping as a research tool has been used across a variety of disciplines and with various approaches (Conceição, et al., 2017). Miles and Huberman (1994) for example discussed several "conceptually ordered displays" (p. 127) including "cognitive maps," (p. 134) which they adapted from others such as Novak and Gowin (1984). Miles and Huberman (1984) further maintained that maps can show us complexity and relationships. Concept mapping organizes relational information in such a way that it fosters

interpretation and meaning making (Novak et al., 1984). The mapping of literacy practices is therefore not new (Mannion et al., 2007), however, it has not yet been applied to the phenomenon of contract cheating. Gichuru (2013) explained that "mapping allows the researcher to capture everyday practices in multiple sites, using different modes and media" (p. 61). This method is not meant to measure or validate a predetermined outcome. It was, rather, selected as a tool for interpretation and exploration. Mapping visually reflects the affordances, constraints, and connections and interconnections of literacies across domains.

Concept mapping aligns with the qualitative data collection traditions of Miles and Huberman (1994). This tradition places an emphasis on the use of graphic forms, such as charts and maps for representation (Evers & Van Staa, 2012, p. 5). Mannion et al. (2007) further discussed the affordances of mapping of literacy practices and pointed out that it is both a data collection and analytics tool. Mapping afforded the study the opportunity to see themes and patterns, and to explore the diversity of literacies, and routes and spaces of literacy navigation. I was also able to see intersections—within and outside of school contexts. The mapping exercise leveraged and assembled the literacy social practice building blocks (Hamilton, 2010) to reflect the literacies scape of contract cheating.

The goal of creating the concept map was to operationalize the literacy social practice building blocks through the meaningful construction of a visual–spatial representation, in effect a type of diagram. This visual representation will be referred to as the "Literacies Landscape Map." The term "landscape" in this instance, is used as a metaphor to describe a graphic view of the various literacies within and across the phenomenon of academic ghostwriting. That said, this landscape is only representative of the data collected, and as such forms a landscape of contract

cheating which includes independent, freelance ghostwriters. Still, mapping creates a space for local, situated, and global literacies to visually intersect.

Such a landscape also provides a tangible, inclusive location to discuss marginalized literacies. The landscape is created as a visual–spatial construct. As such, the map is a literacy text, acting as a citation, providing the reader and researcher with an opportunity for acknowledgement and awareness. The Literacies Landscape Map builds upon Appadurai's (1990) theory of "scapes" and more specifically on C. Luke's (2006) notion of the "eduscape." Within this context, the following section will briefly describe data analysis, including the process of concept mapping for the study.

Data Analysis

Several techniques were used to make sense of and triangulate the data. To enhance the study validity and credibility, in addition to multiple theories and multiple data sets/sources (i.e., interviews, documents, survey, concept map), several data analysis techniques were used (i.e., transcription, coding, and concept mapping), to which I now turn.

Moving from an audio representation to a textual representation of the data was the first step to analyzing the data. After the data collection phase, I transcribed the interviews. Transcriptions are important because the words and exchanges can be studied in detail. The transcription process calls for a focus on the data, leading to a familiarity that supports interpretation and understanding (Bailey, 2008). I transcribed the interviews using a guide adapted from Tilley and Powick (2002).

Following transcription, I moved to coding—first deductive, then inductive. The deductive or top-down coding used words that were defined and predetermined before the data collection began. In the first stage of coding, I read through the

transcriptions line-by-line, making notes in the margins of the transcription volumes, using the deductive codes provided in appendix J. These codes were drawn from the concepts of the "literacy social practice building blocks" (Hamilton, 2010, p. 12), and several "aspects of literacy practices" (Satchwell et al., 2013, p. 47). This approach leaned on existing theoretical constructs to derive meaning. For example, one code word was "literacy event." A literacy event is an occasion in which a written text is involved in a social interaction. An event is the "moment of composing a literacy text" (Pahl & Rowsell, 2005, p. 9), such as working with another to co-write an essay. (See appendix J for a list of all the deductive code words and their definitions).

In the second stage, the coding of the interview transcripts and documents used inductive coding, or a bottom-up approach. This stage supported an openness to ideas, interpretations, and the opportunity to identify emerging, rather than pre-determined themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The transcripts were read again, line-by-line, to seek out themes and ideas in the words, phrases, and sentences. This cyclical, iterative process both coded the data and refined the set of code words. I created a table to list and detail the components and themes extracted from the notes made on the transcription volumes in both coding stages. I created the table by listing predetermined codes to the left; I added the coded data on the right. Additional codes and components were added and refined through the process.

The next stage involved the creation of the Literacies Landscape Map. This stage allowed for the simultaneous analysis of all the data sets (survey, interviews, documents). This was an iterative process, using the data in the table to populate a hand-drawn map. Paper and pencil allowed for the plotting and analysis of concepts and relationships. The final version of the hand-drawn map was then moved to a digital format, where it was refined and expanded upon again (see appendix A for

Literacies Landscape Map). The mapping process was iterative, with constant movement between the coded interview transcripts, table, and map. Akin to axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), the concept mapping activity supported the uncovering of interconnections and relationships between and among notions and ideas. This came about through the use of relational lines and arrows, concept bubbles or circles (Novak & Cañas, 2006), and several Venn diagrams to reflect the relationships between and among different literacy components.

Ethical Considerations

This research project was self-funded. Without institutional or external funding, this research project's objectives and its subsequent findings did not need to navigate any potential or perceived bias concerns as highlighted by Mandal et al. (2012). The thesis ethical protocol was formally approved by the Keele University Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (REC) on March 3, 2020 (see appendix H for ethical approval letter). This study was designed and approved with high ethical standards, as described in the following sections that discuss how informed consent was reached, what the potential issues were of anonymity and confidentiality, and how risk was minimized.

Informed Consent

Each participant was provided with a project information sheet (see appendix E) to achieve informed consent. All participants were asked to read the information sheet prior to agreeing to participate in the interview and were provided with an opportunity to ask questions before and during the interview. The interviews began after consent was discussed and obtained through the completion of a consent form (see appendix F). Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason; however, none of the participants

withdrew. At the end of the interview, all participants were asked if they would be willing to participate in a follow-up session, such as another interview or survey. All participants agreed to being contacted again as part of the next stage of data collection.

All participants were offered a financial incentive and gratuity in the form of $25.00 CDN, which was provided immediately following the interview and survey completion. Most of the teaching staff declined the payment. For the ghostwriters, the method of payment was PayPal. For the students and teaching staff, the payment method used was Interac e-transfer (a Canadian funds transfer service, completed via email). A financial incentive was included to encourage participation rates. During the pilot interview phase, several ghostwriters declined the invitation because there was no financial compensation. As such, this was remedied, and approved as part of the ethics review process.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

Due to the nature of contract cheating, the study carefully maintained the confidence and anonymity of all participants and, as well, prospective participants who chose not to participate. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. Given the nature of their work, it was important to protect the participant's identity. To maintain the confidentiality of participants and their data, each interview audio file was immediately coded with a pseudonym and number and deleted following transcription. Only pseudonyms are included on the interview transcripts, notes, and collected documents. Any documents with potentially identifying information (e.g., ghostwriting advertisement with email address) was redacted or anonymized before storage. The interview recordings, collected documents, and transcripts were stored on a password-protected computer with multi-

factor authentication.

Minimizing Risk

While the study did not anticipate that the interview process would cause any distress to participants, each participant was reminded both at the interview and in the participant information form that they could choose to not answer questions should they feel uncomfortable or if they thought that the information being divulged was sensitive. It was anticipated that the students would be particularly concerned that they were placing themselves at risk of breach of academic integrity policies. As such, the students were reminded that participation was strictly confidential and that the interviews would not place students at risk for academic misconduct policy breach, should they reveal to have participated in any form of cheating.

Positionality

Over the course of my career in education, I have worked, for a time, as an academic integrity practitioner within the Canadian higher education sector. This work entailed having administrative oversight of the investigation of student academic misconduct cases. My professional work has often been constructed as "quasi-legal." In addition to my work in academic integrity, I have worked for many years supporting appeals, and investigations, both as an Ombuds,[7] and as an investigator for non-academic student conduct. Prolonged exposure to these cases shaped my views about student conduct intentionality. Intention of dishonesty is an often-cited determinant for academic institutions with respect to sanctioning of cases. I have also engaged in the development and implementation of initiatives to reduce contract cheating (see Thacker et al., 2020). I have, furthermore, contributed to the revision of

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[7] In Canada, a higher education Ombuds, or Ombudsperson, is an impartial investigator of complaints from members of the academic community regarding unfair treatment (ACCUO, n.d.).

academic integrity policy, and have completed research projects regarding academic integrity policies (Miron et al., 2021; Stoesz et al., 2019). Through these experiences, I may have developed beliefs about ghostwriter, faculty, and student perspectives, activities, and identities. Engaging in qualitative research requires that I acknowledge my positionality (Bourke, 2014), and reflect upon my own history, bias, assumptions, and views. Constant reflection is, thus, important to ensure the quality and validity of my work, and my ethical engagement with my research participants. Furthermore, a Bourdieusian framework is grounded in an approach that rejects the notion of "objective knowledge" (Bourdieu, 1980/1990). It is important to reflect and acknowledge the social structures that have formed and guided my own habitus, reinforcing the very structures from which they arose, and which this study will explore and discuss.

While this study is grounded with a multiple case studies orientation, my positionality brings ethnographic insights to the project, through years of working in higher education, as both an academic integrity practitioner and Ombuds. Although it is not a method of formal data collection, observing the processes of academia over several years has informed my research, as I am already aware of the object of study through the lived experience of working to support students, administrative staff, and teaching staff in relation to academic (mis)conduct.

While I engage in a study of literacies, I must, therefore, also acknowledge that my own literacies practices are embodied in the acquisition of my habitus, network of positions, or fields, and my "social location" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1297). My identity and position are distinct. I am a white woman, raised in and living in a developed, democratic country. I was afforded an exemplary foundational education, and earned both a bachelor's and master's degree, as well as several college

credentials in various programs (including Montessori teaching, publishing, and curriculum and instructional design). This prior education and my research experiences (see Thacker, 1998), in addition to my professional years in the education sector, have shaped my academic lens and views. I view the world as constructed by our lived experience and the socio-cultural events and traditions shaping it around us. My time as an educator has further inculcated (Abasi et al., 2006) my views of academia, and fixed my social constructivist (Vygotsky, 1978) lens. My own exposure to issues of inequity and privilege, through my education and experience as a female administrator in academia, has further refined my critical gaze regarding the imbalances of power and attainment across the higher education system. It is this position that shapes my research questions, study design, and data analysis. The knowledge conceived from the interviews is socially constructed and is understood to be bound historical and contextually (Kvale, 2008). As such, reflection upon context and positionality was critical while interpreting and analyzing the data.

Limitations of the Study

As with all research, this study has limitations. I have identified several. The first is the sample size. The Canadian postsecondary sector is diverse, large, and geographically dispersed. As such, the sample size is not representative of all ghostwriters, students, and teaching staff in Canada. Given that the ghostwriter sample was a subset of ghostwriters (i.e., independent and freelance), this excluded other types of ghostwriters, in particular those who work at essay mills. As such, the sample is not reflective of all ghostwriters, and the interpretations are not representative of the scope of contract cheating. Related to the sample, snowball, or chain sampling (Creswell, 2007) is also a limitation of the study. The student and faculty participants were recruited by snowball sampling, and as such, the sample

does not guarantee an accurate representation of the participant groups. For example, participants may have nominated others they know well, and who are similar to themselves with similar views on academic integrity and contract cheating. Although smaller and snowballed samples reduce our ability to generalize, given the qualitative, multiple case studies orientation which included multiple methods, the sample size has adequately served the purpose to generate rich findings and offer an exploratory insight into the under-researched experiences of ghostwriting.

The next limitation is the lack of face-to-face access to the participants, due to the COVID-19 pandemic There is debate regarding the quality of telephone and online interviews versus in-person dialogue (Irvine et al., 2013). Although direct observation of non-verbal communication of study participants during the interviews was restricted in most interviews (several opted to be interviewed with the video recording on), the study interview sessions yielded rich data, allowing for significant insight into the various complex processes of contract cheating that is reflected in the findings and discussion chapters.

Another limitation can be found within the recruitment methods for the ghostwriters. Ghostwriters were contacted through their own advertisements, and this will have excluded those independent ghostwriters not interested in coming out of the shadows. In addition, the recruitment method may have drawn a sample of ghostwriters whose disposition to discuss their work may have also impacted the nature of their interactions and exchanges with their student clients.

In addition, a researcher cannot always rely on the honesty of participant responses. Participants may have a self-interest to limit the information they offer, or to be dishonest. Given the nature of the study, exploring academic dishonesty, this was a study limitation. Several attempts were made to counter this, including ensuring

confidentiality, establishing rapport through informed consent and interview demeanor, and following up with a survey for additional data.

Despite these limitations, this qualitative study provides a critical understanding of ghostwriter's experiences, and identifies insightful key themes related to identity and perceptions of contract cheating. Future studies, should they so wish, can engage with the student clients and their ghostwriters in person.

Conclusion

This chapter has described the methodology of the study, which lays out its qualitative, multiple case studies design. The methods included semi-structured interviews, document collection, and a follow up survey. In addition, the chapter has described the concept mapping technique used to create a Literacies Landscape Map. Finally, I have discussed the quality of my study in terms of ethical considerations, positionality, and limitations. The following chapters—chapters 5 through 6—present the study findings and analysis.

Chapter 5–Collaboration and Brokering

The previous chapter presented the methodology for the study, which supports a qualitative inquiry into contract cheating. Chapter 5 is the first of two chapters that present the data and findings of the study. This chapter explores the study's findings around collaboration and literacy brokering found within the practices of contract cheating, and responds directly to my first research question: What kind of literacy brokering exists between ghostwriters and their clients in Canadian higher education institutions?

This chapter is divided into two main sections. The first section characterizes and examines findings with respect to unsanctioned academic collaboration. The second section then shares the findings regarding literacy brokering and introduces the new term "assessment brokering," which is explored as an academic literacies practice. The term assessment brokering has its genesis within this study and is one of the most salient findings of the project (Thacker, 2022).

Collaboration

A key theme emerging from the data centred around "collaboration," where ghostwriters and students worked together for the common purpose of creating an academic text, and where this practice was not advertised. Notably, and reflecting the definitions discussed in chapter 1, the efforts of the two parties were often not equal and captured the blurred lines of collaboration and collusion (Barrett & Cox, 2005; Sutton & Taylor, 2011). Academic collaboration, as described in the participants' interviews, can occur between students on different courses, and with a non-student, specifically a ghostwriter. Student peers and friends also played a role in contract cheating, even when no money was exchanged (Lancaster & Clarke, 2016).

Morgan, a fourth-year undergraduate student in the humanities, collaborated

with her best friend to complete an essay assignment. Morgan's vivid description provides an example of contract cheating as collusion, and sketches out how friends and peers can easily slip into the role of ghostwriter. Morgan recalled:

> My best friend and roommate very heavily helped me write an essay. She held the computer in front of her and she was typing. So, it was about the *Titanic*... she knew so much about it because she's from [location redacted] and they have the museum there…I didn't pay her. And she was just helping me with some of the sentences, and then I was like, would you like my computer? And then she said, yes, and we were sitting there working on it together, but she actually had it in front of her and not me, like in front of me. I feel like it was an online class. It was probably due that night because that's how I did a lot of my assignments, at night, the night they were due. But it was because I was struggling to write it. There was just something I was struggling with, it was either, it was one of those assignments where it wasn't free range, it was a question to answer. I don't think there was a lot of choice…I was struggling to write the argument, and she was sitting there doing something else, and then she was giving me suggestions and it just got the ball rolling for her helping me write the essay, but mostly writing it because she had the computer in front of her. (Morgan)

This narrative illuminates many of the struggles students face in academic writing, and the temptation of collaborating with a friend. Interestingly, this extract gives an

insight into experiencing the academic field as a humanities student (Bourdieu, 1979/1984), where Morgan was working toward a deadline, struggling to get started, and did not feel a strong connection to the topic. While Morgan was aware that the actions were considered misconduct, she used the term "help" several times in her story, which reveals the social context of the behaviour, and reflects the social capital Morgan drew upon through a trusted friend. Her best friend was able to tap into her local knowledge of the essay topic, and also the situated and academic literacies needed to complete the assignment and support its submission before the deadline. In other words, Morgan gained access to a peer's cultural and human capital, aligned to the specific field of study (Bourdieu, 1983/1986). Morgan and her best friend, thus, exchanged symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1983/1986) that led to increased academic performance. Morgan leveraged and accessed the social capital of her friendship, which included her friend's embodied skills in academic writing, in exchange for the essay. The essay functions here as objectified capital, and it will eventually entitle Morgan to gain institutional capital in the form of her academic grades and credential, upon graduation. In this instance, these various forms of capital were converted between parties, without financial economic exchange.

While this type of collaboration was not commonly reported among the student participants, this study heard from the ghostwriter's examples of students seeking to academically collaborate with their ghostwriters. In these instances, financial economic exchange did occur within these collaborative ghostwriting relationships. The ghostwriters who were interviewed had differing views regarding collaboration with their clients. The five ghostwriters situated in Canada, and one based in Britain, provided more examples of collaboration and were more agreeable to it, than those from abroad (i.e., India and Kenya).

Xander, a British ghostwriter who often wrote for Canadian students, did not see the request for collaboration as positive to his own writing process. Xander explained:

> People do ask for that specifically. I generally don't like to do it, because I find it quite difficult, you know. Some people want to do it like live on a Google document and it kind of interrupts my research process and writing process. But, yes, sometimes I do that. (Xander)

With the omnipresent use of ICT to facilitate contract cheating, student and ghostwriter's use of Google Docs came as no surprise. In this context, Google Docs provided an online field to facilitate a symbiotic literacy event affording the student and ghostwriter a mutually beneficial literacy experience. Xander (ghostwriter) shared his thoughts on why some of his student clients ask him to collaborate on an academic text. He commented:

> Some of them would, I imagine, want to do it because they want to make it in their own style. And then, other people feel guilty about having used an essay writing service. So, they want to kind of create the feeling that they're doing it legitimately and they're just getting help rather than cheating, quote unquote. (Xander)

Yet, the range of collaborative literacy practices found in the data suggests there are additional motivations than those provided by Xander.

Collaboration existed at several points in the process: prior to writing, during

the writing process, through feedback and discussion after the initial draft, and following submission. While Xander (ghostwriter) viewed collaboration as more of an irritant, it was also considered a “necessary evil” to keep his customer happy. For other ghostwriters, it was something to navigate as part of the freelance ghostwriting service, especially where prior social relationships existed. Most of the ghostwriters started their business through student friends, then proceeded to expand the business. Sawyer (ghostwriter) was in her first year of ghostwriting, and so she wrote for both friends and other clients she did not know but gained through web advertisements. She was still an undergraduate student herself, at a Canadian institution, and explained:

> More often than not, especially if I’m working with my friends, I tend to leave more space for their input. So oftentimes I send things back and forth. With a friend we usually work on Google Docs, so they’ll see me on and editing whatnot. They can add comments and be like, oh, can you also look at this, look at this, look at this. (Sawyer)

As described by the ghostwriters, some students are seeking to be included in the writing process. Camille (ghostwriter) had been freelance ghostwriting for four years, with expertise in legal and business coursework. Her clients were mostly students from institutions in Western Canada. She expanded upon two different types of student clients, and highlighted how some collaborative practices work for her, and how some students are seeking to contribute:

> There’s those who just have an assignment and they don’t care to do it.

> They'll pay you any amount of money and they just need you to finish...And then there's other people who genuinely, who need help in the work that they're producing. So, they'll be the ones to write most of a business model, for example, and they'll send it over and say, I need you to add certain portions to it or I need you to reference with this business sample I had written before on a different topic, etc. So, we work together a little bit more in that context because it's not purely just having me do some work that they're going to submit and not even read through. And so, there's a lot more cooperation in that context, and I definitely have moments where we'll have five, six, seven, eight emails back and forth with redlining or blacklining or different markups. (Camille)

The client–ghostwriter relationship provided in this context allowed for the student to collaborate as little or as much as they may choose. Should the ghostwriter be willing to collaborate, they provide a local, digital, flexible space, configured without the typical collaborative learning patterns of the academic institution. These collaborative literacy events make visible the genuine struggles that students have in assessment practices. They reveal how student choices are shaped by contested literacy practices (e.g., assessment), as well as by the academic skills and enthusiasm held, or not, by the student.

Working collaboratively on writing assignments may also provide learning opportunities however this was perceived as uncommon. Sawyer (ghostwriter), who was new to the industry and had only recently set up her ghostwriting business, commented on the quality of her clients' writing, and the learning opportunities that

may be lost or found. While Sawyer referred to her style as "editing and revising," she described changes to the academic document that are well beyond copy-editing, and instead fall under the terms of misconduct and ghostwriting.

> I often edit and revise assignments that are partially or entirely completed by the student. In these cases, the student gets all their ideas on the page in the best way they can and then I proceed to edit and revise the work to university level content. The issue here is it's difficult for me not to scrape everything they have already written…I essentially re-word a lot of the work and they are shocked when I return it because it appears entirely different from what they handed in. Students that seek these external assignment services get away with giving the bare minimum and their writing skills fail to improve over time because of lack of practice. With very few clients…I actually see an improvement…More often than not, students don't improve when they're handing off their work to someone else. (Sawyer)

Sawyer's (ghostwriter) willingness to collaborate and work from partially written assignments, gave her clients an opportunity to watch the paper develop in its writing quality. Sawyer perceived her involvement in this way as revealing what she described as her client's literacy "deficiencies," although she noted that some do improve their skills over time. Sawyer did not anticipate a certain level of competence or embodied capital in her clients, and she can, as part of the ghostwriter contract, convert her objectified capital for economic gain.

Although students have access to various academic supports on campus, such

as the student writing centre, they do not always take advantage of these services. Drawing upon the work of Bourdieu (1972/1977), this could be conceptualized as access to institutional resources reflecting a student's social and cultural capital, where students must have skills, experience, confidence, and behaviours (habitus) aligned to help-seeking in academia (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Should a student not perceive they possess this social membership, despite actual registration and enrolment at the institution, the benefits of social capital associated with being a student are unequal among student populations. In the absence of formal and available faculty office hours or sanctioned informal spaces (e.g., online discussion board) where students can ask questions about assignments, students may seek out and create their own spaces for support and collaboration.

Students often set up Facebook groups, or use other social media platforms for courses, a fact noted by both students and the ghostwriters (e.g., Terry, a ghostwriter, mentioned WhatsApp (WhatsApp, 2021)). In alignment with previous studies, some of the ghostwriters interviewed did attempt to join student social media groups such as Facebook to seek opportunities for work (Lancaster, 2019). Mackenzie (student), a college student in a communications diploma program, shared that she had joined a Facebook group for one of her courses. She discussed her academic integrity concerns with these online social spaces, saying:

> In Facebook groups for schools, people don't think, or know how serious it is I don't think, so they will be like "this is my rate for essays" and I'm like you probably shouldn't put this in a public Facebook group but okay. And because I'm in a reading program some of my friends are like "oh go over my essay you know just make all the

> edits you want" and I'm like I can't actually edit your paper for you like, I can tell you what I think, but I can't really write anything. So, I think that just goes to show that maybe they didn't learn anything about academic integrity. (Mackenzie)

In summary, collaboration was evident in several of the described student–ghostwriter interactions. These informal exchanges, outside of formal academic fields, may provide both student and ghostwriter with some benefit. For the ghostwriter, the advantage is to maintain the relationship with the client, and for the student, there is an opportunity to engage with and possibly learn from the assignment, gaining those markers of embodied capital, the writing skills, for themselves. Literacies are "frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making" (Barton et al., 2000, p. 8), and this was demonstrated in the unplanned collaboration. There were also occasions where the interactions and exchanges extended beyond collaboration, to what can be characterized as "brokering." In this context, the findings reflect "that writing practices construct rather than simply reflect knowledge" (Paxton & Frith, 2014, p. 174).

Literacy and Assessment Brokering

This section discusses the findings regarding literacy brokering and assessment brokering and explains the features of the two most frequent types of assessment brokering literacy activities found within the data. The first type of assessment brokering is related to assignment criteria—seeking informal help regarding the assignment requirements and/or assignment content. The second type of assessment brokering is related to authorship—seeking informal help regarding citation, referencing, and/or in understanding authorship or knowledge sources.

Literacy brokering occurs at all levels of schooling and, in this context, is defined as when a student seeks informal help (from peers or non-peers) with the texts and literacy practices they encounter within education (Perry, 2009). This arises when students are unfamiliar with an academic text, such as an assignment sheet, or they lack the confidence in understanding or interpreting it. This might include a student asking a fellow student to interpret an exam question to ensure a similar meaning is shared, or it may involve a student emailing a friend to inquire about a professor's grading style.

Students at all levels of education seek out academic guidance, direction, and feedback through formal channels, which would typically involve connecting with a teaching staff member, teaching assistant, librarian, or staff at the writing centre. The teaching staff involved in this study were aware of both formal and informal practices their students used in order to gain clarity on assignment requirements and expectations. Brian (teaching staff), a university faculty member of 12 years, encouraged these informal practices. He created an online space for his students, for the purpose of informal discussion about assignments between them. He shared his belief that if he did not create such a space, the students would create it anyway where he may not be able to contribute. When asked about students talking to each other about assignments, Brian (teaching staff) explained his views:

> For most of the assignments I would encourage it actually…I use either Slack or Discord…a messaging client to support my online class…a specific channel to talk about assignments. So especially in larger classes…because I know that I don't have the time to dedicate to each student the same amount of attention…So, I do rely in those

> larger classes, of like one hundred or more…on a lot of peer learning...So, I will create the room for them to talk about the assignments and encourage them to talk about it, because it is also in them talking to each other and exchanging ideas about what the requirements and expectations are that they understand. There are things that come up there that they don't know to ask me too so, actually I find it really helpful to have them have those conversations as much as possible out in the open. (Brian)

Digital fields and group-chat platforms such as WhatsApp were a common theme for student communication regarding assignments. Jordan (student), who was completing her undergraduate degree as a mature student, explained that discussing assignments and using chat apps were both good options when sorting out her own assignment's topics and questions. She stated:

> We might … discuss, especially when the questions are so confusing, or there are many options to choose from. I remember I took two summer courses this summer, and in one of them we were in a WhatsApp group chat. So, he gave us eight topics to choose from. So, some people were, you know, who is doing this topic? Who's doing this? And these are the things I think I might cover. And then we just shared ideas like that. (Jordan)

In addition to these informal sanctioned places and spaces to discuss assignments, the interviews and survey data provided evidence that some student

clients were seeking informal help with unfamiliar literacy texts and practices from their ghostwriters. Examples of this practice are provided later in this chapter (see section titled "Assessment Brokering Themes"). This unsanctioned student behaviour associated with contract cheating falls under the umbrella of academic misconduct; however, they are also examples of the assessment as a site of learning and empowerment. From this lens, there is something to be learned about literacies and practices of contract cheating. Seeking informal help is triggered by a literacy event, to which the following section turns.

Brokering Triggers

Within the data, brokering experiences and relationships appear to be triggered by a "literacy event" such as a student encountering an assignment sheet, but not being sure of the expectations. The ghostwriter interviews demonstrated time and again, that one of the first things a ghostwriter will do in their interaction with a student is to gather the assignment expectations. Sam (ghostwriter) explains:

> I want to have an understanding of the expectations that the instructor has, so I try to get all the information I can from them, the level, what field the course is in, because you want to pick the vocabulary that is appropriate for the discipline. (Sam)

Students are themselves not always clear on assignment expectations, as Mackenzie (student) explained:

> Oftentimes I'll like just ask classmates first and if it's not clear and like everybody's on the same page then I'll reach out to the prof to get

> some clarification or just ask them publicly in class, so that they can go over it, so that everybody understands it a bit better. I definitely think it's unclear especially when they don't go over it at all, and they just hand you the sheet sometimes it's hard to interpret what things actually mean and what the expectation is or like what does this project actually look like. Yeah, and like people are scared to ask process, especially in a class setting…if it's a big class— nobody wants to be that person. (Mackenzie)

Brokering triggers are literacy events where students are motivated to "make sense of their new literacy context and literacy practices" (Raslie & Keong, 2017, p. 2) by leveraging their social capital, via the social relationships around them. An insight into academic 'fields' of study is that students may seek a brokering event or relationships because they have encountered a barrier which could be cultural, linguistic, or knowledge/skills based. Assessments embody institutional authority. Essays and exams have long been understood as sites of struggle, in part due to the unspoken demands of literacy requirements baked into the assessment itself, including assessments that require skills like academic research, writing, and referencing (Bourdieu, 1979/1984).

Many participants noted that it was common for assessment questions and criteria to be confusing. Rita (teaching staff) commented that some of her students "have a hard time translating the written directions into what this actually looks like as an assignment…the students sometimes get confused when I'm [Rita] not very clear." Sawyer (ghostwriter) argued that beyond the assignment topic, the genre of essay writing may also be problematic. She commented:

> Maybe they're [teaching staff], not doing something wrong, but there could be a change within them as well. Either in how they distribute the work or what kind of assignment style there is. And maybe take a step back and re-evaluate the value of an essay…because maybe the reason why so many students are struggling is because either they're not learning the fundamental parts of an essay or the foundation of it. So, each time they're assigned an essay or something of that sort, they have to keep seeking help. But I think we need to instill in students the skills to write an essay from a very young age, because it's going to haunt them forever if they don't know. (Sawyer)

Sawyer's comment reflects a common belief of the ghostwriters that students struggle with the essay form and that its value as an assessment form requires reconsideration. Sawyer also points to how dependence upon contract cheating services can develop when students are not contributing to their own writer identity. One ghostwriter (Sang), who had been in the business for over a decade, saw the essay as "pressure" and a "useless" form of assessment for the students. Students and ghostwriters alike commented on the struggle to understand assignment requirements. Jack (ghostwriter), who had been ghostwriting for seven years, noted that it was helpful for him when the students sent him rubrics and any detailed instructions, noting that understanding the assignment requirements could be "a bit convoluted or treacherous." Lucas, a teaching staff member and graduate student shared that he and his fellow students created a Facebook group to support a course, so that they could "decode what the hell was going on." The students all pointed to assessments as being

a locus of confusion or frustration at times, typically leading them to ask questions of others.

Finley (student), who was completing a professional master's degree, admitted that she "bugs the professor until they are annoyed with me" to get the answers she needs to complete an assignment. Not all students, however, have the confidence for this approach. Some students perceived that there was a drawback to asking the teaching staff directly for explanation or help. Alex, a mature student completing an undergraduate degree, explained that he would first try and sort it out himself, and then if he could not:

> I would reach out to a non-authoritarian person because I don't want to look stupid by overlooking something obvious, and that's a terrible way to start someone's assessment of your work on a project regardless of if it's included in the mark or not, but you don't want them [the professor] to start looking like, this person doesn't get the question, right? (Alex)

Alex's comment shines a light on the power imbalance between student and professor. Like all students, Alex is still forming his own academic habitus (Bourdieu, 1984/1988) and identity in the institution and does not want to reveal the level to which this capital has been embodied (Bourdieu, 1983/1986). He is aware of his professor's level of institutional capital, attempting to both navigate the assignment but also the social relationships on campus.

Elli (student) commented that when she was unsure, she would email the professor and "check with other students that have taken the course before me just to

gain their insight and perspective about what is required." Morgan (student) also suggested that students could sometimes lack the confidence to approach their professor and ask questions about an assignment, leaving avenues that are more informal or unauthorized as the only other option. She explained that with assignments "a lot of people have anxiety, and they can find it very difficult to ask for help." Sandy (teaching staff) similarly noted that students experienced varying comfort levels, levels of interest, and abilities with respect to reaching out for assignment clarification. She explained that, with students, "some aren't comfortable enough or interested enough to approach an individual professor and ask them for help. 'Cuz that takes time, right? And some students are really good at advocating for themselves, and some are not." Navigating assignments in a formal environment may, it can be concluded, prove to be too much for some students.

Mackenzie (student) described her experience with proctored exams during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, which revealed she was uncomfortable with the online proctoring tool, and was unsure how to navigate it. Her comments also suggested a desire for an institutional approach to certain assessment tools, and a desire to have clarity of expectations. She said:

> I think there should be a clear rule or policy on it instead of it's just up to the professor because I had some profs last year that were really strict and used Proctorio.[8] They would film you and it's like kind of creepy it also tracks your eye movement, so you're like scared that even if you're not cheating, they're gonna think you're cheating…I

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[8] Proctorio is a remote proctoring software that uses artificial intelligence and personal webcams to invigilate assessments, such as final exams. https://proctorio.com/

> think it would be beneficial to have like just a clear consensus on like what the plan is and it's all going to be Proctorio or if it's all going to be open book. (Mackenzie)

The confidence to navigate the assessment with a professor or teaching assistant, and the ability to self-advocate, may be considered elements of a student's developing (academic) habitus and social capital (Bourdieu, 1980/1990). Pedagogical situations, personal history, and experiences, as well as perceptions of their own limitations may influence or trigger a student's choice to seek out a broker. For example, Sawyer (ghostwriter) commented about campus writing centres: "I think students are almost embarrassed to seek out those services too much, because they're like, oh, I should know this already or whatever." Sawyer's comment speaks to the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1983/1986) of some students, or, rather, their *lack* of cultural capital. Some students will have an ability to navigate the campus or educational fields to their advantage. Others may be aware of campus resources, but for other reasons, may not visit them. When asked about attending the university campus writing centre, Blake (student) responded:

> I haven't. I've been encouraged to, just by other peers saying oh you should take advantage of that. And because I've procrastinated, I usually don't get to it, or I usually don't have enough to show them, but it is probably something that would be helpful, and I know that it is available at my institution. (Blake)

Blake's comment speaks to a commonly noted issue of time management, not

often viewed as cultural or embodied capital (Bourdieu, 1983/1986), yet certainly capital that ghostwriters leveraged for their business. In addition, the ghostwriters, especially those who were themselves educated in Canada, had a rich understanding of assessment requirements typical to Canadian institutions, often showing themselves in possession of expertise, or as embodying cultural capital. This embodied capital takes time to accrue. The ghostwriters acknowledged several brokering practices in which they engaged.

Ghostwriter as Literacy Broker

The ghostwriters explained that a small minority of students were interested in the academic aspects of their assignments and wanted to learn. Some engaged with their ghostwriter informally to bridge the assessment literacies gap. Each ghostwriter expressed some tension between themselves and the student client, in terms of needing to negotiate the relationship, the work, and the academic literacies. While the requests for assignment explanations from their student clients constrained the ghostwriter, the requests enabled the student's understanding and academic literacies development. Requests for further information or to work collaboratively on an assignment were often viewed as an irritation, yet on some level, necessary to maintain the relationship, and to support repeat business. The social element of these spaces offered an opportunity for the student to extend their assessment literacy, and for the ghostwriter to create a space. This space reflects the value of learning, despite the context of their relationship—to negotiate the contested assessment.

Ghostwriters had a rich understanding of assessment types/genres, styles, grading practices, rubrics, and learning outcomes, holding expertise as a broker. They also had disciplinary knowledge and knowledge of the Canadian education system. This was partly demonstrated through their use of Canadian content in their

advertisements. For example, one ghostwriter promoted his years of experience in Canadian education and provided sample essays on the website to demonstrate his expertise with Canadian essay topics. This broadly aligns with Lancaster (2018) who found that some “providers promote themselves based on their specialism in writing” (p. 8). Ghostwriters also demonstrated their knowledge of assessment by knowing what to ask the student for, as evidenced by Xander, who explained:

> I generally ask them if they can send me everything they possibly can about the particular essay. So, reading lists, essay-marking schemes, writing standards, things like that. What referencing system they’re using. And then I sometimes chat to them one on one and try and work out what they’re looking for exactly. And then I just take it from there, basically. I generally don’t ask what grade they want. Because I find it’s treacherous. (Xander)

The ghostwriters further gained assessment literacies as their business, capital, and client base grew. Camille (ghostwriter) outlined:

> In the beginning, I just sat down and would write out whatever I thought. But it’s very evident that people have very different voices and so what I do now is I usually ask them to send a sample of anything they have written, if they have something written. It doesn’t have to be their topic, that topic, just anything I can know what words they use and how they write. If they don’t have that then I’ll just generally have to lower the level of writing actively when I’m writing

it. (Camille)

Camille sought out her own previously written academic work to better clarify for herself how to write at the appropriate education level and style for her client. She shared:

> If it's a lower level like in high school, sometimes I'll reference back to works that I've done for other high school students and the general grades that they received, or I'll reference work for myself that I wrote in that timeframe when I was in high school. Alternatively, if they're higher-level requests or they are professional requests, like legal writing or any other kind of business writing, more probable than not, I have different databases that I'll go into and kind of cross-reference legal writing or other business writing formats that I've seen with ones that I've already written. And there's a lot of back and forth, sometimes, with certain clients who need higher-level writing or have different expectations where I'll send a sample of, I don't know, a paragraph or whatever, the beginning portions of the piece, and then they'll give me feedback on whether or not that follows the directions the actual piece is supposed to take. And then from there on, I get a better sense of the level of writing and the style. (Camille)

This quote highlights how Camille leveraged her understanding of situated literacies in relation to the assignment, and how the freelance ghostwriter draws on a breadth of assessment and writing knowledge to be poised as broker. Camille had an awareness

of how her own academic habitus and embodied capital (Bourdieu, 1983/1986; 1984/1988) had grown over her writing experiences and work, and so was able to look back, reflect, and use this trajectory to add value to her ghostwriting work.

In this section, I have explained that many of the ghostwriter participants, were positioned to act as literacy brokers, albeit infrequently, expertly navigating assessment requirements and academic literacies. The section that follows moves on to consider a form of literacy brokering, namely "assessment brokering" which includes two types, which were found through coding for literacy events.

Assessment Brokering Themes

Assessment brokering is an informal learning practice, used to "bridge gaps in the students' knowledge and understanding" (S. Lee, 2017, p. 1) of academic assessment literacy practices. This brokering practice increases a student's cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1983/1986), supporting their abilities to gain access to knowledge and resources, or else to further embodied capital aligned to fields of academic study. Students sought out their ghostwriters to interpret or explain various aspects of their assignments, seeking a transfer of resources, or capital, across fields. The ghostwriters commented that occasionally students even perceived they had improved their writing skills after working with a ghostwriter—although it was explained this was not common. Xander (ghostwriter) commented:

> I have occasionally had students let me know they no longer need my services since working with me due to a perceived improvement in their own writing ability. Most of the time, though, students remain at roughly the same level of writing skill. (Xander)

The analysis identified two different themes or types of assessment brokering instances. These instances were reported by the ghostwriters through the interview. Students informally sought knowledge and meaning making related to:

1. Assignment Criteria: Understanding requirements, content; and
2. Authorship: Understanding sources, citation, and referencing.

Theme 1: Assignment Criteria: Understanding requirements, content.

Course and assessment design are academic literacies practices, as are the practices associated with completing the requirements of a course as a student. As such, assessment practices are historied, not neutral, and reflect patterns of social interaction. As highlighted in chapter two, assessment design and its iterative redesign is viewed as an element of good pedagogy, and it is recommended as one element of strategy to support academic integrity. Perry (2009) notes that "[w]hile accessing the meaning of a text was a sometimes-necessary part of brokering, it was not sufficient. Understanding a text's meaning was part of understanding a larger practice" (p. 270). Xander (ghostwriter) pointed out that assignment design might be influencing students' decisions to seek out a ghostwriter. He explained:

> What I see all the time is people come to me and they send me an assignment. And the assignment that's set by the teacher makes so little sense, that even I can't work out what it's about. About, maybe 60 percent of the assignments are just badly written. So, I think that's a major reason that people do turn to essay writing services. It's because they've looked at it and it's just confusing to them and maybe they've

> gone to the teacher and that's confused them more, so they've come to a stop and have no, well, they feel like they have no other choice but to outsource it. I've had assignments where professors have had five, ten pages of explanation of what you've got to do, which is just far too much. Contradictory points within the aims and objectives and stuff. (Xander)

Alex (student) pointed out that the instructor was in a position of privilege, in designing the assignment. He noted that "the instructor was asking the question from a position of knowing the answers already," thereby implying an imbalance of knowledge and power. He said, "they are not considering whether or not the question itself is a road-block to getting the answers…you need to be considerate of how the question can be read in multiple ways." This comment reflects a common concern of students, that they may not be interpreting the assignment requirement correctly. Rita (teaching staff) was aware of student frustration at times due to unclear assessment expectations and noted, "[w]hen it's an assignment that I've used many times in a class, and I become more clear on what I want, I think it helps." She also suggested that "assigning the types of projects and writing that students want to do" was important. She further commented that if her students were curious about the topic, she could "get students actually interested in doing the research and writing about it." Some student clients sought to understand their assignment requirements or the content of the assignment by engaging with the ghostwriter.

Sam (ghostwriter) had completed his own degree in Canada over a decade ago and was, therefore, knowledgeable and familiar with the academic systems. To apply a Bourdieusian framework, Sam's capital and habitus were aligned with academic

fields (Bourdieu, 1983/1986). He confirmed that some of his student clients may not have the adequate understanding of the assignment itself and will contact him about it. They will "call to talk about the paper they just submitted, and they want to understand or get clarification." Xander (ghostwriter) agreed that it was a common issue that students did not understand the assignment instructions they were asked to complete. He commented:

> I find that students often choose to use my services on the basis of complicated instructions from professors. For instance, often instruction pages can be 2-3 pages long, overly instructive, step-by-step, and utilizing complicated terminology and theories. Students feel overwhelmed by this and instead choose to hire a writer. Also, professors often write their questions as if they're wanting you to support a specific argument, rather than leaving it open to interpretation…which I believe may turn some students off from doing the assignment themselves. (Xander)

All the ghostwriters interviewed had experienced their clients asking for explanation about the outsourced assignment. Xander (ghostwriter) shared that:

> Just today one client asked me to help clarify what the professor's instructions on writing an introduction meant. They said they were struggling in meeting the assignment criteria as they did not understand the purposes of summarizing in the introduction. I believe they had taken to heart the professor's instructions to never summarize, and thus

> did not understand the use of it in an introduction. In this instance, they commissioned me to write the introduction despite my offering advice. (Xander)

Sang (ghostwriter) commented that, "some students, they want you to go over it with them so they either want to meet you or they want to speak with you on the phone or through emails." Often, the media describes students who outsource as having little interest in learning, and some scholars assume that students who outsource fundamentally reject the academic behaviours expected of them (Steel, 2017) yet, my study shows that the landscape is not so straightforward. Louis (ghostwriter) said that sometimes his clients do ask him questions about the essays he prepares for them, believing that some of his clients take the assignment seriously. He commented that "some students are always curious…they are serious about their tasks." Sam (ghostwriter) expanded further on student queries and explained:

> There have been some people that have emailed me back with questions about the assignment, and so some of them actually read the assignment, some definitely don't, but some will email me back and say can you clarify what you mean in this sentence, and that's not a problem. I have no problem with follow up. I want to keep them as clients, the majority, I mean, it's like any business, the majority of the work is from repeat customers. (Sam)

Sam's comment speaks to the mutual benefit of brokering. By maintaining the brokering relationship, the student builds their embodied cultural capital, and the

ghostwriter is poised for repeat business. Camille (ghostwriter) said she received more questions from clients when the work was connected to their profession–they want to understand and are demonstrating some level of agency in the learning process. She noted:

> I'd say there are two very different styles of people. On one hand, the people who just need an assignment handed over, oftentimes they don't ask for any kind of explanation. On the other hand, people who I worked with in terms of collaborating and helping them not just purely writing a paper for them? I think they will be more hands on and they'll ask me questions and clarification, and come back and ask me if they've understood something properly after reading the work. And I get that a lot more frequently in the context where it's more for professional vocation, whereas I have a lot of students I know that will just hand in an essay and don't really contact me to understand. I don't even know if they've read it. (Camille)

This example of brokering demonstrates how the student agency can re/negotiate the student experience, transfer capital, and move a step closer to the classroom domain through this unsanctioned engagement with the assignment. This quote also illuminates that there are literacies required for work and literacies for learning. Across the landscape of contract cheating, the student may exist liminally, outside of the dominant system of education, moving ever so slowly, gaining social and cultural capital, toward another "sense of one's place" (Bourdieu, 1979/1984, p. 466).

Xander's experience suggested that his student clients struggled with more

than just the assignment requirements and content. He shared:

> Mostly, students I work with have a good grasp of the content they should write about—they just struggle on how to actually write it. Their writing abilities are often geared toward simply reciting information in a chronological order, and they struggle to understand what critical analysis is and how to implement it into the text. I find this personally a very difficult concept to explain to them myself. (Xander)

Sawyer also had views about her client's academic literacies, abilities, and limitations. Her comments also place the assignment within the broader context of the students' identities, histories, and interests. Barton et al. (2000) explains that literacies are embedded into our broader social relations. Academic institutions support and build upon certain literacies, while marginalizing others. Sawyer said:

> In terms of issues when I am given an assignment, students have weak abilities in conceptualizing how long an assignment will take to complete and how much work goes into it and the professor's timeline is always a little off. Professors expect students to delve into an assignment without any doubt, procrastination, re-starting, etc. and this wastes time, but it's never really taken into account by the professors when they put something out. I think assignments need to be more lenient in instructions and incorporate more room for students' own creativity and innovations. (Sawyer)

Assessment brokering (Thacker, 2022) occurs where there is a social relationship, such as among student peers, roommates, and ghostwriters. It is social, and therefore, has cultural elements. Ghostwriters would utilize social relationships to provide a good service. For instance, Sang, a ghostwriter, provided his services for students within his own culture and shared that he had many Asian Canadian clients. In this instance, some form of cultural brokering (Mazak, 2007) was occurring, as the ghostwriter relayed in the interview that he understood the pressures and expectations of students within the Asian Canadian cultural context and was able to navigate both the clients' home domain/culture and the expectations of the university. When we discussed the matter of students asking clarifying questions of their teachers, he commented:

> It's such a competitive environment, so everyone's trying to one up each other. And the ones that are just smart, naturally, you know, top of the class, always friends with the professor, they ask those questions...but, then you have the people who struggle with writing. Who even if they spend three, four weeks on their paper and then they will still get like a 60 or 70 at best, because they have those bell curves and they want people to drop out, first or second year. It's such a competitive environment, right? So, a lot of my students are Korean and Chinese. Guess what? All their parents only want them to be lawyers or doctors. How are you going to get someone that doesn't know, and hardly speaks English to get one hundred percent on their political science paper? Criminology paper? Wants to be a lawyer.

> They're going to get 60 or 50, right? That's what happens, and that's when they hire me, and I help them out…it's good money, but I mean they have a lot of pressures. (Sang)

Sang perceived that he understands the cultural and language pressures associated with his student clientele, offering to close that gap through ghostwriting and brokering. While language was not an overwhelming theme, it was mentioned. Jack (ghostwriter) also experienced language as a factor in his business, noting that:

> Sometimes they'll send it back to you, and say can you write it a bit simpler using basic English? Like, I get…immigrants asking for me to do the work. So, they want nice plain English words that make sense to them and it's not just going to be too obvious that they didn't write it themselves. (Jack)

Camille (ghostwriter) commented that in her ghostwriting practice, language was at times a factor:

> There is a rare occasion when a student has very minimal English-language speaking skills, so they're not really sure what the assignment is asking, but that's rare in my experience anyway…and at the university level, you'll have entire applications for scholarships or general applications for things where the person doesn't have a really good grasp of English. (Camille)

Camille's comment points to the breadth of ghostwriting activities and skills that permeate the business. When ghostwriters are engaged at the admissions and application stage, it would be difficult to imagine that the prospective student would disengage with ghostwriting services upon acceptance. Language as a factor or not, students are not always sure what is expected of them. Sawyer (ghostwriter) wrote the following in the follow-up survey:

> Some common issues that are noticed are students themselves are unaware or unsure of the assignment criteria, they hand over work without knowing entirely what is required from it. Sometimes I am shocked that they hand over an assignment that is actually very easy and straightforward if they go through the instructions in a little more detail. I think that the assignment sheets need to be simplified so that students are not immediately discouraged. Lots of students are also scared when it comes to citations on their assignments and research…so when the assignment criteria leads with this, they will often quickly hand it over. (Sawyer)

So far, I have explained that ghostwriters can function as broker to provide knowledge and understanding about the assignment requirements and content. As the previous quote so clearly identified, part of assignment meaning making is to understand the various sources of knowledge and information that make up writing, and how they are presented. The following section therefore explains how ghostwriters clarified their brokering experiences surrounding sources, citation and referencing.

Theme 2: Authorship: Understanding Sources, Citation, and Referencing.

Citation and referencing are also an academic literacy practice. Demonstrating authorship is viewed as an important part of ethical scholarship, and the ways in which these are demonstrated vary widely across disciplines, institutions, and education levels/systems. It is no wonder that the students participating in the study struggled with both the form and function of referencing and citation, not yet having adopted a critical stance for authorship, and often lacking familiarity with the practices. Several of the teaching staff also commented on their tenuous grasp of the practices despite their more extensive experience. Several of the ghostwriters mentioned citation managers and other resources (e.g., Perdue OWL)[9] used to complete their acknowledgement work.

The student participants all had views that were, emotionally, close to the surface. Blake (student) explained that she preferred it when her teachers were "explicit on how we should cite things," and that, in third year of her undergraduate degree, she still found it a struggle. She went further to say that citation style had never been explained to her, and that:

> It's always one of those things, where I feel like I have to do research on the citations. It's always like, how do you do this again? What is proper? How do I have to actually cite it with the style? (Blake)

Morgan (student) demonstrated how citation practices across different instructors affected her citation learning experience and her grades. She explained:

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[9] Purdue OWL offers online reference materials and services for academic writing. https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/purdue_owl.html

> Some professors are very strict on how citing works. Like I had a professor, in my last year at university and I got dinged[10] for having a citation in the middle of the sentence. She's like, 'you need to put it at the end of the sentence.' And I had never been talked to about that by any other professor before. I had never lost marks for it. And so, I had to change what I've learned for the specific professor, so I didn't lose more marks. (Morgan)

Morgan's experience could easily upset a student's learning trajectory and confidence with writing authorship practices, delaying a student's acquisition and fulsome identity as an academic writer. Alex (student) explained that as he moved into higher-level university courses, he began to see his fellow students, his peers, engage with citation and referencing practices in new ways, acquiring the habitus, especially in online spaces. He commented:

> Online discussions are very important now…and in those discussion boards…I have found that in the upper-year classes that I've taken…even in the online discussions, people are using citations and making it very formal just in their back-and-forth conversations. I don't think that you need to cite if you're just having a discussion about the text that you're reading, but people are practising those skills

[10] "Dinged"–Canadian informal slang. Means to be negatively "hit" with something. In this example, the student is implying her grades took a hit. This term is more often used in reference to a small car dent or financial hit. https://www.slice.ca/50-canadian-slang-words-our-american-friends-dont-understand/

> all the time. And I see that it's become more second nature to people. (Alex)

Alex's comment reflected his perception that peers were beginning to habituate the practices of citation, and points to how students are comparing their own practices, development, and understanding of process to others, and are not always aware of the correct protocols themselves.

Greta (teaching staff) agreed that citation was challenging, explaining that students "actually have to practice and do it" to learn. She frequently engaged with several of her own former students who had moved on from the college program where she taught to a university program. Greta functioned as an assessment broker to several of her previous students, although outside the scope of contract cheating. She remarked that:

> I taught a student how to do APA and all of those students at [institution name redacted] how to do APA, but she still texts me to double check. Now that she's at [institution name redacted],…she'll write something and then she'll double check. And she'll be like, can you check this, is my APA okay? And then she'll send it to me on text. I'll be like, you're missing something. She's like a period, right? Know what I mean? She's like, I knew there was something wrong, but I wasn't quite sure what. So, it's like, we've created this fear, this terror about the citation style, but not about the citation practices for some reason. They're more scared about the style than they are about the practice. (Greta)

This quote appositely demonstrates that educative sessions on referencing and citation may not be enough for that transformative moment of "mastery" (Bourdieu, 1979/1984). Greta also argued that citation style guides (e.g., MLA, APA)[11] were arbitrarily different from each other, always changing, and not always neutral. For example, only recently have style guides provided guidance on gender neutral language. Her quote also points to the reality that many students look at citation and referencing through a 'fear of misconduct' lens, rather than through an 'appreciation of scholarly, critical authorship' lens. Greta viewed citation/referencing as both a style and a practice, and she questioned which one was more important to emphasize with students. Some scholars have suggested that citation and referencing practice be dropped altogether from undergraduate learning (see Young, 2019), insisting that the practice takes away from learning and burdens teaching staff with its teaching and assessment oversight.

Brian (teaching staff) pointed out several nuances of learning citation practices, noting that a student writer must be aware conceptually of when to cite a source and also the mechanics of citing. He used a citation manager software for his own writing, noting his dependence upon it. While online citation applications are responsible for assembling and organizing references and citations, they do not step in to indicate to the writer when an idea or phrase requires a citation, and how it should be structured in a sentence. This supports the point that citation and referencing practices are not mastered in a short amount of time. They are developed over a long period, and for some students and faculty, never mastered. Brian (teaching staff)

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[11] Abbreviations used to reference formatting and style guides most commonly used in the humanities and social sciences: Modern Languages Association (MLA); American Psychological Association (APA).

noted he was "about 50–50 on the confidence of citation." That said, citation and referencing is a necessary part of the assessment landscape. The interviews demonstrated that the practice was not well understood. This is often discussed in the literature (e.g., Pecorari, 2013; Sutherland-Smith 2008), and its misunderstanding can contribute to unintentional plagiarism, but also students' lack of confidence in their academic skills. Jordan (student) explained that she would contact her past instructor with citation questions if she could not figure it out by herself. She said:

> When I'm not sure, I might try to Google it and find answers but if I'm still Googling and I'm not finding the answers or I'm not clear on something, then I reach out to my old teacher. Because she…will figure it out for me. So, I just, archive stuff that she sent me in the past with regards to citations. So, then I can always just go back and look at it. (Jordan)

As such, it was not surprising that the ghostwriters also found students seeking explanation on citation and referencing practices. Terry (ghostwriter) stated that:

> Canadian students, they will ask for kind of clarification on what you have done on their work with references...the UK clients are more concerned about if you use the UK English. For the US, they are just happy to go with what you have provided. (Terry)

Although this comment was very general, it does highlight that students will ask questions to assess the value of the source of information and to contextualize the

writing in their assignments. Both of the key informant ghostwriters who responded to the follow-up survey request confirmed that students do ask questions about sources, citation, and referencing. Sawyer (ghostwriter) explained:

> One time, a client of mine asked about the research sources I had used to write their assignment. I think they were wondering about where I gathered the content and what databases I used. They ended up returning to me for more service, but in this occasion, the student was trying to find out if they were capable of conducting the research themselves. Unfortunately, students often find large databases and database searches to be daunting and overwhelming due to the sheer amount of content. (Sawyer)

This type of epistemological learning is gained over time and can change across contexts. Rowan (ghostwriter) opined that, for her, “quite a lot of the questions I get are about sources and where I find my sources. A lot of people ask me how to do works cited, which is why I charge an extra fee for works cited.” Rowan’s online advertisement noted $7 per page, and $30 for works cited. That said, several ghostwriters admitted that they were able to write many assignments without any in-depth research, and that they are often writing first- and second-year papers without reading any books, articles, or using a library, relying on Google and Wikipedia (Wikipedia, n.d.) to source materials. This suggests a serious flaw in the assessment design. When asked how she goes about her research for writing, Rowan (ghostwriter) responded with, “two words man: Google and Wikipedia.” Sam (ghostwriter) shared that:

> You would be surprised, or maybe you wouldn't, how well Wikipedia can inform a three-page paper. It does not take a whole lot of ingenuity or horsepower to adapt a couple of Wikipedia articles to a three-page assignment. So oftentimes it's not even me doing a whole lot of original work, it's just me synthesizing stuff that's already out there. (Sam)

Sam's comment raises the question of assessment design with response to research expectations. The ghostwriters were aware of citation as a "struggle" and "weak point" for many of her clients. Sawyer, for example, reports that:

> … if I'm given a completed essay to rewrite and go over…usually they have some sort of citations or they're like, oh, must cite here, and they'd leave an empty bracket for me to add an in-text citation. They'll be like, oh, can you, just double check my references? The in-text citations may not be correct, or, can you check the list at the end? The reference list? (Sawyer)

Not all students engaging in contract cheating are seeking a broker or engage in brokering behaviours. There was evidence to suggest that students seeking ghostwriting services are not interested in the learning opportunity provided by the assignment. For example, Xander (ghostwriter) commented that, "the majority of my customers want nothing more than a simple transaction, no contact, other than getting the essay back and then we move on with our lives." The ghostwriters in the study pointed out that most students are seeking another person to complete their academic

assessments to receive a grade to pass the course. Sam (ghostwriter) stated:

> There is one student in particular who I have been working with for a year and a half, and she just pays me up front for the semester for a course to do all the written assignments. She has not done a single one of her assignments. If she was forced to write her own assignments, I don't know if she could get a passing grade if she tried. I'm not sure she belongs at university, that's just the reality. (Sam)

In this section, I have explained that in some circumstances, students are challenged by the practices of citation and referencing, and informally seek, through assessment brokering, to understand authorship through their ghostwriters. Assessment brokering occurs in the liminal spaces of the academic domain. We should not, therefore, be surprised when students reach out for assistance informally. Many families already have a culture or practice of "literacy sponsorship" (Gonzales et al., 2005)–extending this to the education domain may feel like a normal extension of literacy support.

Conclusion

This chapter has described collaboration within the experiences of ghostwriters, teaching staff, and students. I contend that some freelance ghostwriters do collaborate with their clients, and suggest that some students do want to participate in, and learn academic literacies, even within the context of contract cheating. The chapter further suggests that ghostwriters do function as an assessment broker in some instances, drawing out several academic issues that may lead to students engaging in contract cheating in the first place. As such, the findings presented in this chapter

extend the concept of literacy brokering to a more specific literacy practice of "assessment brokering." This study thereby defines assessment brokering as the informal process of seeking assistance, about some element of an academic assessment text or assessment practice. At the time of writing, the term "assessment brokering" (Thacker, 2022) is not found in the wider literature. The next chapter moves to consider the second research question regarding ghostwriter, student, and teaching staff perceptions, and presents findings regarding notions of ghostwriter identities.

Chapter 6–Identity and Perceptions

Chapter 6 presents findings with respect to my second research question: "What are the perceptions of contract cheating held by ghostwriters, students, and teaching staff?"

In addition, this chapter presents how the ghostwriters experienced contract cheating and identified themselves, with respect to their roles. An Academic Literacies model considers as part of its epistemology, the identity, perceptions, and social literacy practices of those engaged in academic writing. Perceptions are the thoughts, beliefs, and feelings about persons, situations, and events. They are a central element of the "transformative stance" of academic literacies ideology (Lillis & Scott, 2007, p. 12) as well as an important determinant of behaviour. Understanding beliefs can inform differences of knowledge, culture, academic expectation, and assumptions. Exploring narratives within the data, therefore, offers a glimpse into the "habitus" of participants, where frameworks of navigating academic fields requires a variety of embodied capital (Bourdieu, 1979/1984, 1983/1986). Understanding differences of perception is also critical to developing shared understandings and perspectives. Reflecting themes emerging from the data, this chapter is presented in three main sections. The first section argues that ghostwriters perceive themselves as "helpers" and have also a constructed identity as a "writer." It also pays attention to ghostwriters' perceptions of what motivates students to outsource their academic work. The second and third sections discuss perceptions of students and teaching staff respectively.

Ghostwriter as Helper and Writer

Many of the ghostwriters interviewed for this study saw and referred to themselves as "helpers," and the data suggests that they found personal integrity in

their writing work by framing it in this way. Sang (ghostwriter), a ghostwriter of 10 years, found employment and solace in the work of ghostwriting following the death of a friend. When asked why he started his business, Sang commented, “I had a friend who committed suicide, and he was very pressured with school. And then I realized that there needs to be a source that helps these students, right?” Sang’s comment illustrates his view that the pressures to succeed through higher education had played a role in the friend’s suicide, and that this justified his action to “help” other students with their academic assignments.

The ghostwriters often spoke of the students’ ongoing struggle to juggle family and work responsibilities while seeking to gain a credential. They themselves had leveraged their own institutional and embodied academic capital for their own socio-economic stability, if not mobility. Terry (ghostwriter) was located in Kenya and advertised online to ghostwrite for Canadian institutions. He found value in helping student clients who may have a “chronic disease” or are “juggling school, family, and employment.” Terry shared his view that it was commonplace for his clients to be “working and going to school at the same time,” and so they sought a ghostwriter to “get help from someone.” Louis, another ghostwriter from Kenya, also spoke of “a core responsibility of every human being to help someone achieve,” and who, like Sang, placed a moral imperative on their work of contract cheating. Another ghostwriter, Sam, commented on their ability to support and help students to succeed. He had been ghostwriting for 8 years and wrote exclusively for students at Canadian institutions. Sam (ghostwriter), said:

> Maybe at the end of the day, if I can help someone get a degree who probably could not earn it on their own, either because they don’t have

> the cognitive horsepower, time management skills, or they are too lazy or whatever, then I can't say that's necessarily a bad thing…if they wouldn't otherwise be able to get it done. (Sam)

Sam's comment also points to his views about the motivations of why his clients choose to outsource, and how he plays a role in the development of his clients' social capital over time.

In addition to seeing themselves as helpers, many of the ghostwriters identified as writers and small "writing" business entrepreneurs. Ghostwriters and students draw on their own cultural and social experiences as they communicate, collaborate, and engage with the writing process. These practices also construct identity. Many of the ghostwriters saw themselves as intellectually curious, even as budding academics, wanting to, someday, pursue higher credentials. Sam (ghostwriter) stated: "I personally love knowledge for its own sake, I read a lot and I genuinely enjoy this work, and reading journal articles and broadening my own base knowledge..." The ghostwriters often spoke of the joys of writing, of learning, and of being able to use this passion for learning and writing to generate their business. Rowan's (ghostwriter) identity as a writer extended beyond academics, as she referred to herself as a "general ghostwriter," who also wrote song lyrics and poetry. Working as freelancers gave them the flexibility to do so. Rowan stated:

> I like English and just writing in general, you know, whether it be writing an essay, writing a short story, writing a poem…writing in general, it's always been my passion. So, I find any kind of writing to be really easy. (Rowan)

Sam (ghostwriter) found the work of ghostwriting interesting, referring to himself as a "big geek" for enjoying the work. Camille (ghostwriter) was also confident in her writing abilities and identified as a writer. She noted that:

> I've always been academically very inclined in literature. It led to helping other people with writing, and then to people proposing that I write a bigger chunk of their essays, rather than just editing them, and that's turned into something profitable. (Camille)

This reflects a common pathway into ghostwriting on a larger scale—first editing for friends, then writing for friends, and then scaling up to bigger business. Xander (ghostwriter) had a similar experience and he commented on how he got into the work when he was a student:

> I kind of helped a friend and he paid me for it, and then they told another friend and then it spread to a pretty small circle, you know. Friends and friends of friends, essentially. It wasn't kind of a big-time thing then, but it paid the bills, so… (Xander)

These soft launches, using existing friendships, demonstrate how the ghostwriters leverage their social capital in addition to their academic literacies to grow their businesses. Starting among friends provided them with the time to gather expertise, hone skills (e.g., academic, social, digital), build social capital, and then their business. Sawyer (ghostwriter) described her transition into contract cheating:

> My friends would notice that I had a thing for writing, that I was good at it, and they would see my essays. We'd compare essays, we'd compare grades…and they'd be like, oh, you should do this... it's a big market especially in university level education…So, when I first started out, I was editing and revising a lot for my friends. I would do it for free…and they'd be like, wow, this sounds completely different and much more professional whatnot, and then so they're like, oh, I'll recommend someone to you. They would tell their friends. And so, I would start getting maybe a handful of people, when essay season was at its peak. And then ever since COVID, when I've been out of an actual job, they suggesting to me, you know what, this fall, you could make this actually a lucrative side hustle. (Sawyer)

This demonstrates both the common pathway to ghostwriting, and how the literacy practices—social and situated—embolden their identity as helper and writer. Many of the ghostwriters reflected on past writing experiences and history that had influenced their writing practices. All the ghostwriters had strong personal experiences and connections to writing, with Sawyer (ghostwriter) agreeing that it was the best part of the job, and that writing for her was "second nature." Preet (ghostwriter) remarked that while he had to be prepared for any writing topic, it was fun, and he commented: "it gives me the opportunity to learn myself, right?"

By contrast, one ghostwriter was self-critical of his writing skills. Jack (ghostwriter) did not think he was a great writer, not perceiving that he had embodied the academic skills just as the others had. He shared that, over time, he had begun to

care less about the quality of the product. He explained:

> Like it comes and goes in waves for me I find, like I might be interested in writing well for a few months and then I won't care about the grammar mistakes or the spelling or things like that…I'm not a very good writer…I think the problem I've got is that I'm not a very good typist. Like I wouldn't be able to work as a professional writer because I can't type 80 words a minute or something. Like I'm a very slow writer, but when I'm interested in something it's quite readable, yeah. They get a good mark on it, like it's really rare I'll get a complaint, but I mostly get As or Bs for them. So, that inspires them to keep their name up at the top. And that's good, right? (Jack)

Despite the undermining of education through the work of ghostwriting, many of the ghostwriters believed it was nevertheless important, and understood the value of learning and in gaining a credential. Xander (ghostwriter) considered himself an academic of sorts. He stated:

> I love to learn. So just being able to get paid to learn is great. Like I love that. It's probably the main reason I do the job in fairness. Because eventually, I want to do a master's, PhD maybe, So, I'll start making money for that. I can carry on learning, and still use my brain you know. That's definitely my favourite part. (Xander)

Louis (ghostwriter) thought university education and the experience of university was

important, as this was when “your mind is opened up.” He also explained that what he liked best about ghostwriting was “helping someone achieve what they are aiming for. I’m helping someone achieve what they want.” This “helper” attitude and “writer” identity permeated the interviews and reflects some of the uneven balance of power between student and ghostwriter, further positioning the ghostwriter as broker. Louis further commented that “everyone has the right to get a home tutor,” to justify his services. While the hiring of a legitimate tutor is commonplace, Louis’s ghostwriting services were not intended to be educative.

Maintaining their reputations as “good essay writers” was important to the freelance ghostwriters. Sam (ghostwriter) explained that he made it clear to his student clients “what [his] circle of competence is” with respect to writing, to maintain his high quality of writing and to protect his reputation. This is likely in part because of the value and ease of repeat business and word-of-mouth, but also important for their own constructed identities as writers inscribed in the practice of ghostwriting. This framing of themselves as helpers and writers could also be seen as a mechanism to rationalize or neutralize (Sykes & Matza, 1957) the behaviours.

The ghostwriters were aware of the stigma associated with the job. Sang (ghostwriter) defended himself, and clarified his identity perceptions by explaining “we’re not all scammers or plagiarizers, we’re here to help.” Xander (ghostwriter) pointed out his views about the quality of essay-mill papers in comparison to the quality of papers written by freelance writers like himself:

> My clients want something that’s going to be written better than your average essay-mill writer, who might not speak English as their first language, and kind of just move through your information. People

> would tend to come to me when they want something slightly better than that. (Xander)

Several of the ghostwriters commented with disdain on the practices of other ghostwriters who "scammed students" (Sang, ghostwriter). Sang considered his service to be different and of better quality, as had Xander, who referred to his services as "premium." There is some reality to this perspective, as Sutherland-Smith and Dullaghan (2019) found that many essay mills fail to deliver essays on time, fail to meet university standards, and retain personal details, leaving clients vulnerable. In the excerpts below, both participants showcase their views, and discuss the potential dark side of ghostwriting practices for students:

> They [ghostwriters] will blackmail or threaten you [the student] after they help you, for more money. You have to use someone locally who has a phone number that can talk with you. If you go to those sites, they're all from like India. Indian scammers. (Sang)

The literature has spoken to this type of blackmail (Yorke et al., 2020). The quote above reflects the ghostwriter's perception of a professional hierarchy of ghostwriters. This perception is structured around the quality of their product, risk, and treatment of their student clients. Xander too was familiar with ghostwriter/student blackmail in the contract cheating landscape.

> For a long time, I just thought they [students] were being paranoid. But recently on Reddit, I've seen other writers threaten students who

> already paid them, to send the details to the professor. So, it must be justified. (Xander)

These two quotes offer a snapshot into the fluctuating field conditions of contract cheating. Students may be navigating through a wide array of ghostwriting agendas, from writers like Sang and Xander who see their work as “helping,” to darker motivations of capitalizing on students’ fears of being “found out”—where the risk of being exposed for contract cheating could have very serious consequences in terms of students’ academic progress and formal penalties.

Offering business services which, in their estimation were of high quality as well as perceiving their services as better, less risky or more ethical than another “scammer” perhaps helped the ghostwriters to feel better about the work that is negatively perceived by society and academic institutions. This construction of themselves was made easier through their condemnation (Sykes & Matza, 1957) of other ghostwriters who scam, blackmail, and provide poor quality assignments. Through the participants’ narratives, the social elements of ghostwriting become visible - the “helping,” the comradery, the support, and the connections made under conditions of stress, pressure, and strain. As Terry (ghostwriter) explained, the ghostwriting industry “put[s] people’s food on the table.” Relationship’s form, grow, and diminish, yet these connections serve to support the industry of contract cheating.

The three ghostwriters from Africa who were interviewed along with the ghostwriter from India, often saw themselves as “business owners,” using business discourse such as “customer,” “rate of return,” “bargain,” and “price negotiation,” to explain their work strategies and processes. The geographically Canadian ghostwriters by contrast reflected more of a service orientation while referring to their business.

Yet, while a business attitude permeated much of their work, the ghostwriters still used elements of friendship to maintain the flow of work, leveraging social capital and socially situated literacies as tools for repeat business and "customer loyalty." Pierre (ghostwriter) said that he had been working with most of his clients for 2 to 4 years over the timespan of their degree. Sam had also noted similar lengthy client relationships. Terry (ghostwriter) explained:

> I don't just have clients. I have friends, so I'm treating this like any other kind of job. It's business. You need them to come back. You need them to refer you to the friends, their family…From where I come from...people come into this kind of industry because they want to kind of change their economic situation, right? (Terry)

Another aspect of the business and writer identity was, somewhat ironically, concern about avoiding plagiarism within the quality of his product. Additionally, this awareness reflected the ghostwriter's knowledge of academic expectations, and literacies. Jack (ghostwriter) commented:

> The number one concern is plagiarism, of course. You've got to look out for plagiarism. Right? If you're plagiarizing papers, they're always going to come back, and people are going to want refunds, or you have to do them again. As you know, you just have to watch out for plagiarism. (Jack)

At times, the academic literacies practices of ghostwriting may contribute to

relationships forming or strengthening, through the sharing of information to benefit the writing work, for example, when a student requests a personal writing piece. Jack (ghostwriter) commented:

> Sometimes, I'll need personal information from them, you need to get some information on their background, their heritage, or sometimes, people want me to write an admission letter, or statement of intent letter, so I'll need to get background on who they are or what they are doing and their goals and previous history, things like that. (Jack)

Given the academic risks associated with outsourcing, Sam (ghostwriter) "helped" his clients navigate the academic field by recommending that they keep a low profile in class, restricting contact with faculty and teaching assistants, which may tip them off to some misconduct. Sam added the following when discussing working with a client for a course:

> If they are going to have me do their work for them, I recommend that they have as little contact with their professors and their TAs as possible. I tell them, don't email your prof or TA asking questions. Don't ask if you can come in and talk to them one day after class. Don't do any of that stuff because any contact allows the TA or prof to develop an understanding of how you talk, your vocabulary, and how you think, and then they start reading your papers you submit and there is a disconnect—then they could get suspicious…you just want to be an anonymous student...a student number to the professor...you don't

> want them to have any experience with you personally or they could notice a discrepancy. (Sam)

Sam framed this strategy as “protection” from potential detection, directing his clients to withhold exposure of their own habitus (Bourdieu, 1972/1977) to their instructors. While this may help students avoid being implicated in contract cheating, it may also prevent the student fully experiencing academic socialization, and the development of social skills in education contexts, or their academic habitus (Bourdieu, 1984/1988). This distance also reduced opportunities to develop assessment literacies and to gather feedback and support from teaching staff. This strategy protects the ghostwriter’s ability to continue to construct their “writer identity,” and discoursal writing voice (Ivanič, 1998), yet also constrains the student ability to do the same. Perhaps in a more basic sense, these protection strategies also serve to ensure that the ghostwriters can continue to gain work through students wishing to engage in contract cheating. The student is, therefore, asked to avoid the opportunity to engage and become a member of their academic community, through fear of being “found out.” Pierre (ghostwriter) was also aware of the risk of a student getting to know their teacher, suggesting that “maybe if they know the student personally, they might doubt the quality” of the assignment.

The social engagement patterns of contract cheating can be seen through the discussion, negotiation, and at times, the exchange of support, thoughts, and ideas between students and ghostwriters. The “social” appears to be embedded within the literacy practices of contracting cheating. Social engagement and negotiations can be seen in the relationships and the identities of ghostwriters as “helpers” and “skilled writers” that are created and maintained throughout the practice, typically supported

by ICT. Technology allows for social interactions, while maintaining anonymity, should parties choose. Contract cheating is social in nature, despite the reality of geography, technology, and elements of privacy that are often engaged in the process. Pierre (ghostwriter) commented during a Google Chat (while he downloaded Zoom for our interview) with me that many of his clients prefer to remain anonymous and that he had never met a student client face-to-face. He added that to maintain privacy, "some even refuse to pay through Western Union or any other method except PayPal. I guess they might be worried about getting caught LOL." Xander (ghostwriter) had a similar experience with his clients, sharing that, "a lot of people make up new accounts and new PayPal accounts and an email just to do it, so. The vast majority are definitely kind of concerned about confidentiality and privacy, yeah." Furthermore, Sam (ghostwriter) said:

> Rarely does somebody send me their course syllabus, usually they just copy and paste strictly the relevant description of the assignment, but they are usually reluctant to you know, tell me if it's a first- or fourth-year level course, which university they are at, and you know sometimes those things re helpful for me if I'm writing, to know if it's first or fourth year. So sometimes I ask to see the syllabus because I want to have an understanding of the expectations. (Sam)

Despite the anonymity, social interaction and personal information is still shared between student client and ghostwriter, reflecting the interconnectedness of identity and literacies. Jack (ghostwriter) commented that some students were "trusting" and explained, "they need to have certain databases involved in their

references or bibliographies or something, so they usually just give me their password and username themselves." Digital tools, such as online databases, or citation generators can contribute to academic writing success, but in this case with Jack, had the potential to compromise the student's privacy and identity.

Ghostwriters Jack and Xander both advertised their services in the context of their own academic education success, situating their academic literacies, and leveraging their academic histories and identities. Both of their websites noted their own credentials, and number of years working as a ghostwriter. Jack's website noted the length of time he had been writing as part of his province's education system. The web page also offered sample essays, several of which were on explicitly Canadian topics.

The ghostwriters had varying personal ethical views and struggles with the work. Jack (ghostwriter) called it a "lost opportunity" for the students, commenting that the students, "don't really care that they're paying for their essays, they just sort of need an essay and so they pay for it. They don't really think about the lost opportunity of reading about something or something like that." Sam (ghostwriter) thought that outsourcing work was a detriment to the student's work ethic and soft skills, but also commented:

> I am not in the slightest bit plagued by a moral pang about this...nobody needs employees that can write an essay about the Palestine Israeli conflict. You will never be asked that in a job interview…so if people leave university with a diminished ability to write, those are not really the skills that are needed in the work force anyway. (Sam)

Sam's narrative could be characterized by "denial of injury" (Sykes & Matza, 1957) appearing to downplay the compounding effects of contract cheating on the student's future employability outcomes. Preet (ghostwriter) wrestled with the practice being unethical; however, he also added a layer of neutralization to the framing of his work:

> When you think of it from a business perspective, every business is shrewd in some way. I can't speak for my clients, but somewhere, down in my heart, I do feel like this is unethical and maybe I should not do this long term. (Preet)

Rowan (ghostwriter) referred to contract cheating as a "pretty weaselly thing to do," and Xander (ghostwriter) commented on how he and other people close to him viewed his work, explaining:

> I have given it some thought before in the past and it does seem to infuriate a lot of people. I've had friends that I've told about it, not be happy with it. And so, I've got my own thoughts about it all, and I just don't really care too much, to be honest. It's their own choice, it's their prerogative, you know. Because I'm doing banalities mostly, I don't kind of feel, like I'm going to put someone's life in danger—like if they were cheating to become a doctor or something like that. (Rowan)

These few quotes demonstrate that the ghostwriters, while identifying as helpers and writers, have mixed feelings about the work, and are at their core aware of how

ghostwriting is negatively perceived by society and academia.

In this section, I have explained that ghostwriters were keen to construct themselves as "helpers," and often strongly identified as writers and small business entrepreneurs. This notion of being a "helper" may be shaped by their understanding of student motivations for seeking a ghostwriter and align with the brokering behaviours described in the previous chapter. Yet it may also reveal something deeper about ghostwriters' awareness that contract cheating breaches tacit ethical understandings of academia, where participants seek to deny or neutralize any potential guilt by framing their work as "help" (Sykes & Matza, 1957). Or perhaps further still, how ghostwriters are aware of the various struggles faced by students amid academic fields (Bourdieu, 1988/1984). The section that follows considers how the ghostwriters perceive student motivations for choosing to outsource.

Ghostwriter's Perceptions of Student Motivations

This section provides insight into three themes regarding ghostwriters' perceptions of why students are motivated to seek their services. Reflecting the literature, these reasons can be viewed on a wide spectrum, from the perceived privileged character flaw of "laziness," to stress and mental health issues, to doing it for good grades to gain a particular credential (Bretag et al., 2019; Rundle et al., 2019).

The ghostwriters often commented on students being lazy. Jack (ghostwriter) commented that his clients had "too much money, and not enough inclination." Sam (ghostwriter) shared that he did not really have a typical client, and that "some are lazy, some are dumb, and there are some who are industrious and capable people but are just overwhelmed at a particular time." Echoing the lazy theme, Pierre (ghostwriter) said, "I have some lazy students who just send me their login and I

handle all their coursework ranging from essays, reports, discussion posts and exams." Xander (ghostwriter) thought students today "had more disposable income to spend on these things." Sawyer (ghostwriter) likewise saw a variety of academic field conditions driving the practice, commenting:

> Honestly, I don't know what goes through their heads. I feel like its desperation mixed with laziness. But I think honestly, obviously they know what they're doing is not correct, entirely correct, right. This is their education, they're supposed to be learning, but there must be a reason they're seeking out these services. So, either the client is doing something wrong, they're being lazy or honestly, it might be even on the school system for overwhelming the students too much. (Sawyer)

It is worthwhile noting that the term "lazy" is subjective. The behaviours associated with the term lazy could also be easily captured under several other categories of reasons or motivations. For example, Amigud and Lancaster (2019b) used terms such as "perseverance", "self-discipline", and even "personal issues" (p. 102) to explain student motivations to outsource. As Sawyer pointed to in the preceding quote, the ghostwriters also pointed the finger at the institution and its systems.

Several of the ghostwriters pointed to failures of the teaching staff and academic institutions as one reason why students turn to them. Rowan (ghostwriter) said, "the modern education system rewards students for regurgitating unoriginal thought. If you are just going to be unoriginal, then you might as well get somebody else to be unoriginal for you." She thought that unless a student was pursuing a "really super good job," university education was "archaic and outdated." Terry (ghostwriter)

also perceived that the students who outsourced were not "missing out on anything," but despite this the students "needed the papers, they need the degree." The few ghostwriters who saw little value in the education itself nonetheless understood the symbolic value in the credential, and its value, that ultimately kept them in business. Sawyer's (ghostwriter) comments below reflect how the ghostwriters understand the value of education and the degree within wider societal field conditions, and use this awareness to their business advantage:

> I think nowadays it's almost like an undergrad degree or even more, has become a bare minimum to get into any line of work. So, it's definitely being very valued or almost overvalued. But I think, yeah, I think because of the importance of that credential that is why students are willing to do anything to get it, which includes seeking out services like this. Because at the end of the day, I don't know how much you're going to take away or remember from a class. Other than the grade and that you passed. So, a lot of students, like that's their mindset. They're like, I just need to get a pass. I need to get a passing grade whatnot. I need to get that degree. And that's the end of the journey. The learning is an afterthought most of the time. (Sawyer)

The ghostwriters had other ideas on why students turned to them, although the responses varied. Some believed students were too busy with life's demanding responsibilities or were disinterested in the academic work. Sawyer (ghostwriter) often saw "desperate students with deadlines…who can't risk losing the grade or flunking the class." Poor time management was consistently proposed as a variable,

from both students and ghostwriters as a factor in contract cheating. Sam (ghostwriter) was less generous with his comments saying:

> Kids are so freaking lazy! I get requests for like a 500-word assignment by the end of the week, that's based on a four-page short story. I don't care how busy you are, you can do that. It might take you two hours. (Sam)

These comments assume that the student has the ability to complete the assignment but chooses not to do so. However, when asked about the motivation for students to seek out a ghostwriter, Xander (ghostwriter) shared the following thoughts, suggesting that the motivational context is often shared by the student when negotiating a job with a ghostwriter:

> It's never out of ill will, it's always about stress. It is always about how stressed they are or what they're struggling with. About having to hold two jobs and do this and do that while they're doing their degree, and they're running out of time. Having mental health issues that don't allow them to do their work. Not understanding what their work is. It's never, I've never encountered a student that's just completely careless about it and doesn't feel anything about it at all. The customer always appears or tells me that they're stressed, that they're struggling at the time. (Xander)

The question of desperation came up when Sam (ghostwriter) acknowledged that

compensation was not always offered as financial. He noted that "this is not something that I want to get involved with or said yes to, but two have offered to exchange sexual services instead of financial compensation…it is something people barter with." This type of exchange is unfortunate, although it is documented to occur in academic institutions (see Vaughn, 2019). This also points to the inequalities that exist within sites of education. Without economic capital, other resources can be exchanged for academic work. Student inequities and lack of cultural capital increases these pressures to attain a credential and gain employment.

Camille (ghostwriter) reflected that when students are required to take courses outside their degree major, such as breadth electives or general education courses, they are more prone to outsource, reflecting a lack of familiarity or interest with the academic field of study or discipline. She commented:

> I think that certain courses or things that you're asked to do along the way to get the credential, they aren't intrinsically tied to the credential itself...not that they don't have value but I think they have less value to the student who actively knows they don't want to do anything in math for example, they're just doing it because they have to because that's the requirement to get a degree. I don't know, it's like you have to take science courses in order to get an arts degree. And I fear then there's a lot of resentment for those classes and people don't try hard, and that's a lot of the time where they'll just outsource it to somebody else, because they don't feel like it will hinder their knowledge in the degree that they actually want. (Camille)

Xander's (ghostwriter) comments would align with Camille's ideas about course interest. He said:

> A lot of them come to me or actually, or at least they say they're a pretty good student usually, but then they just run out of time. Or they've got too many other things on to do it. Or another big one is that they do, especially in the US. You know how in the US, they have to do, even if you're doing math, you still have to do history classes. They'll be like, well, I'm not a history student and they outsource the history work and just do all the stuff they know themselves. (Xander)

When asked about his clientele's choices, Jack (ghostwriter) did not believe the students would graduate at all, and so his work completed towards the student's degree was of little concern him. He said:

> Most of the work you get is from the first- or second-year students. Third year, I guess as you know, third year is where it starts to get pretty difficult. If you can't do your own work then, there's no point in staying. So, it's usually first- or second-year students, and I figure a lot of them, they're not going to finish anyway. Right. So, it's a little bit, so I can take the whole thing with a grain of salt, you know what I mean?…So, it's just like laziness. I can't understand the spare cash some of these students have. I mean, when I went to school like 60 bucks was a ton of money, right? So, some of them are spending, they pay me 150–200 dollars to do an essay. I just can't believe how much

money they have. (Jack)

In this section, I have explained that ghostwriters perceived that students were motivated to outsource their work, because they needed the credential for social mobility, and future socio-economic opportunity. The ghostwriters also often spoke to student's perceived laziness, and lack of academic abilities (i.e., academic literacies) as a factor. Interestingly, these factors align with a recent study of teaching staff perceptions of student motivations to outsource (Erguvan, 2021). The next section considers the students' perceptions.

Student Perceptions of Contract Cheating

The students had mixed perspectives on contract cheating; however, two main themes were identified. As explained in chapter 5, one undergraduate student (Morgan) had engaged in a form of contract cheating with a friend. The other student participants had not; however, they were all aware of outsourcing advertising as well as ghostwriters working on and around campus. The themes presented in this section, therefore, relate to student cognizance of contract cheating and motivations for contracting cheating. Other perceptions and observations will also be discussed.

Cognizance

The students were generally unaware of the term "contract cheating" prior to the study, although they had general knowledge of the behaviours and opportunities of contract cheating. This awareness generally came from advertisements on their campus and through social media, or from other students and peers engaging in outsourcing. None had been made aware through educational initiatives delivered via their institutions, although several had completed academic integrity modules which covered "completing your own work." Alex, an undergraduate student who had

enrolled in university in his thirties, had become used to the ads on campus and noted:

> There's lots of things on billboards that I see or stapled to posts, and that just kind of becomes the visual milieu of campus. I don't think about actually calling the number, or whatever. The posts all have flyers on them. (Alex)

The "visual milieu" as described by Alex, works to demonstrate to current and future students the prevalence of ghostwriter opportunities, and possibly to normalize the practice of contract cheating. Blake (student) had also seen advertisements on campus and had made the connection that the ghostwriters were exchanging their academic literacies for capital. She shared:

> Every once in a while, like when you're walking around campus, sometimes you would spot these, I guess, advertisements of, like the numbers where you can pull the number off the piece of paper. And it's basically advertising, you know, they're selling kind of like their writing skills and saying, like, I can help you write your assignment essay or whatnot. But, yeah, I always wondered who calls these people? (Blake)

Finley (student) had noticed a difference in her awareness of and an increase of contract cheating opportunities from her undergraduate days to her current graduate studies experience, due to changes in digital fields. She explained:

> I think social media makes information come to people in a much faster way. And I see that, because when I was an undergrad, I remember seeing flyers for these types of services, but they were…only on campus. I never really saw them anywhere else. But now with social media, the internet, it's just easier to push the information out... (Finley)

While this comment cannot validate the rise of contract cheating behaviours, it speaks to the varied modes of delivery used by ghostwriters to connect with prospective clients, following the trends of social media use, and the way in which ghostwriters work to normalize and saturate the landscape with outsourcing behaviours. Visual and textual representations build perceptions and identities, impacting social interactions, campus cultures, and a "social milieu of practice" (Cuff, 1992, p. 156). These outsourcing opportunities may also resonate differently with students when they are viewed in a private digital space such as a cellphone, versus a public campus billboard.

Advertisements on campus or received through social media platforms may find appeal with the more vulnerable students—those feeling the strain of looming deadlines for example, or those with less cultural capital to seek support on campus. As discussed in chapter 5, some students may not enter the institution or "field" with the social and cultural capital to seek and utilize the legitimate resources available through the institution. Campus advertisements attempt to leverage the unequal balance of capital across the student body. In response to a question about how advertising works to normalize contract cheating in the higher education system, Alex (student) agreed, and responded:

> Because all the signs are on campus. It's an understanding that that exists…it legitimizes it as a thing that exists, but I don't know if it normalizes it. But people are normalized to seeing it, I guess. Right? But I don't know if that normalizes the ethical implications. (Alex)

This comment splices apart the idea of normalization, to include two aspects – the normalization of the behaviour itself, and then, how to think and feel about those behaviours. Alex (student) also touched on the notion of cheating being constructed, and subjective.

> What does cheating even mean? And what is someone's feeling that what they're doing is a rule or not breaking a rule? So, yes, there's a definition of cheating, I'm sure. But I think that definition feels more personal than public. (Alex)

This last quote further touches on a reworking of a student's personal perspective and understanding of cheating—or perhaps to justify cheating. Indeed, Alex's comment highlights how personal perceptions of academic practices can be far removed from the dominant and outward stance or expectations of the academic institutions. Many students can find and navigate individual and digitally networked fields which can include access to the resource of assessment brokering, especially via anonymous digital and collaborative platforms. Should these fields function to provide resources, develop identities and normalize cheating behaviours, it should come as no surprise that an institution's attempt to inculcate students into a "culture of academic integrity"

is not quickly adopted and internalized by students. The students have highlighted the importance of the digital landscape or virtual milieu of contract cheating, to increase their awareness of cheating opportunities. Shifting advertising into a private digital space may also be impacting perceptions of cheating behaviours. This is particularly relevant considering that research has demonstrated that student perceptions of opportunity is an important determinant associated with contract cheating (Curtis & Clare, 2017; Bretag et al., 2018).

Student Motivations

There exists an unequal distribution of linguistic, academic, and technological resources among students, which is reflected in their perceptions of academic fields (Bourdieu, 1979/1984). Students enter the education system with varying amounts of capital, and are attempting to gain additional academic capital, social capital, and embodied capital through engagement with their academic institution. Similar to the ghostwriters, the students perceived the credential or symbolic capital of a "good degree" as a possible motivation to outsource. Blake (student), a part-time undergraduate student who was also simultaneously working full-time, saw value and cultural capital in her own degree. Blake said about her pending credential:

> I think it's a good thing to have. I don't think I would ever judge anybody who doesn't have any kind of post-secondary education. But for me personally, it's just something that, well it's always been a goal. And I think it's a good to have, I think for myself, it just gives me more confidence, to not only develop myself through that, but also for the future in terms of developing my career. (Blake)

Alex (student) was also aware of the broad societal view of what a degree can offer, tangibly and symbolically. He said:

> I think there's a value in knowing that if someone went to college, well, and university on top of that, I think that there's an understanding that this person is able to learn. They have the wherewithal to unpack and explore tough questions and tough topics that they didn't know about and be able to ingest them and output the results of that ingested knowledge. And knowing that they are able to do that means that this is a person that I would be willing to potentially start a business with or approach things where we would have to learn new information. And I would trust that this person has the ability to intelligently approach complex issues. (Alex)

These comments speak to what Alex believes are the outcomes of his degree, that is, opportunities, social mobility, the ability to learn and tackle tough questions. Additionally, the credential makes transparent both the acquired skills of the degree, and also the individual's social status, which, taken together present the individual's cultural capital as maintained by Bourdieu (1979/1984, 1984/1988). As described earlier in this chapter, the ghostwriters were also very aware of the symbolic value of the degree as a form of social and cultural capital, and their role in contributing to its acquisition.

Jordan (student) struggled with her desire for the credential and the symbolic "piece of paper." She knew it was a tool for social mobility, yet struggled with her perceptions of this. Jordan commented:

> Oh, it's just a piece of paper...but I'm also hypocritical because, you know, it's just a piece of paper and it tells you and I, that we are better than our brothers and sisters because, you know, we have this piece of paper…So, it's kind of weird. But at the same time, I'm still striving for that piece of paper. So, I'm also a hypocrite, because I'm, you know, I'm against it but then for it. (Jordan)

The students easily offered suggestions as to why their peers might engage in contract cheating. Finley (student) viewed the current landscape, or "field conditions" (Bourdieu, 1980/1990) of higher education as a perfect set of circumstances for contract cheating to flourish:

> I think that we live in a very competitive society. Speaking in a Canadian context, I think that students are feeling the pressure from society, from their families, to excel in their academic intellectual work. And they feel that they will do whatever it takes to get the marks they need to live up to that standard…also maybe mental health. People just don't have the capacity to do all what is being asked of them. So, a lot of students are in a situation where they could be working part-time to support their family, or they could be working full-time and taking on studies…Or they just have too much, and they can't manage, but they want to accomplish what they've set out to accomplish. So, it's a means to an end. (Finley)

Finley touched on many of the current discussions surrounding student motivations to hire a ghostwriter, and also some reasons why a ghostwriter may choose to start up their business. Jordan (student) had not engaged in contract cheating herself but knew a ghostwriter at a local university. She explained:

> I had a friend, we're no longer friends…and that's how she paid her tuition, she was writing papers for people…and I was just amazed because I'm like, when do you have time to write your own? Because she's doing the research, she's writing the paper, she's doing all the sourcing and everything and then the edits. And I'm like, that's a lot of work…and she was also a mom. So, I'm like, how do you have time? You know, because she started out with one and then he told his friends and then they told their friends so…For them, they're looking at the money…they don't care whether it's academic or not, it's a business for them, right. So is that capitalist piece. Well, I don't think that they care about the student possibly facing any kind of consequences for their actions, because then if they really did, would they do it in the first place? No, they wouldn't. Why would they even consider that and let that get in the way of them trying to make money? (Jordan)

Jordan's comments highlight the cyclical nature and "hustle" (Walker, 2019) of student ghostwriting, where students themselves provide ghostwriting services to fund their own school tuition, and also to support their own lifestyle while completing their degree. Jordan perceived the nature of ghostwriting as rooted in financial gain,

although her comments have also made visible the realities of many students today, who are managing childcare responsibilities, and facing economic challenges. Jordan's 'friend' leveraged the option to ghostwriter, quite possibly as a flexible source of income, which, would have strengthened her academic literacies needed for her own assignments (i.e., through practice writing of assessments). This makes the critical point that contract cheating is more than just a financial tool, it reveals something much deeper about the socio-economic inequalities within the higher education sector, similar to the precarious "place-holder" ghostwriting practices of academic youth in Kenya (see Walker, 2019, p. 161).

Like the ghostwriters, several student participants commented on the connection of enjoying the curriculum content, or having a clear professional pathway, as affecting choice around cheating, or influencing their value of the education. Elli (student) shared her thoughts:

> They could just be lazy and just want to have a larger social life, so you get someone else to do your work. It genuinely could be that they have no interest in this topic. Maybe they've been forced to by a family member, that they're forced to go to school and become a lawyer or a doctor. And that's not really their passion. So, if somebody else can just get them through it...perhaps they're people pleasers. (Elli)

While most of the students explained that they had never considered contract cheating and explained that it "just wasn't worth the risk" (Blake), Alex (student) viewed academic cheating as more of a personal choice, rather than connected to the institutional academic integrity policy or to scholarship more broadly. Alex reflected

that, for him, “it’s less about what are the rules that the school gives and more for me about, what is my own ethical code and what then will I break and not break—I go with my own ethical code.” Alex also noted that he had engaged in a “small amount of operating outside of the lines,” and that because he had the opportunity to do so in an online class he did not enjoy, then he was “going to take the easiest path what will allow me to get through something that I’m not enjoying.”

The participants’ student identities seemed to inform their views about contract cheating. Alex (student) explained outsourcing as a resource:

> I’m sure that for many people their engagement with contract cheating is viewed as a necessary tool that will get them to where they need to go. I don’t think anybody approaches it like I’m going to go to university, I’m going to stick it to the man, I’m going to cheat every single way that I can, to prove that the structure is wrong. (Alex)

Jordan (student) was more practical and wondered if students were feeling stressed and overwhelmed. Jordan, like Elli, also commented on parental pressures possibly playing a role, and the student feeling “forced” to complete the degree, as ghostwriter Sang had mentioned. Jordan said:

> People are just overwhelmed. They’re overwhelmed. It can be many things. It can be someone who is just, you know, overwhelmed with a lot of schoolwork and might just need the extra help to finish a paper. It can be someone who, you know, doesn’t really want to be there because their parents are forcing them to be there. And then, because

> they're forced to be there, they have to do well and they know they're not going to do well on their own. So, they pay someone to do it for them. (Jordan)

In this section, I have explained that students perceive other students who cheat as being motivated by the credential itself, and what this means for socio-economic mobility and reputation. Overall, they perceived other students as being under strain due to multiple priorities, stresses, and responsibilities. This finding aligns with Nagy & Groves (2021), who conducted an Australian study which coined the term "strained rationality" (p. 1) to help explain students' motivations for contract cheating. In their work, Nagy and Groves (2021) argued that "combatting unethical behaviour in the tertiary student-learning setting requires a more humancentric and inclusive approach where students feel comfortable approaching teaching staff to ask questions and receive support in developing their academic skills" (p. 335). The section that follows considers the teaching staff perceptions of the landscape of contract cheating.

Teaching Staff Perceptions of Contract Cheating

The teaching staff participants perceived contract cheating as adverse, and they had strong beliefs about the value of the essay as a form assessment; they believed that their own assessment design practices were designed to mitigate against misconduct. As such, two broad themes were identified. These themes are concerned with the essay's inherent value and morality, and assessment design. Other perceptions and observations are also discussed.

Essays and Morals

Teaching staff participants ultimately viewed employing contract cheating as a

missed opportunity for the student to develop academic literacies and other competencies connected to society and personal character development. The teaching staff comments often reflected a moral component, with connection to a student's ethical engagement not just with the academic institution, but with society more generally. Sandy (teaching staff) explained that "when you write someone else's paper for them, you take away their ability to critically think about something that might be important." Teaching staff also saw the essay as a tool for public good, and as a tool or precursor to supporting social justice, although the views were complicated. Rita (teaching staff), who had been teaching at the university level for 12 years explained:

> I have complicated feelings about it, because obviously as an academic myself, I think it [the essay] is a very powerful, useful form and format. And I think you know public discourse and knowledge would be better if people took seriously evidence and argumentation. There are a lot of good foundational concepts, I think, in essays. I think all of those skills are hugely important inside and outside of the university, but how to do it in a way that does more transparently develop those skills for students and so that they can see the value in those things. How rigid to be about exactly the academic format is not something that I haven't landed on any answers. (Rita)

What is interesting about this theme is how it contrasts from the ghostwriters' and students' perspective of misconduct as being a personal ethical choice, rather than an ethical choice connected to the larger moral framework of the academic institution.

Teaching staff perhaps have different priorities and goals, with developed academic habitus (Bourdieu, 1984/1988). They have acquired capital made more transparent through the systems and structures in which they inhabit, and in which fields they have been included. They are also situated at a place of privilege in this landscape inclusive to them, having the role to generate knowledge, assign grades and determine educational outcomes. This privileged position allows for alignment with, or the adoption of, their own institutions practical, ethical and/or moral view of cheating.

There are several slightly differing definitions of these two terms—ethics and morals. For the purpose of this study, "morals" are taken as customs or societal norms established by a group of individuals that guide an understanding of what is right and wrong (Walker & Lovat, 2014). "Ethics" speak to the character of the individual in particular situations, and guide values and principles in certain circumstances (Walker & Lovat, 2014). With this definition, it stands that ethics can be "restricted to one's own worldview" (Walker & Lovat, 2014, p. 1)—offering an insight into "habitus" through structured frameworks of understanding (Bourdieu, 1980/1990). The teaching staff appear to have adopted or inculcated the moral stance of the academic institution, while the students, in many cases, have not. In part, this moral stance is built into the dominant systems through policy and practice.

The teaching staff's perceptions of the value of essay writing was also connected to our wider societal responsibilities. Sandy (teaching staff), an instructor in the community college sector for 30 years, explained that essay writing skills are connected to social justice and to broader goals than just writing:

> If we can't do that, if we can't encourage students to do that [write an essay], then how will they ever tackle things like social justice? How

> will they ever tackle things like looking and understanding racism and inclusion and equity? Those are difficult questions; they're hard things to wrap your head around. They're hard things for academics to wrap their heads around. To say that students are never going to use writing. It's not about the writing. It's about understanding the arguments and why you're doing it. It's like saying that why would I ever, why do I need to learn functions? I'm never going to use math. Well, that's not true. And when we start pulling away all of these academic pieces for students just because we think somewhere along the line they're not going to write? No. It's about understanding the larger picture. (Sandy)

This distinction seems important, because teaching staff expect the students to take on the moral principles of the institution in the context of academic literacies, yet the process to do this is unclear. The teaching staff appear to suggest that it is in part through academic writing - the skills of forming robust arguments and analysis - that this transformation comes about. If habitus consists of our thoughts and beliefs, and habitus is developed over long periods of time in relation to fields (Bourdieu, 1972/1977), it is reasonable to consider that students' and teaching staff's views related to academic integrity matters were perceived differently–in this case the difference was the personal connection to institutional morals and norms. Peter (teaching staff), who had been teaching at the university for 53 years, shared his perspective on the value of the essay as an assessment form:

> I'm an old-school prof who believes that students ought to be able to not only speak properly…but be able to write properly. They've got to

> communicate in those two ways. And so, I insist that part of my course always had to have a written component. So how do I feel about students being forced to write something even in first year and big classes? I feel strongly about it. And, you know, some students write well because they came from a high school that insisted on this sort of thing…And some don't. But, you know, I've had students come back to me and say, you know, I really enjoyed your class. The thing that worked best for me or the most I got out of it, other than learning something about astronomy, was I learned to become a better writer. And that makes my heart smile because it's a lot of work for me, but even if it affects just 10 percent of the students, then I'm satisfied with that. I feel strongly about them having to write and compose something, it's whether you call it an essay or it's just a three-page thing or whatever it is, I feel it's important. And I think there are lots of students that graduate with degrees who can't write. And I'm wondering why we are giving these degrees to these people if they can't, you know—write... (Peter)

Peter's comments reflect a common view on the value of the degree, also expressed by some students and ghostwriters—that the degree is reflective of a particular set of academic literacies skills, that are of broad value to the economy and wider society. Academic writing is structured and organized by the social patterns that exist within the academic institution (Barton, 2007). Dominant writing systems are adopted and maintained for various purposes and privilege certain groups. Peter's comment that "some students write well because they came from a high school that insisted on this

sort of thing” also reflects Bourdieu’s (1979/1984) argument that those who flourish in higher education are often those who have pre-existing cultural capital – those skills and understanding of the academic system/field, in this case developed during high school. Comments from two students (Morgan and Mackenzie) also support this idea. They both described their experiences in Ontario high schools regarding exposure to citation and referencing practices which had prepared them for post-secondary writing. Morgan explained how she came to see an “uneven playing field” with her fellow students’ previous education “because people are coming in from all different high schools all around the country or province” and “you never get sat down by a professor or a teacher in high school that says, this is Chicago, APA, MLA, in-text citations, and footnotes.” These academic inconsistencies and histories make more demands of some than others, and privilege some more than others, yet the expectations are perceived as static and consistent for all students. Peter (teaching staff) had developed assessment practices to support his views that writing was a form of capital, and that graduates must be provided with academic writing opportunities to build such abilities and transform the academic habitus (Bourdieu, 1972/1977).

Teaching staff participants also commented on their own academic background and experiences learning to write in the academic field. Ling (teaching staff), who had been teaching for 8 years, commented that when she began her doctoral program, she had “never written a single essay” and that starting her doctorate (in Singapore) was “the first time being exposed to academic writing.” She said she was “still working on [her] writing skill, like, to this day.” Ling also spoke about how she was a first-generation university student in her family, and that her parents were uninvolved and unable to help her.

> I’m a first-generation university student, first-generation. I mean, my parents didn’t even get high school education. So, I’m basically on my own. And I guess I can’t imagine what other parents will be doing for their kids, in terms of academic performance. Maybe some of them are capable, so they will be able to help out. I never experienced that. (Ling)

Again, this echoes Bourdieu’s (Bourdieu, 1983/1986) ideas around the role of pre-existing cultural capital in educational experiences and outcomes. Perhaps Ling’s own challenges and experiences with academic writing led to her views about the credential and contract cheating. She explained:

> I mean, the degree may help you open doors with your very first job, but after that, does it really matter that much?…So, I have international students from the Asian countries. They come here to study at [institution redacted]. They want to graduate. They want to go home with that degree, but sometimes they find shortcuts. They take shortcuts. They don’t get caught and then what happened to them? Like, would that prevent them from being successful in future? Would that prevent them from, like, being good at what they do? Not necessarily. (Ling)

In contrast, Lucas (teaching staff and graduate student) viewed the essay as important, and shared his thoughts on why students may choose to outsource. He explained:

> Maybe a lack of confidence. Stress. I never have, as a student, quite honestly. And I never would, because I know that, no matter how painful and how much self-loathing I'm going through while I'm writing some papers and, you know, procrastinating, that's just part of my process. And I know that no matter what, I always come out better at the end for having been through that process. (Lucas)

Lucas's comments point to the sometimes arduous process that writing can be and highlights his view of the moral worth upon completion. When asked about talking to her students about contract cheating, Sandy (teaching staff) explained:

> I do talk to students about their job as students, what their role is and that at the end of the day, their moral compass belongs to them…I tell them it's their job to police their work. And it's the same thing. It's about a moral obligation. (Sandy)

Casey (teaching staff), who had been teaching for 25 years in a writing-centred discipline, explained her strong emotions about contract cheating. She said:

> I couldn't do your interviews because those people, they make me so, so angry. What they're doing, it so undermines my whole profession…and the students, like I do understand a lot of reasons why the students do this, and I try to show some compassion to them, and I've tried to take that onboard in how I talk to them about plagiarism, and how I try to get them to make different choices. But if you're

> writing work for somebody who's getting assessed as if it's theirs, they're not learning anything, and that's so fundamental to the work that I do. I can't see any justification for them doing that for work. I think they should all be ashamed of themselves, and they're all going to hell. (Casey)

Casey's (teaching staff) comments reflect the common view of contract cheating—that it is a full rejection of education, which terminates all learning. She also notes her awareness of other systemic issues and inequalities within fields of higher education, which assessment design strategies may not be able to address. She also points to the moral responsibilities of the institution, saying:

> These are students who often have barely functional spoken and written English-language skills, and how they're getting admitted to an English-language university is a whole question, and it's kind of a bait-and-switch. They're admitted and they're really not equipped to do the coursework, and then they cheat, understandably, because they don't know how else they're going to pass, and I really think it's quite morally compromising for the universities that are, kind of…If they're going to admit students who can't function in English, they need to provide English as an additional language training for them, that is an extra cost. (Casey)

This comment reveals something much deeper about faculty views on institutional integrity, and the consequences of seeking international tuition dollars without

establishing a support framework for both teachers and students. A growing concern across the sector (Khoo, 2021).

The teaching staff understandably had strong words and feelings about contract cheating. They also were very passionate about the assessments that they had crafted and worked out over periods of time, perceiving that their assessment design choices significantly had an impact on academic misconduct and integrity opportunities.

Assessment Design

All of the teaching staff interviewed had strong views about the role of assessment design in preventing contract cheating. They all provided examples of strategies used and refined over their teaching careers. While the effectiveness of these strategies cannot be known from the dataset collected here, their perceptions of their effectiveness was a theme. Brian (teaching staff) perceived assessment design as critical to removing opportunities to outsource in his courses. He provided an example:

> There's one class that I teach…around the intersection of sustainable practice and arts-making with a focus on theatre, and the final project does involve a significant amount of research...So, it's writing a proposal that's based off of research for your current context...They also do a presentation…and so because of that, if you were to outsource that project and then you're presenting it…it would become very obvious very quickly that this isn't your work because you won't be able to answer questions around it…Essentially, when writing and research involved, there's usually some mini defence that comes along

> with it that makes it very hard to do that…It's very hard to contract out to somebody who doesn't engage with that campus to be able to come up with a context for it. So, part of it is that contextualization as well. So, I rely heavily on assignment design to avoid the appeal of contract cheating. (Brian)

Rita (teaching staff) had designed her assessments in such a way that she believed it would be more difficult for the student to outsource. Rita designed with requirements to use specific course materials, and explained:

> I've been trying to make their essays more geared toward mobilizing concepts of readings that we use in the course. And I often, in the third-year courses I ask them to add additional references and articles that they find on their own. But I've tried to also make sure that they, well,…you would need a lot of attention from a ghostwriter to write for my courses, they're not just: write an essay about whatever. (Rita)

Peter (teaching staff) had some specific assessment strategies he had developed for various class sizes. For tests, he had a test bank of questions to draw from while he also used Proctorio (Proctorio, 2013) for online exams. For writing assignments, he asked students to write in groups. He explained:

> And working within a group forces them then to actually, in effect do their own research because they all take on a part of the assignments. And then one person at the end sort of puts it all together to make it

> look like it's coming from one person, but in a way, it sort of eliminates the option for the student to think, oh, I'll just get somebody to write this for me...So, it just makes it a little more challenging rather than the ghostwriter maybe just pulling something off the shelf. (Peter)

Lucas (teaching staff), working also in the Arts, argued that his assignments were designed so that they could not be outsourced, by the nature of the iterative work. Lucas explained:

> As far as the work that they are handing in in my courses, it's almost always an iterative process, because that's part of the production process for me…I see their work develop as they go…And so, there's really no way. In most of the coursework I've had with students, for them to, you know, hire another kid to go through the whole process. It would be so obvious, you know…When it's individual work, I build in stuff that ensures that I know everyone has done everything. So that there's no way for a student to get through my courses, without having, you know, handed in some original writing…I don't explicitly say don't cheat! It's just not possible for them to cheat. (Lucas)

Assessment design choices by a teaching staff member are perceived as having a role in reducing cheating. While this may be true to some extent, assessment is also shaped by dominant literacies and practices designed by larger systems in education, such as provincial or institutional quality assurance frameworks. For example, many program learning outcomes (PLOs) in the Ontario College sector are created externally from

the individual college itself. In addition, Ontario College programmes must comply with a provincial teaching directive called Essential Employability Skills or EES (Ministry of Colleges and Universities [MCU], 2009). Many teaching staff, especially part-time faculty, must adopt and teach a course as developed by another person or group, without input, effectively impacting academic freedom, and limiting how teaching staff can (re)design assessments. Greta (teaching staff) explains:

> At the college level there's a lot of more like little boxes that you have to check off. I think that assignment design becomes more and more challenging in that regard, because you want to make sure that you are meeting EES and PLOs and all of that stuff, whereas at the university level when you're doing an assignment, most of the PLOs or student-facing learning outcomes are things that are not necessarily mandated by the department. It might be something that the professors themselves have created. So, the more freedom you have makes it a lot easier to design the assignments. (Greta)

Many teaching staff used educational technology such as Turnitin or SafeAssign (Blackboard, 2021) for assignments. The uploading of assignments to text-matching software is a practice, and in context, a literacy event. The practice is contested across academia, with several of the teaching staff participants expressing their disapproval of it. The implications of educational technology often reveal the power imbalances and inequities in the education system. Teaching staff use it as one element of an assessment strategy. Like many assessment elements, they are not neutral. Rita (teaching staff) commented: "I never use Turnitin. I still resist using

Turnitin because I tell them [students], I don't like this private company making profit off your work and storing your data and stuff." Brian (teaching staff) added that he did not, "like the policing action of having to start with Turnitin." Rita (teaching staff) acknowledged that academic misconduct was likely going on, remarking that, "I think it is probably fairly easy to get away with it in a large first year course, where I don't have a relationship with the students." Living and working in academia, teaching staff were able to articulate and acknowledge potential systemic issues that may be contributing to the problem of contract cheating. Rita (teaching staff) explained:

> I do think that it has to do with universities, again, understanding themselves and students understanding them as just institutions that give out credentials. The whole idea of subcontracting and contracting out and everything is just so, well, you could make a larger political economic argument about this. But, you know, our economies are increasingly dependent on all of this type of casual contract labour that almost every institution is using in various ways. (Rita)

In this section, I have explained that teaching staff perceived that when they had the agency to design their assessments, they could reduce contract cheating opportunities. Teaching staff also perceived the essay as one vehicle to develop transferable capital and its moral worth was aligned with the values of the institution and credential itself.

Conclusion

This chapter has described the various perspectives of ghostwriters, students, and teaching staff with respect to contract cheating, highlighting themes that emerged

through concept mapping and interviews. Key aspects of this chapter highlight that ghostwriters construct their identities as that of “helper” and see themselves as writers. This identity appeared to reflect acknowledgement of academia as a potential site of struggle, along with what appeared to be attempts to ameliorate any guilt around the moral stance of ghostwriting. I have also shown that students’ knowledge and awareness of contract cheating was influenced by advertising on campus, not through institutional initiatives, which may have implications for how students develop individual understandings of cheating and misconduct, which are not always aligned with academic integrity policy. Teaching staff had strong beliefs about the value of the essay, and their own strategies to reduce contract cheating in their courses, while acknowledging larger trends in higher education, which was impacting the landscape. The next chapter discusses the findings and presents the contours of the contract cheating Literacies Landscape Map.

Chapter 7–Discussion

Drawing on the analysis presented in chapters 5 and 6, this chapter discusses and interprets the study's findings in relation to the wider literature on contract cheating and literacy brokering. Through the metaphor of the "literacies landscape," this chapter highlights the social and textual interactions, exchanges, and practices of ghostwriting, and offers an insight into a subset of the world of contract cheating, reflecting its complexities, utility, and struggles. The themes reflect a deep engagement with digital and socially situated literacies across the landscape. In particular, I make visible the terrain and contours of a "fourth space," where learning and discourse is relational and informal, and the online domain plays a significant role.

Reflecting Bourdieu's (1972/1977, 1980/1990) notion of "field," the landscape of contract cheating is permeated with sites of contested power, blurred boundaries, and spaces of agency. Gimenez & Thomas (2015) remind us that "paying attention to context, in particular the contextualization of pedagogical practices, is central to our understanding of academic literacies" (p. 31). This study has asked questions about the nature of literacy brokering, perceptions of independent ghostwriters, students, and teaching staff, and challenged itself to describe the landscape of contract cheating. This positioning sheds light on the affordances and constraints of the intersecting fields as well as conditions for individuals engaged in contract cheating.

Brokering and Assessment Literacies

Within the data, literacy brokering between ghostwriters and their student clients, although occasional, was specific and related to assessment. Although infrequent, these literacy patterns emerged, and highlighted, student and ghostwriter motivations, experiences, and struggles. Consistent with the work of Perry (2009),

this study found that brokering was not an activity of language translation, but instead, a transfer of capital – including academic literacies knowledge, and, in some cases, cultural knowledge. In this context, the transfer of knowledge related to the literacies practices of assessment, regarding assignment criteria and authorship, such as citation and referencing practices. These literacy events were not always welcome by the ghostwriter; nevertheless, the ghostwriters engaged in both brokering and collaboration to maintain their relationships and secure future opportunities for work. In these contexts, the ghostwriter is trading on their academic literacies capital twice. In the first instance, they did so to produce an academic text, and in the second instance, they did so to sustain the social capital that supports the ghostwriter–student relationships and the potential for future work.

The narrative descriptions provided in chapter 5 have demonstrated that any type of collaboration positions the student to learn informally about the assignment, and to develop academic literacies. Those students who submit partially completed assignments to a ghostwriter may have already engaged with the academic work, and may want to continue the work in a brokering or collaborative format. Moreover, the chapter highlighted that these students are seeking to learn and would benefit from building their assessment literacies more broadly. Other studies have also found positive benefits for students writing in pairs (see, for example, Storch, 2005, 2019). These positive effects are found on the writing product, but also the writing process. This finding builds upon Amigud and Lancaster (2019b) who found that "many students try completing the work themselves, but later succumb to situational pressures that influence their ability to complete the work" (p. 102).

The theme of collaboration practices between ghostwriters and their clients was an unanticipated finding. These occasions, while not plentiful were noted by most

of the ghostwriters. The finding was unanticipated because of how the transactions are typically described in the media and literature, as a "complete dismissal of the learning process" (C. Lee, 2019), and because students are somewhat portrayed as paying ghostwriters to complete assignments "without any inputs of their own" (Sivasubramaniam et al., 2016, p. 2). However, this study found evidence of collaboration practices, as they were described by the ghostwriters and students in chapter 5. In a 2016 study on contract cheating the ghostwriter participants were described as "former students of Western education who are now based in their native, non-Western countries" (Sivasubramaniam et al., 2016 p. 7). The same study by Sivasubramaniam et al. (2016) appears to dismiss the "claims" made by the ghostwriters that they worked in collaboration with the student. The 2016 study refers to any student writing collaboration as the ghostwriter's "justification" and suggests that the ghostwriters "tried to prove customer involvement throughout the project, and therefore argued it [ghostwriting] is not unethical or immoral" (Sivasubramaniam et al., 2016, p. 11). This comment not only dismisses any legitimate informal learning, but it also marginalizes the motivations of the students around assessment practices. Although it may be true that only a very small minority of students seeking essays from freelance ghostwriters end up working collaboratively, or within a brokering exchange, the findings of my thesis have highlighted that collaboration within the frame of contract cheating does exist, and that it can be mutually beneficial. Moreover, it suggests that the landscape is more complex than is currently found in the literature.

Collaboration functioned to support repeat and new business for the ghostwriters, which aligns with the previously observed finding that ghostwriters valued word-of-mouth and referrals over online advertising (Sivasubramaniam et al.,

2016). Lancaster (2018) introduced a list of nine profiles or groups of ghostwriter types, drawn from the literature. Although this list of ghostwriter types was described as “not necessarily complete or mutually exclusive” (p. 3), the results of this thesis could add to Lancaster’s nine groups of ghostwriters, and offer a subcategorization of the ghostwriter who, without intending to do so, provides academic collaboration and/or assessment brokering for the student. More research is needed to confirm if this activity occurs frequently enough to be considered as part of the ghostwriter typology. In some cases, the outcome of this brokering is informal student learning. The results of this thesis demonstrate a need to, as ghostwriters have been, expand the profile of the student who engages in contract cheating, as more than what the binary suggests. Further to this, in her recent doctoral exploration of contract cheating in Kenya, Walker (2019) found that “[a]cademic writing is primarily used as a part-time job alongside full-time studies, as a ‘place-holder’ during periods of would-be unemployment, and as a supplement to formal employment” (p. 4). She also notes that while most of the Kenyan ghostwriters had graduated from post-secondary, some were still students. This was true for two of the ghostwriters interviewed in this project. The idea that ghostwriters hide in plain sight on campus surely works against any institution’s efforts to create a homogenous culture of academic integrity.

The findings presented in this thesis do not claim that these collaborative writing and brokering efforts place the student behaviours outside the scope of academic misconduct. Instead, the narratives of participants show that by acknowledging some forms of learning, and that brokering of knowledge around assessment is occurring, we can further our understanding of what motivates the student to outsource, and what pedagogical changes related to assessment literacy—for both teaching staff and students—might be transformative in the classroom.

Foltýnek and Králíková (2018) found that one of the most important reasons leading to student contract cheating in Czechia, was "lack of time, not understand[ing] the topic, and laziness" (p. 10). This aligns with the perceptions outlined in this study; however, it should be noted that the Foltýnek and Králíková study (2018) did not include any questions about citation, referencing or assessment. Amigud and Lancaster (2019b) also found that students "may have a knowledge gap affecting their ability to complete assignments" (p. 104). Knowing that students are seeking knowledge related to their assessments, and that there is some learning in this process, disrupts the unhelpful binary construct that so often accompanies descriptions of contract cheating. The existing definitions often refer to students "bypassing learning" (Lancaster, 2018, p. 1). From the narratives of participants presented in this thesis, it is clear that this binary is insufficient to explain the range of behaviours that exist. I propose that this construction further isolates students who struggle with assessments, and whose academic writing identities place the value of their academic capital outside the contours of the academic institution.

The academic literature and narrative accounts from the media by and large project and also offer a binary perspective on the issue of contract cheating–this binary is founded on notions of good vs bad morals and ethics. Indeed, as presented in chapters 5 and 6, this study found that this discourse of "morality" was present in all three participant groups to varying degrees. The teaching staff were most likely to characterize contract cheating in moral or ethical terms. This moral binary may contribute to students seeking informal help outside the academic domain. The ghostwriters flipped the issue on its head, arguing that their work "helped" in many moral and ethical ways (e.g., helped to put food on table; helped students to gain a degree).

The practices of collaboration and assessment brokering presented through participants' narratives suggest that some students may be employing agency and expressing a resistance to the challenges they encounter in the formal assessment space. As one student participant, Alex, framed it, he would first seek "non-authoritarian" spaces for help (see chapter 5). Assessment collaboration and assessment brokering (Thacker, 2022) are two examples of social and digital literacies. Moreover, as Perry (2009) highlights, these socially situated literacies have the benefit of "brokering [that] may reinforce specific literacy concepts and skills" (p. 274). This study's findings strengthen those by Satchwell et al. (2013), whose study of literacy practices found that "agency is intimately linked with identity…if students felt that they did not have agency in the literacy practices with which they were expected to engage, ultimately they were less likely to adhere to associated conventions and the quality of the work was reduced" (p. 53). Academic texts have implicit agency. Barton (2009) explained that texts "act as people, on behalf of people and in place of people" (p. 49). When a text no longer acts on behalf of the teaching staff, another sponsor for that text is sought.

This thesis has revealed a complex landscape of both agency and resistance, demonstrating that contract cheating with independent ghostwriters has social and cultural underpinnings, providing spaces for collaboration with a ghostwriter—which is a site of informal learning—and yet also a contested practice. Narratives of "support" offered through the framing of ghostwriting identities as "writers" and roles as "helpers" position ghostwriters to be viewed as, and act as, assessment broker if they choose. The identity of "helper" may also function to neutralize (Sykes & Matza, 1957) and normalize the behaviours as legitimate. I argue that this understanding of the social nature of contract cheating contributes to a deeper understanding of

assessment literacy and could support the development of contract cheating reduction strategies that educate, include, and respond to students' social needs in education, and are inclusive to their digital everyday lives. As presented in chapter 6, the ghostwriters had mixed perceptions of the ethics of their work, Sam noting he had "no moral pangs" about it, and Preet acknowledging it was "unethical." Walker (2019) found that her Kenyan ghostwriters were "very far removed from cheating" (p. 290) and "save for the concerns of a few writers, ethics never came up in the study. In fact, when asked whether they consider the ethics of academic writing, most of those surveyed said that they did not" (Walker, 2019, p. 291).

This thesis further presents original insights into the lived experiences of 11 ghostwriters, including how online technologies, such as Google Docs, and PayPal "facilitate the brokering process" (Raise & Lee, 2017, p. 14), and how collaboration may provide some students informal learning opportunities. As such, the findings of this research build on the work of Raise and Lee (2017) who found students engaging with technology and working in pairs to maximize brokering opportunities in the classroom. Raise and Lee's (2017) final theme was related to scaffolding (p. 15) which differs from this study. Scaffolding is an instructional technique. An example of scaffolding would be a teacher dividing curriculum content into smaller chunks so that the students can progress over time toward greater understanding. While scaffolding was explored with the ghostwriters in interviews and the follow-up survey with key informants, the study did not find strong evidence to support the notion that the students brokering with ghostwriters were engaged in, or benefited from, any academic scaffolding literacy processes, or that there were scaffolding efforts on the part of the ghostwriter.

Chapter 5 outlined findings regarding the assessment brokering themes of a)

assignment criteria and b) authorship. These assessment brokering types described by the ghostwriters broadly align with Bretag et al., (2018) whose survey of Australian students found that a dissatisfaction with the teaching and learning environment was a variable influencing a student's decision to outsource. Also, a survey by Harper et al. (2019) of Australian teaching staff found a disjuncture between Australian staff and student beliefs with respect to understanding assignment criteria.

The ghostwriters interviewed in this study used their academic literacies to complete their work. Some took extreme pride in interpreting assignment expectations, the syllabus, and marking criteria. They utilized disciplinary knowledge and awareness to employ understanding of sentence structure, and vocabulary, and engaged in critical and abstract thinking. This finding was consistent with Sivasubramaniam et al., (2016), whose ghostwriter participant reported that they had "utilized [their] acquired analytical and vocabulary skills to address the needs of [their] students" (p. 6). The results of this study show that several (not all) of the ghostwriters assessed students' academic level to produce assignments at the appropriate degree standard. This required the ghostwriters to explore a student's personal history and writing experiences, as well as their own to create seemingly "authentic" academic work and avoid detection by teaching staff.

Many of the ghostwriters also drew heavily on their broad knowledge of citation and referencing practices and the essay genre, positioning themselves as a source of assessment knowledge. Only one ghostwriter in this study, located in Kenya, spoke about text-matching software as part of the ghostwriting industry. This finding is contrary to other studies (see Sivasubramaniam et al., 2016; Walker, 2019), where ghostwriters claimed to use Turnitin or other text-matching software. The ghostwriter is a broker of academic discourse, a writer of texts, and draws upon their

own assessment literacies and academic experiences. This study also found that the ghostwriters continued to grow their academic literacies and writer identities through the work of ghostwriting. Walker also concluded this, and found that for many of the Kenyan ghostwriters, contract cheating writing "may unwittingly contribute to the development of academic knowledge across several disciplines, and the development of academic literacies" (Walker, 2019, p. 287). Academic literacies are thus produced, leveraged, and consumed in the seemingly fluid landscapes of contract cheating–especially in increasingly online fields.

Narratives provided in chapter 6 demonstrated that there are various perspectives on the role of spoken language in contract cheating, and certain systems upholding these views. Although several of the ghostwriters confirmed that some clients were linguistically diverse and that—from their perspective—a lack of language proficiency may have motivated some to outsource (aligning with Bretag et al., 2018), language proficiency did not play a significant role in triggering instances of collaboration or assessment brokering. This perhaps indicates that students with language challenges related to their academic program are less likely to try and work collaboratively on an assignment or broker with a ghostwriter. This may also be because students with academic language challenges are less likely to choose a local, independent ghostwriter, as opposed to another outsourcing option (e.g., essay mill, family, friend), or they may choose authorized supports on campus.

Chapter 6 also provided insight into the level of awareness of teaching staff and students about contract cheating. The student and teaching staff participants were both aware of ghostwriting services available on campus, although they had differing views on the phenomenon. Although the students did not generally know the term "contract cheating," they were aware of the behaviours and of advertising on campus

and through social media. All of the teaching staff interviewed were aware of contract cheating, and believed they had some assessment related strategies in place to reduce it. The strategies were shared during the interviews, such as assigning group work, and local topics. It was surprising that all of the teaching staff had considered various strategies and this differs slightly from that of Eaton et al. (2019) who found a "general lack of awareness about contract cheating among post-secondary educators in Canada" (p. 9). This difference in findings may have more to do with the time difference between the two studies – Eaton et al. in 2019 (prior to COVID-19) versus the thesis data collection period of 2020/2021.

After all, the COVID-19 pandemic thrust contract cheating misconduct to the forefront, around the world in 2020/2021, during the time of the thesis interviews (see Rossiter, 2020). Narratives provided in chapter 6 regarding perceptions of student motivations to engage in contract cheating align with the study by Eaton et al. (2019), who found that Canadian faculty members perceived that their students' previous learning experiences, pressure, and stress contributed to contract cheating behaviours. This study builds upon the comment by Eaton et al. (2019) that *both* students and faculty need further instruction and support, and that teaching staff resources "could include professional development around assessment design" (p. 11), and I argue that this recommendation for further educational development should be moved into a different, transformative framework, so that it may be more effective. That framework would include assessment literacies as a threshold concept (Meyer & Land, 2003) and that assessment literacy frameworks be developed and implemented in concert with an institution's Centre for Teaching and Learning (or equivalent). This also builds upon the conclusion by Eaton et al. (2019) that "there is a need for contract cheating to be addressed in institutional policy and for it to be discussed openly among faculty

and students" (p. 15).

Within participants' interview data, assessment serves as the battleground of social inequity and unequal academic structures in our higher education systems (Bourdieu, 1979/1984). The specific theme of assessment brokering, gives rise to my recommendation for academic initiatives to adopt assessment and academic writing conventions, including citation and referencing, as threshold concepts. This adoption forms part of a transformational approach to academic integrity, rather than a punitive response, or a move toward criminalizing contract cheating services as seen in the UK (see BBC News, 2021). As laid out in chapter 2, threshold concepts are defined as troublesome curricular topics (Meyer & Land, 2003) and an "ongoing struggle" (Kent, 2016, p. 2) for students to learn and master. This thesis demonstrates that some students have an ongoing struggle with the practices of citation and referencing, and so do some teaching staff, suggesting that a new approach is needed.

The findings chapters also demonstrate that when a student's understanding of authorship and assessment is precarious, it can position them in a state of liminality with respect to the academic domain, and when brokering with a ghostwriter they are engaged within new domain or space. With a troublesome understanding of authorship as part of the contract cheating landscape, repositioning citation and referencing as a threshold concept shifts—if not addresses—this vulnerable student position, positioning academic integrity education as transformational (Meyer et al., 2010). Academic integrity education, training in citation and referencing (Harper et al., 2021) and "proper referencing" (Amigud & Lancaster, 2019b, p. 106) is often touted as one solution to reducing contract cheating; however, without sufficient mastery and transformation of student identity with scholarly academic literacies practices, assessment literacies will remain a vulnerability.

Rogerson (2017) noted "citation irregularities" (p. 8) as a clue that would help identify ghostwritten assignments. She also noted that one student in her study "expressed their personal difficulties in understanding faculty referencing requirements," (p. 8) which aligns with the insights drawn from this project. While Rogerson (2017) pointed to citation managers and increased "skill development sessions" (p. 5) to support student success around citation, the Rogerson study fails to frame this need as a threshold concept, thereby holding back the potential of truly transformative mastery of the academic literacies needed for success. By contrast, my study demonstrates that referencing and citation practice meet the criteria of a threshold concept, as both troublesome and transformative. Threshold concepts are also characterized by their "liminality" (Meyer & Land, 2003), which will be discussed shortly.

Without learning outcomes applied to key academic literacies such as essay writing, referencing, citation, and strong professional development for faculty with respect to assessment design, the assessment and progression with these critical skills will remain a challenge. For students to find confidence in their academic literacies requires time and support. For faculty to find excellence in an assessment design requires pioneering several iterations of the assignment, responding to feedback, and constant oversight. Faculty need institutional support to engage in assessment redesign. As noted in chapter 2, much of the literature on contract cheating suggests assessment design as part of a holistic approach and tangible solution, yet the institutional framework to implement this strategy is lacking. Ongoing assessment design requires dedicated time, not always afforded to teaching staff. In addition, much of the pedagogical strategy related to assessment in the literature misses the strengthening of assessment literacy as foundational to transformative change.

Assessment strategies such as increasing timed and invigilated assessments (Baird & Clare, 2017; Moriarty et al., 2016), including specific contextual requirements in an assignment (Rogerson, 2017); requiring localized knowledge (Lancaster & Clarke 2016); and improving relationships between teaching staff and students (Harper et al., 2019; Tomar, 2012) ring true; however, these recommendations miss the foundational elements of assessment mastery. Findings demonstrated that each teaching staff member held beliefs that their assessment practices, although heavily iterative, held some potential, however small, to reduce, or thwart contract cheating.

The written assignment is the dominant form of assessment in higher education. Assessment is a messy journey, of course, and assessment design, as evidenced by the iterative process described by each the teaching staff participants. Certain assessment choices require more time–time to develop, time to explain, support and grade. Some faculty may have teaching assistants to support grading, some may not. Part-time or sessional instructors may not be paid for assessment redesign (Crossman, 2019). Class size impacts assessment choices, and disciplinary content may also affect choice of assessment design. Some teaching staff are trained on rubrics, others are not, or have less use for them given their curriculum, degree level, or discipline. The structures of assessment are inconsistently applied across the sector.

Assessment drives the supply and demand for ghostwriters. The practice of assessment appears to be contested across higher education, in its various shapes and forms. Even the enduring dissertation and thesis has had its form and purpose questioned from within academia (Porter & Young, 2018). Through the narratives of ghostwriters, students and teaching staff, chapters 5 and 6 demonstrated that

assessment frameworks, systems and practices hold power, which can include or exclude a student's prior learning experiences, history, and interests. Non-dominant literacy practices may not always be valued or "easily transferred" (Mannion et al., 2007, p. 15) to college or university related literacy events, such as assessment. Assessment can be permeated with educational policy directions, leading to unwanted demands of both students and teaching staff.

Assessment is influenced by the established social structures and reflects power dynamics (Yusun & Gagné, 2021). The literacies landscape of contract cheating highlights this. This is important because it acknowledges how critical assessment design and implementation is to student success. Holistically, student success means more than "good" grades–it means wellness, belonging, and access to opportunity. Students bring complex backgrounds, identities, and discourses to the classroom and to their views on assessment. This complexity is an academic opportunity; however, these backgrounds may restrict, exclude, or enable their academic literacies (Bourdieu, 1979/1984; Street, 1995). Like writing, assessment design is iterative, and can be messy. The learning environment, including assessment design is determined by the institution and the teaching staff. It is challenging for teaching staff to share the power in a classroom, when implicit in the teaching role is assessment and grading, as pointed out by the students in their comments about assessment and seeking clarity on assignment requirements. Yet teaching staff are restrained by many of the same dominant discourses and systems as students.

Although alternative approaches to grading, or rather the move to "ungrading" is gaining popularity (see Stommel, 2021), letter and numerical grading practices still dominate the current system and policy. While there are many personal contexts and institutional situations that influence contract cheating, this study highlights a lack of

assessment literacy as one potential underlying factor. This study finding supports the idea that there is a link—suggested by Morris (2018)—between contract cheating and assessment literacy. Lancaster and Clarke (2016) also hint at this framework in their contract cheating recommendation to "help students have an understanding that they are being assessed in order to help them to develop their own skills to ensure that they can demonstrate they have subject expertise" (p. 649). This suggestion becomes redundant, however, when students do not value their learning.

Digital Literacies and Techno-Capital

An interesting finding of the study regarding digital literacies was its significant role in contract cheating, on both a micro and macro scale, and how these literacies are an important social element of the contract cheating landscape. On a global scale, Terry (ghostwriter) reflected that contract cheating was able to thrive in the digital space. He explained that "the thing about drug trafficking is it happens on the ground, people have to literally move goods…Internet routes are so much easier…it's difficult to put in adequate measures." ICT affords the broad academic community great freedom, yet also creates restrictions. The literature often speaks to the role of technology in changing the contract cheating landscape over time (see, for example, Bain, 2015), yet it is often not clear, beyond social media (Lancaster, 2019) what this means for a student and ghostwriter, in practice, locally. This section will discuss two affordances and opportunities provided by ICT and digital literacies, including privacy and friendship that were found in the data. Literacies constitute forms of capital, "laden with symbolic significance that lead to the articulation and exercise of symbolic power" (Carrington & Luke, 1997, p. 104) – this exercise can be clearly seen with socially situated digital literacies.

In addition to the unequal distribution of academic resources among students,

there also exists a variance in digital literacies, or techno-capital (Rojas et al., 2003). The contract cheating literacy events described in this study are defined as "digital literacies practices." They are patterned by social interactions, cultural experiences of literacy and technology, academic institutional structures, socio-economic conditions, and power relations (Barton et al., 2000). Contract cheating as a practice is embedded within more visible, dominant, literacy practices such as assessment and academic writing, yet also engages with marginalized literacies. Altering the contract cheating landscape requires a fundamental review and transformation of assessment literacies, taking into account the digital and social nature of literacy and learning. Viewing contract cheating as a literacy practice has arguably presented the phenomenon as more socially enabled than currently presented within the literature. For those engaging in contract cheating with independent ghostwriters, digital literacies allow for social relations, and may reduce the power struggles and inequities that exist within the systems of higher education.

In addition to social resources, the ghostwriters and students all leveraged technology resources and skills whereby the contract cheating process was strongly enabled by utilizing digital literacies. Digital literacies are interconnected with resources, literacy practices, and academic literacies. Ghostwriting leverages the social and cultural relevance of digital literacies to profit from, and further, a student's desire and ability to gain an academic credential. Ghostwriting practices in this context are therefore dependent on the privacy afforded in the digital space, and the bridge that technology provides between the participants, across the country, and the globe. Digital technology also influenced academic literacies and practices of collaboration, for example with the use of Google Docs.

Discussion of two forms of assessment were dominant in the interviews: the

essay, and the online proctored exams. Web proctored exams, as a topic of discussion, was timely, given the sudden pivot to online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Along with this pivot came an increase in proctored exam use (Kharbat & Abu Daabes, 2021), which typically includes web surveillance. Existing ed-tech[12] influences have an impact on assessment (re)design (e.g., Turnitin), as does new technology, such as online proctoring software. As ed-tech companies continue to develop products for assessment and promote ed-tech for the prevention of misconduct, teaching staff and institutions will continue to have to navigate this contested arena and determine how their choices will impact student choices down the line. My study has pointed to concerns about robust assessment literacy, and as such, I argue that shoring up assessment literacy for students and teaching staff may reduce instances of contract cheating, but overall, will support teaching and learning. Technology and ICT finds its place permeated in the contract cheating literacies landscape.

Rich descriptions from the ghostwriters interviewed in this study detailed how contract cheating for academic institutions engages in a variety of digital academic literacy practices such as the use of scholarly databases, citation/referencing software, digital file management, use of education technology (e.g., text-matching software), and instructional technology (e.g., learning management systems; online discussion boards). Several ghostwriters also employed the use of digital writing assistance tools, such as Grammarly (Grammarly, 2021), which scans text for options to improve writing concerns such as grammar, plagiarism, spelling, style, and tone. Rowan (ghostwriter) referred to these digital tools and methods, as "quality assurance

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[12] Ed-tech is the short form and colloquial use for the term "educational technology." Ed-tech is hardware and/or software designed to enhance teaching and learning.

checks" for her business. Undergraduate student Morgan pointed out that engineering undergraduate students at her institution received a free Grammarly subscription, because "they're just really bad at writing." This free subscription for students was confirmed at several Canadian university websites (e.g., University of Prince Edward Island, Memorial University, and University of Saskatchewan). Participants explained how digital tools and anonymous software may make the practices of contract cheating increasingly easier, and efficient in digital spaces. These digital spaces and places, such as Wikipedia, have been described as reflecting "the principle of mobilizing collective intelligence by encouraging free and open participation" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006b, p. 45), working against the academic integrity notions of the institution. Along with the presence of physical advertising of ghostwriting services around campus, advertising on digital and social media platforms was creating a "visual milieu" that has influenced several of the students' perceptions of the phenomenon.

Perry (2009) reminds us that "literacy practices are always contextualized by genre and culture" (p. 273), but this study finds that this is also true of domain and mode. While contract cheating behaviours are identified with a minority of students, some of those students are struggling with writing practices and demands that require an unspoken level of cultural capital, aligned with academic fields of study. Often, these literacies are only developed through experiences and the development of writing identities (Bourdieu, 1979/1984). The next section presents my conceptualization of a "fourth space" where some students find refuge and access to informal learning practices.

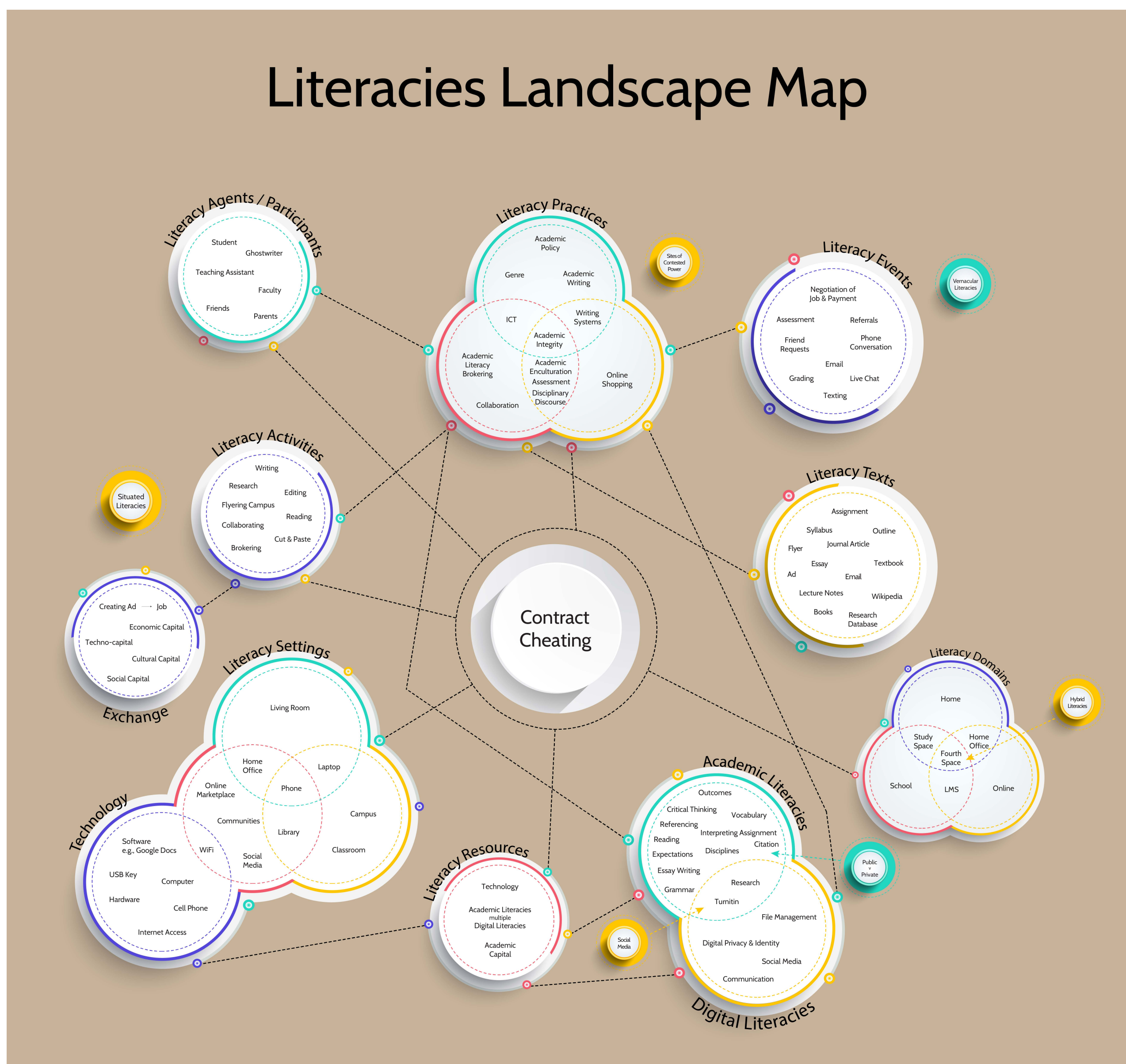
Surveying the Landscape and a Fourth Space

This section discusses the findings of the contract cheating Literacies

Landscape Map, or scape, in response to my third research question which asks: What does the mapping of literacies reveal about the eduscape of contract cheating, in the Canadian context? (See below and appendix A for the findings: Literacies Landscape Map). In this context, the map reflects the literacies landscape of independent ghostwriters, and does not include the broader landscape of essay mill ghostwriters.

Figure 3.

Literacies Landscape Map



Through this unique approach to collecting and interpreting the data, as outlined in chapter 4, the creation of the Literacy Landscape Map functioned as both a tool for data collection, and as a technique to analyze and interpret the data. Approaching "mapping as practice" (Genz & Lucas-Drogan, 2017, p. 1) across domains afforded insight into how the ghostwriters and students work alongside and with academic literacies practices, yet outside the physical domain of campus or the institution. This section discusses the landscape which offers both "spatial as well as ideological dimensions" (Forstorp & Mellström, 2018, p. 3) to the findings. It is a metaphor to describe the features of academic literacies within the phenomenon of academic ghostwriting. This notion speaks to the interconnectedness, impermanence, and boundary blurring of literacy and social practices, both local and global.

Through mapping of the "literacy social practice building blocks" (Hamilton, 2010, p. 12), the map showed a space that was occupied by the ghostwriter and student client, a space that was separate and on the boundary of the dominant discourse of academia, and that existed outside the classroom, either online or in person. The contours of the map brought to the forefront the notion of third space as discussed by Bhabha (1994), a space which intersected with hybrid literacies, both digital and academic. In other cases, multiple literacies intertwined, where the student and ghostwriter drew upon digital and academic literacies, but also vernacular literacies. Vernacular literacies are associated with home, and everyday lives, "outside the domains of power and influence" (Barton, 2007, p. 52). These relationships and intersections found in the data partly explain how vernacular literacies act to include the student, drawing them into a socially situated space, engendering other literacy practices with informal learning, such as collaboration and brokering.

Another important finding reflected in the Literacies Landscape Map was that the space created by the ghostwriter—be it a collaborative or brokered space—offers privacy, social relationships, and empowerment. One explanation for this finding is that ghostwriters' work is to roam within digital domains, creating networks, gaining access to third spaces, and in some cases, creating other, fourth spaces. Contract cheating has carved out new networks, informal communities, and liminal spaces of agency, separated from the contested spaces of higher education. The impact of technology on contract cheating is significant, as it not only impacts the nature and volume of the business, but it also impacts the domains between which the students and ghostwriters move.

These results can be related to Wellman's (2001) notion of networked individualism. Networked individualism refers to the increasing importance of personal networks over communal networks, facilitated by the rise of the internet. The Literacies Landscape Map reflects a personal network, connected by the digital and various resources or capital. Wellman et al. (2003) suggest that "(e)ach person is a switchboard, between ties and networks. People remain connected, but as individuals, rather than being rooted in the home bases of work unit and household. Each person operates a separate personal community network, and switches rapidly among multiple sub-networks" (p. 20). This framing brings about the question of personal networks and a person's relationship to institutional values and ethics, furthering Alex's (student) point that his ethics reflected his own perspectives beliefs, and not his institutions.

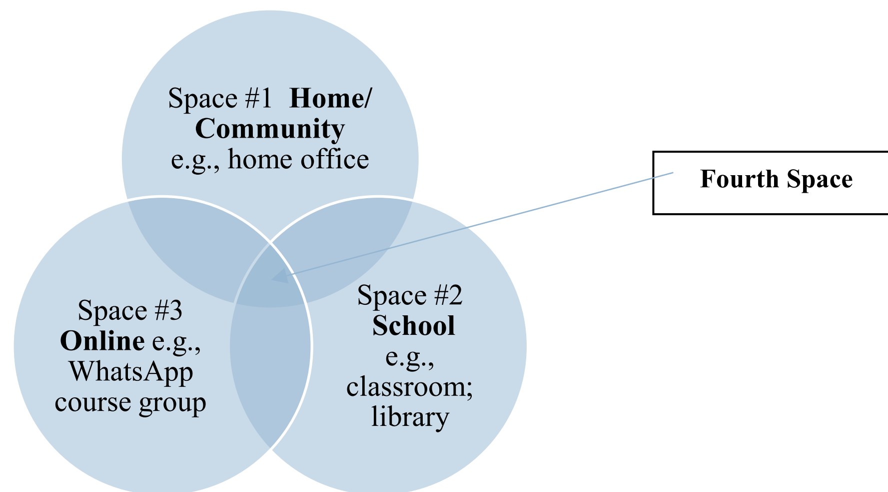
The Literacies Landscape Map demonstrates how the independent ghostwriter can function at times as the broker, as they "straddle different contexts" (Papen, 2010, p. 11) or domains or fields–the academic domain and the informal gig economy

(Lancaster, 2020a) brought about by the digitization of the economy and of higher education. Ghostwriters can leverage their academic literacies to "bridge and scaffold linguistic, cultural, and textual divides" (Perry, 2009, p. 1) for their student clients in a digital space. This space affords both the student and ghostwriter a degree of privacy, and it exists outside the academic institutional domain, with reduced pressures and "strains" (Nagy & Groves, 2021) yet it can still offer a site of learning. This space is navigated through the broker relationship and reflects a resistance to the expected literacy practices of the post-secondary domain, and offers the agency to navigate assessment on their own terms. These spaces may be temporary, and fleeting, yet a key aspect of them is the exchange and leveraging of social capital.

The contract cheating literacy landscape's most salient feature is developed from notions of third space discussed by Bhabha (1994), and Moje et al. (2004). The space identified through the Literacies Landscape Map described in the paragraphs above, is called fourth space (see figure 4). The idea of a fourth space is not new (see Fernández Ruiz et al., 2019). This fourth space is characterized by a blending of the other literacies spaces (1, 2, and 3), and the affordances provided by ICT, social relations, and techno-capital.

Figure 4.

Contract Cheating Literacies Spaces, Fourth Space



The fourth space is liminal, outside of the formal academy, situated within the social and digitally networked domains of contract cheating, and reflects student agency. Some students are "boundary crossing" (Lillis & Scott, 2007, p. 19), seeking new literacy spaces. These spaces, which are more neutral and social, offer different power hierarchies and structures than those found in their academic institutions learning spaces. As reflected in Figure 4, the first space is home, with connection to community – an example of a place here is the home office. The second space is school. An example of a place here is the classroom or campus library. The third space is online, for example, a WhatsApp course group. The fourth space is the overlapping intersections of these three spaces. Additional intersections exist, such as the union of home and online – an example is an online marketplace such as Kijiji. The intersection of school and online can be understood by the example of the Learning Management System (LMS), such as Blackboard. Lastly, a student study place is an example of the intersection of the two domains of home and school. The students cross the boundary from home, to the "Western," hierarchical, space of the

university classroom, and then on to the third space of online; from here, some cross over a further boundary into a fourth space, afforded and created through contract cheating exchanges and arrangements. This fourth space offers privacy, and social connection, even friendship. One explanation for this movement is that this boundary crossing interrupts the formal learning process, shifting to informal practices which may strip away the pressures and uncertainties of the school domain. These informal practices may also exist as a form of resistance to the assessment structures defined within the other spaces. Concept mapping, which allowed for emerging rather than bound spaces, provided this terrain of social relations (Mannion et al., 2007) which could be explored.

Contract cheating, in this context, is increasingly infused with digital, marginalized, and academic literacies. The fourth space created by contract cheating includes these hybrid literacies, which hold various forms of capital. The ghostwriter holds a symbolic wealth of capital, for example their credentials, bound up in their academic literacies. Further, ghostwriters' academic literacies are equally bound up in their institutionalized cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1983/1986, p. 47). This is extended to an adept embodiment of literacy practices (i.e., habitus), such as an in-depth understanding of the academic discourse and assessment design across various genres and disciplines. Student and ghostwriter participants explained how they exchange economic capital for another form of capital—cultural and symbolic–in the form of a written piece of assessment. The student ultimately seeks the symbolic power and cultural capital bestowed by the credential. As has been shown in chapter 6, there are a variety of entangled motivations for seeking the credential. These motivations reflect both the power structures of the academic institution—that both controls and defines dominant academic literacies including assessment systems—and some of the

inequity implicit in the writing systems. Students bring a variety of unequally validated literacies and capital to the academic domain. The participants demonstrated an overall need for the improved understanding of assessment, and that in some instances, independent ghostwriters, some unwillingly, play a role in the development and exchange of academic literacies as capital.

Students and ghostwriters both bring to the table various literacies and capital. Some of the literacies are dominant, others are marginalized. Within the fourth space, the student may be given an opportunity to use their marginalized literacies, to gain the more dominant literacies–the academic. Through collaboration and brokering, this small subset of students engaged in contract cheating are attempting to create their own "writer's identity." Ghostwriter practices broker this exchange in a fourth space, which is a space characterized by a flattening of power structures and hierarchies. It is a space grounded in the social and digital, on the fringe of academia. Walker's (2019) study of ghostwriting in Kenya also acknowledged the social element of ghostwriting noting that "the relationships which characterize academic writing are marked by casual exchanges" (p. 161). Walker also claims that ghostwriters "[t]hrough academic writing…have leveraged their personal networks, the ubiquity of ICT, and the convenience of the digital economy; asserting their agency, hacking global higher education systems and 'hustling' through their transitions" (p. 302). Although this study would agree with this statement as it pertains to ghostwriters, I would also suggest that this study would find the same statement to be true also for many students who seek ghostwriting services.

None of the ghostwriters I interviewed claimed to have constructed a third or fourth space for their clients. My findings indicate that the space was constructed for some students due to the affordances of techno-capital (i.e., digital literacies, ICT), a

shared goal (i.e., completion of the outsourced assignment), and the social nature of ghostwriting, which is reinforced by the customer service relationship, as well as the social nature of literacies. The fourth space is described as a space of agency, where, at times, the student can use marginalized and hybrid literacies, collaborate, engage in a brokering relationship, and be unfettered of the systems of academia. Instances of collaboration and brokering, no matter how rare, offer a trace of student agency–a residue from which administrators and faculty can glean what motivated a student to give way to contract cheating.

Adopting a concept mapping method informed a relational analysis of the coded data–offering a scape of contract cheating. This process also provided reflexivity, and from this, blurred dominant boundaries and spaces, identifying a fourth space. This fourth space is dependent upon social relations, digital, and academic literacies, and demonstrates the struggles of students in the contested site of assessment. A fourth space must be acknowledged and considered, with a deeper, critical understanding of student outsourcing.

This chapter has provided an interpretation of the two findings chapters—chapters 5 and 6—and has discussed how these build upon and add original empirical data to the literature on contract cheating. I have highlighted my contributions that emerged as a result of the study, also detailing the findings of the Literacies Landscape Map, in the context of the study discussion. The final chapter of the thesis offers recommendations on how these findings can be used to revise policy and structures within our academic institutions, and move beyond holistic strategies to a more transformative approach to academic integrity.

Chapter 8–Policy Implications and Conclusion

The purpose for this multiple case studies research project was to contribute to understandings regarding the nature of exchanges between the student and the ghostwriter, and to explore the tensions and exchanges that exist within the literacy practices associated with contract cheating. Through an exploration of participants' narratives in chapters 5, 6 and 7, this study has shown that issues in higher education, specifically around an assessment literacy framework, must be addressed to reduce contract cheating. Academic institutions have the capacity for growth and change, as evidenced by the system's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, the findings of this project point to several institutional changes that are needed to effect genuine transformation. For policy change to be effective, policy makers must consider context, otherwise tension grows among policy developers, those who implement policy and process, and those who are regulated by it. This chapter discusses several implications that stem from the study.

Transformational Approach

The first policy implication outlines an approach to academic misconduct that moves past the often-cited "holistic approach" (e.g., Macdonald & Carroll, 2006) and challenges institutions to become more critical, inclusive, and reflexive in their approach to academic misconduct. In a recent chapter (Thacker, in press), I explore what a holistic approach means in practice, as defined by several key scholars in the field, and then I expand upon the definition of holistic, calling for academia, and its leadership to aspire to a "transformational" approach. A transformation touches all aspects of the institution, and includes teaching and learning, as well as the acknowledgement of systemic inequity and inclusion issues in education. Thacker (in press) argues,

> "[w]e must not divorce approaches to academic integrity from other strategic and academic plans, such as student success, internationalization, responding to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC, 2015), or initiatives to support equity, diversity, and inclusion. These are all interconnected frameworks, and they are strategies that scaffold to create an inclusive educational space" (p. 11).

Participants' narratives support this argument for a move to a transformational approach to academic integrity, which would take into consideration some of the systemic issues in higher education. A transformational approach must destabilize the dominant literacies that perpetuate inequalities in the systems and structures. To varying degrees, efforts are being made to disrupt the dominant literacies – for example, the movement to decolonize the curriculum (Shahjahan et al., 2021). It remains to be seen if the methodologies across disciplines, being utilized to decolonizing the curriculum will in fact create more inclusive classrooms. A transformative approach must engage and enhance the diversity of the entire academic community, drawing on many, sometimes seemingly disconnected groups, to work collaboratively to address the multitude of systemic issues facing higher education today. It also takes pressure off teaching staff to solve the issues of academic integrity alone, as noted by Harper et al. (2019), and to work collaboratively to address "institutional conditions that both foster and inhibit practices" (Harper et al., 2019, p. 1871) that contribute to contract cheating.

Sutherland-Smith (2008) argues for a transformative approach to teaching and

to address plagiarism, which, she explains, assumes that students lack experience with paraphrasing, summarizing, and referencing, as students are apprentices in academic writing. This approach also assumes a joint responsibility for understanding plagiarism (institution, teacher, and student). She argues that this approach "work[s] towards educating students to develop an individual sense of authorial voice in their writing" (p. 32) and points to a focus "on students being able to transform information into knowledge, through their own constructions of meaning" (p. 32).

A transformative approach to teaching and learning has a social constructivist theoretical underpinning (Vygotsky, 1978) and aligns with the notion of "threshold concept" (Meyer & Land, 2003). As noted by Kelly and Cranton (2009), "transformative learning is not independent of content, context, or a discipline. It's not an 'add on' to a course. It is a way of making meaning of knowledge in a discipline in a way that students don't passively accept and believe what they are told or what they read, but rather engage in debate, discussion, and critical questioning of the content. Promoting transformative learning is a part of 'covering' content" (p. 1).

I suggest that academic writing practices, and academic integrity concepts are a part of this student transformation, and as such should be treated as such in the curriculum. All students should benefit from this framing, not just specific groups of students often highlighted as having a "deficit." This "othering" of certain groups takes away from an inclusive excellence practice on campus and in our communities. One recent approach that was implemented without singling out certain groups, can be seen in Khoo's (2021) study which took a "proactive approach" to academic integrity and academic writing. In this "learner-driven and instructor supported program," undergraduate students can voluntarily join an online, non-credit, programme that "simultaneously address[es] the need to educate students about

academic integrity while improving their language competence" (p. 170) and academic socialization. Studies such as this are needed to provide empirical data on the methods and practices that impact a student's experience, and the development of authorial voice, with both writing and its connection to academic integrity.

Indeed, central to the challenge of moving teaching and learning to a transformational model, is the intensive and increased time placed on teaching staff and administration to bring about such change. For example, the use of "flipped classrooms" (Nouri, 2016) presents opportunity for active learning and a re-balancing of power in the academic domain, yet transitioning to a flipped classroom takes time, and certainly multiple cycles of iteration to get right. Sites of struggle are not exclusive to the student domain. Precarious academic teaching has been suggested to play a role in the landscape of academic misconduct (Crossman 2019; Thacker, in press; Walker & Townley, 2012). The management of academic misconduct allegations and assessment revision is also time consuming and may fall outside the scope of a part-time teaching contract (Crossman, 2019). Crossman argues that a "holistic approach to academic integrity in higher education requires a concerted and integrated effort of all stakeholders across a campus, yet the tiered faculty system of most institutions may be at odds with comprehensive approaches" (2019, p. 1). These systemic issues must be addressed in concert, with any transformational academic integrity strategy.

The following section explores how Centres for Teaching and Learning (CTL) can play a role in the shift toward a transformational approach, and to support the creation of an assessment literacies framework, which, in turn, considers academic literacies such as writing, citation, and referencing as threshold concepts. Several of these issues can be addressed with support from university management and

leadership, and in the mission and policy direction of Centres for Teaching and Learning, which leads to the second policy implication.

The Centre for Teaching and Learning

In Canada, most universities and many community colleges have, and benefit from, a Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) (Education Developers Caucus [EDC], 2020; Forgie et al., 2018). While these units go by several different names and have differing structures, they are a core service unit, playing a critical role in the educational development of teaching staff through initiatives and programmes, often also providing training for teaching assistants and doctoral candidates. The COVID-19 pandemic brought to the forefront the critical role of the CTL in supporting a diverse array of teaching and learning options and delivery modes, and their role in supporting academic integrity (Eaton, 2020b). Although some institutions like the University of Manitoba, staff their CTL with academic integrity expertise, the actual amount of academic integrity related content that is offered by these units, and whether academic integrity grounded course and assessment design is foundational to their programmes remains unclear.

Students in this study commented on the role of the teaching assistant in the brokering of assessments, and as such, they have a role in supporting academic integrity. CTLs should consider how training for graduate students and early careers faculty includes more training initiatives devoted to assessment design, with an eye to academic integrity, and the framing of citation and referencing as a threshold concept. Graduate students and teaching assistants, like students who engage with ghostwriters, occupy a liminal space at the threshold of academia. As teaching assistants, they cross that threshold, straddling both domains (student and teacher), placing a tension and opportunity on the teaching assistant. Again, the literature is unclear how academic

integrity training is foundational to these critical roles in higher education.

CTLs can play a role in developing an assessment literacy strategy, and the inclusion of framing academic writing practices as threshold concepts. CTLs often play a role in quality assurance activities, such as curriculum mapping, cyclical program review, and program development (Thacker & McKenzie, 2022). This study has found that assessment literacies are integral for student and teaching staff success, and suggests that CTL policy can support this contract cheating vulnerability, thus supporting academic integrity. In addition to the role CTLs can and should offer with academic integrity, the following section discusses the next policy implication - a connection between the CTL and quality assurance.

Quality Assurance

Quality assurance (QA) in higher education is needed to ensure both quality programming and education outcomes, however as Glendinning (2020) points out – it is not universal or homogeneous across higher education. Yet, it is an important tool to maintain the public's trust in the education sector. QA policies and procedures differ widely across countries and regions. Some countries have established national quality assurance organizations, such as the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in the United Kingdom. In Canada, QA is decentralized, and is the responsibility of each province and territory (Weinrib & Jones, 2014), although there are some national guiding documents to support quality across higher education credentials, including the Canadian Degree Qualifications Framework[13] (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada [CMEC], 2007). Regardless of the specific QA structure, the goals are the

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[13] The Canadian Degree Qualifications Framework is endorsed by Universities Canada. Universities Canada is an advocacy organization at the national level. https://www.univcan.ca/universities/quality-assurance/

same–to ensure good quality programming and continuous improvement.

QA is linked to broad academic integrity oversight in several countries, such as the United Kingdom and Australia. Dill (2007) provides a useful distinction to help understand the breadth of QA processes found in the education sector. Dill explained that "[i]nternal quality assurance refers to those policies and practices whereby academic institutions themselves monitor and improve the quality of their education provision, while external quality assurance refers to supra-institutional policies and practices whereby the quality of higher education institutions and programs are assured" (p. 1). While external QA organizations, such as the QAA maintain a strong agenda to promote academic integrity (see Glendinning, 2020), many internal quality assurance frameworks have a peripheral link to academic integrity.

For example, in Ontario, Canada, the provincial government plays a role in quality assurance through an arm's length organization called the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance, also known as the 'Quality Council' (Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance [OUCQA], 2021). The Quality Council provides oversight to approve new university degree programs and cyclical institutional audits, however, has not brought about any pro-active, focused initiatives or research agenda to safeguard academic integrity, other than the inclusion of academic integrity in the Ontario Qualifications Framework[14] as a degree level expectation. The university itself conducts its own cyclical programme and unit reviews, and while the process must follow the broad provincial framework, many details of the review may be defined by each institution. These internal processes may involve curriculum mapping and require reporting on various quality indicators. It

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[14] The Ontario Qualifications Framework (OQF) details the attributes of all credentials offered at Ontario's post-secondary academic institutions. http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/pepg/programs/oqf/

remains nebulous how many of these internal QA processes include an assessment of academic integrity approaches and strategy.

As I discussed in a recent chapter (Thacker & McKenzie, 2022), several opportunities exist within the QA framework to consider assessment and academic integrity. These opportunities are often missed, as several of the teaching staff participants noted that academic integrity was not discussed during curriculum mapping activities, despite the Canadian Qualifications Framework containing academic integrity as a degree level outcome (CMEC, 2007). Curriculum mapping is one, increasingly routine, element of internal QA frameworks (Liu, 2020). Curriculum mapping is often supported by the CTL, which is helpful to bring together educational developers with expertise around assessment design, academic integrity, and inclusive pedagogies. Generally, curriculum mapping speaks to the alignment of learning outcomes and program expectations with the curriculum. This activity can involve discussion about academic integrity best practices, assessment improvements, and misconduct issues and concerns.

To include discussions of academic integrity into a curriculum mapping session, academic leadership must be aware of this opportunity, and play a bigger role to normalize academic integrity as part of quality assurance. Academic leadership must develop and implement critical QA practices. I propose that the term “critical quality assurance” be introduced when institutions discuss policy revision, purpose, and structure, and eventually move to review existing QA policies and practices. This reframing of QA to include a critical lens will consider how dominant structures and frameworks influence our course and assessment design and influence our assessment literacies. This frame will ensure that policy makers consider taking a transformational approach to QA policy and practice, and ensure that both equity and

diversity, and inclusive pedagogies are foundational to programme development, review, and revision. Leadership is necessary for broad policy change to be implemented. Various stakeholders must be on board to consider infusing existing practices, such as curriculum mapping, with questions of assessment literacy and academic integrity. As Glendinning (2020) reminds her readers, "ethical leadership and commitment to honesty is a prerequisite for developing an institutional culture of academic integrity" (p. 18). One stakeholder that is often overlooked for its role in upholding academic integrity is institutional governance.

Institutional Governance

Another final policy implication and opportunity to support transformation can be found within our institutional governance framework. This study argues in favour of transformational change, and this includes the systems and structures that underpin the academy. Universities offer collegial governance systems, with broad membership. Members of governance bodies are drawn from diverse constituencies, and as stewards of the institution, they are expected to act in the best interests of the institution (Foy, 2021). Governance bodies have a unique role to play in the development and oversight of academic integrity strategies. Governance bodies are often provided with annual reports, which disclose the number and type of annual cases of misconduct at an institution. Governance bodies may also receive, for information, updates on academic integrity initiatives, case resolution timelines, and they would typically also consider any new or revised policy tabled for consultation and approval.

An often missed opportunity is a governance body's potential role in providing input and accountability oversight to existing and developing policy and programming strategies. While members of governance bodies may not possess

academic integrity expertise, they do have a role and obligation to be educated about the university and its stakeholders (Foy, 2021). This “duty of care” (Foy, 2021, p. 15) positionality encourages members to demonstrate that they are informed, engaged, and capable of providing a critical lens. While administration may choose not to focus on academic misconduct for various reasons in a governance setting, governors and members responsible for providing oversight can participate in the development of preventive strategies by providing feedback, asking questions, and supporting implementation through accountability measures. The advancement of progress over time is afforded through this opportunity for influence. Academic misconduct intersects with other multi-stakeholder issues, with Foy (2021) arguing that governance bodies of today must also consider issues of technology, and “the ways in which technology affects the university” (p. 31) such as with privacy issues, teaching, learning and curriculum. Governance bodies are typically comprised of internal and external members, ensuring a variety of perspectives on items of business, and allowing wide consultation across the institution. Meaningful engagement with members on the development of policy and strategy will extend commitment and accountability. This meaningful use of member oversight and accountability regarding academic integrity initiatives falls to the administration and leadership to support and implement, and I argue, forms part of a transformative approach.

Suggestions for Future Research

Broadly, there is a need to frame future research on contract cheating, assessment literacies, and QA in a critical, theoretical frame. In addition, there is a need for further qualitative research. While this study provides a contribution to the qualitative and experiential exploration of contract cheating involving independent ghostwriters, there is much more to be considered. For example, this study found

evidence of assessment brokering as part of some exchanges between student clients and ghostwriters, and a targeted sample of students (who engaged in contract cheating) could provide further understanding of this relationship and the brokering exchange types. More broadly, additional research is needed around the assessment literacy needs of students – along with how their needs might shape the policy implications discussed above. It would also be beneficial to plan future research around CTLs, and their roles in the development of assessment literacy. Of course, empirical research to test the validity around certain assessments that claim to reduce cheating would be most welcome.

Given the argument that systemic issues in higher education are contributing to misconduct, research should pay attention to the student and teaching staff experience from the perspective of mental health, and other factors having an impact on the socio-economic position (e.g., employment, family/caring responsibilities) of the ever-evolving student demographic. In addition, the impact of academia's increased reliance on casual teaching contracts should be addressed from a qualitative standpoint. Ultimately, many students must overcome a wealth of inequalities and barriers (cultural/symbolic) to even begin their degree, let alone complete the programme once enrolled. My study has captured how the pressure of attainment can be a "strain" leading to the desire to engage in contract cheating. This student strain in requires further exploration in the Canadian context. Finally, while this study did profile some development of independent bespoke ghostwriters, more in-depth qualitative, ethnographic approaches, with local observation, would provide a deeper understanding of the fourth space, and the brokering role they play. Further to this, the study focused on a subset of ghostwriters (independent), and so further study of ghostwriters who work at essay mills would expand the literature.

Conclusion

Drawing upon original empirical data gathered through semi-structured interviews with ghostwriters, students and teaching staff, this study makes five claims regarding contract cheating. The first is that while contract cheating is often reflected as a total rejection of learning, and perceived in terms of morality, a more nuanced and contextual understanding exists. This more critical understanding includes an awareness that contract cheating is grounded in socially situated, digital literacies, which, in some instances, provides a foundation for collaboration and brokering arrangements with freelance ghostwriters, opening spaces for informal learning. Second, the nature of this collaboration and assessment brokering suggests that students are struggling with assessment literacy, in both form and component parts (e.g., requirements; citation and referencing). Third, this study claims that by approaching both assessment design, academic writing, and citation and referencing as literacies practices, requiring them to be taught as a threshold concept, institutions can begin to shift to a transformational approach to academic integrity. Fourth, the findings reveal a complex landscape of both agency and resistance with respect to assessment and demonstrate that contract cheating has socially situated literacy underpinnings, in part reflected by the ghostwriters identity as helper and writer. Finally, this study makes several policy recommendations, with respect to CTLs, QA, and governance that can support a transformative approach to our higher education institutions, grounded in inclusion and recognition of the differential capital held by and available to students from diverse backgrounds.

This study has, therefore, offered several original contributions to the field, including the introduction of a unique data collection and analysis tool, found in the literacies mapping scheme. Also, the study makes several claims regarding literacies,

brokering, and ghostwriting, in response to the research questions. In particular, the findings and development of the concept of “assessment brokering” increased the original knowledge contribution of the study (Thacker, 2022). In addition, this study has contributed texture and contour to the independent ghostwriter’s lived experience, by offering a deeper understanding of ghostwriter perceptions, identities and the students who outsource their academic work. These identities find their shape from writing histories and practices, and from perceptions of themselves as small business owners who help others.

The thesis makes a theoretical contribution by explaining that freelance ghostwriting is a social and digital literacies practice, therefore it is relational and contextual. This critical, socio-cultural approach to understanding contract cheating, extends the current literature about ghostwriting which, to this point, has been almost exclusively descriptive. The study is the first to apply several theoretical and conceptual approaches to the problem of contract cheating, specifically, to explore the literacy and capital exchanges of those engaged in contract cheating.

This study contributes by explaining that contract cheating is the product of the imbalances and uneven acquisition of capital in higher education, and more broadly to is part of a complex landscape of systemic issues in academia, where power is negotiated and constructed through language use. With this humanizing lens, this research advances our understanding of ghostwriter’s identity and perceptions and deepens our understanding of the range of motivations and advantages for students in outsourcing their work. This addresses the call to better understand the underlying factors that contribute to contract cheating.

From the data analysis and findings, this research has also developed several institutional policy directions, and suggested directions for future research. Contract

cheating has an impact on all education stakeholders in one form or another. It affects our academic institutions as well as our communities, and if we look carefully, it points to some of the systemic cracks in the higher education system, including the cumulative impact of inequalities on attainment. The findings of this study will inspire academic integrity scholars and practitioners to explore how assessment literacy can support our students and faculty and strengthen the academic institutional mission.

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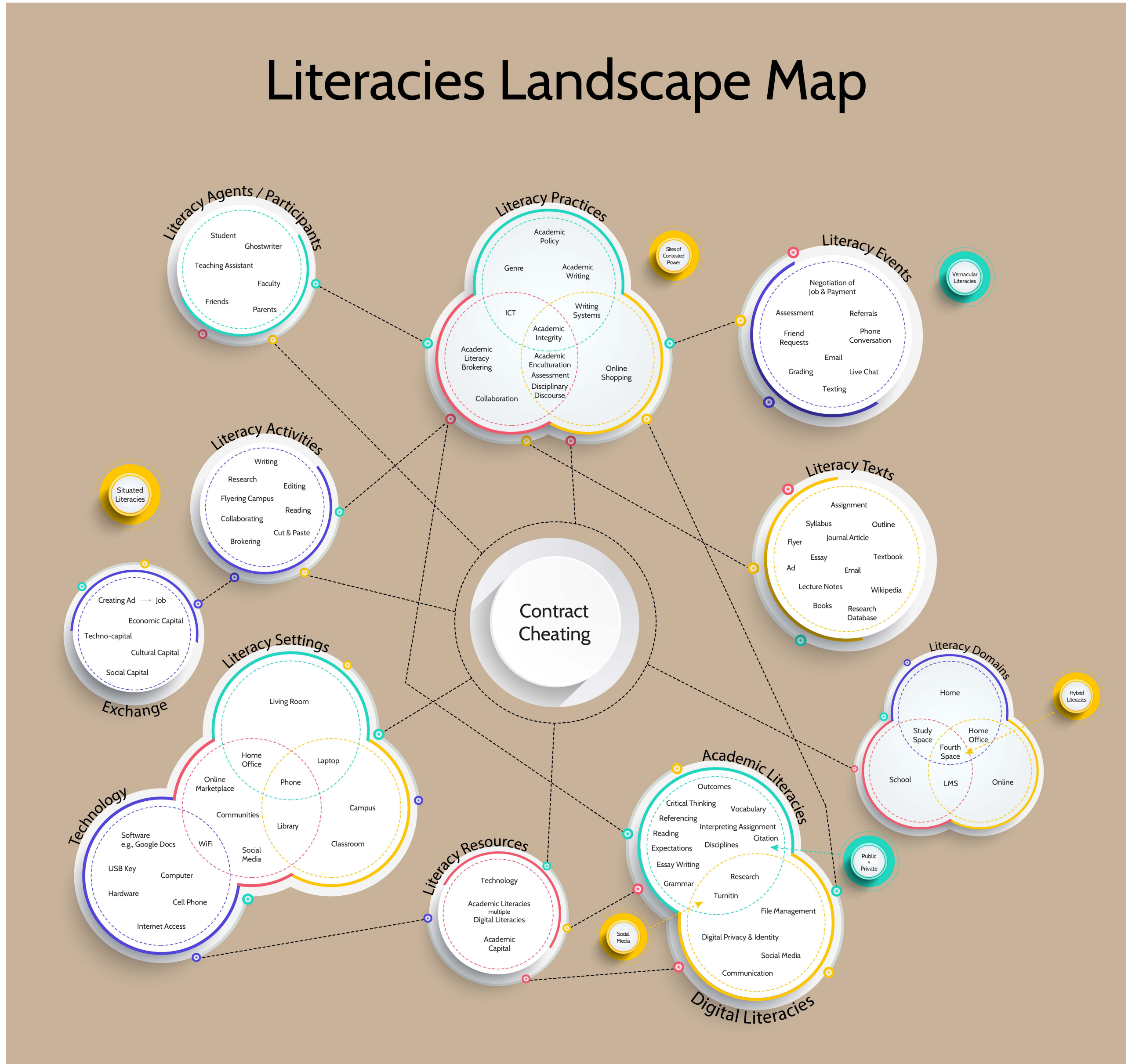
Appendices

Appendix A. Literacies Landscape Map



Appendix B. Ghostwriter Vignettes

Sam (Interview Date: February 2019)

Sam lives in Canada and ghostwrites exclusively for Canadian universities. He attended university himself and now runs his own freelance research, writing, and consulting business. He ghostwrites for students on the side when his other writing business is slower. During the interview, Sam was outgoing and engaging. He was interested in my research, and fascinated by the terminology I used to describe contract cheating. He enjoyed the practices of research and writing, loved learning, and did not appear conflicted about his role as ghostwriter, although he stopped short at writing outside of his disciplinary expertise.

Jack (Interview Date: March 2020)

Jack lives in Canada, and is an independent ghostwriter, working mainly for students in his own provinces Colleges and Universities. In the interview conversation, his attitude toward the work was lackadaisical. This assessment was supported by his admission that some students would come back to him specifically to tell him that they had been accused of plagiarism in their purchased essays. He admitted he had paraphrased previous essays poorly but he seemed unconcerned. He also commented that his interest in the writing "comes and goes" in waves, and that he was a slow writer and not a very good typist. Jack was continuously amazed at the amount of money students were able to spend on his service.

Rowan (Interview Date: April 2020)

Rowan lives in Texas, in the United States. She is young and quite new to ghostwriting. Rowan is passionate about all forms of written expression, identifying as a writer beyond academics. Her clients were often in high school or first year of college, although she advertises that she writes for Grade 3 to college. She almost

exclusively used Google, Wikipedia, and a citation manager to write assignments. She commented as part of the interview, that the ghostwriting was “pretty sneaky” and “pretty weaselly little thing to do” but pointed to her precarious financial situation as the reason for doing it. She saw little value in a post-secondary education, unless a person wanted a “certain job,” and seemed disinterested in post-secondary education, and disconnected from curricular requirements of the higher education sector.

Terry (Interview Date: May 2020)

Terry lives in Kenya and is a university graduate. He saw his work as a business that puts food on the table. His approach to his work was to make friends, not just have clients, to encourage repeat business. Terry was aware of his need to avoid plagiarism and he commented in the interview that his ghostwriting work had taught him how to avoid it. He was aware of the advantages of the digital nature of the work, comparing it to drug trafficking, but being able to move the goods online much more easily. He considered himself very lucky to be able to work online and from home.

Pierre (Interview Date: May 2020)

Pierre lived in Kenya. I was advised by email, 4 months after the interview, that Pierre had died, following a brief illness. I am not clear who sent the email. Pierre had been ghostwriting for 8 years and posted his advertisements on many different online sites, writing assignments for students located all over the world. He demonstrated an awareness of differing academic expectations in various countries and at various education levels. He wrote as part of a team of writers to support various writing requests in multiple disciplines. He struggled with getting full payment from new clients. He also noted several long-standing clients who had been with him for years.

Xander (Interview Date: June 2020)

Xander lives in Britain and has been ghostwriting for 3 to 4 years, initially as a part-time job, and now full-time. He viewed his services as "premium," and better than a typical essay mill product. His self-identification as a writer and pride in being well-acquainted with academic expectations was evident. He stayed away from longer assignments, as they were too time consuming and "a drag." He learned this approach over time, after completing a client's master's thesis. He struggled with the short deadlines for the work but had developed a system over time. The system included efficient ways to cut corners, which he had no problems with, since it was not a paper he was submitting for himself. He mentioned that one client had been caught by her institution after she posted on Reddit looking for a ghostwriter. He was also aware that blackmail occurred as he had viewed these threats on Reddit. Ultimately, he considered that the student was responsible for the misconduct, not him.

Camille (Interview Date: June 2020)

Camille has been ghostwriting for 4 years and was a graduate student at the time of the interview. She wrote primarily for Canadian university students, identifying the work as a "side hustle." She also wrote applications (e.g., admissions, scholarships). She had a strong understanding of assessment, knowing what questions to ask a client. Camille identified strongly as a writer, and was passionate about the work, enjoying both the source reading, and assignment writing. She enjoyed the breadth of writing she was able to do, from high school level essays, to professional.

Sang (Interview Date: June 2020)

Sang lives in Canada and has been ghostwriting for over 10 years. Sang had a unique perspective on ghostwriting, as he talked about a friend who had committed suicide. Sang attributed the death to the competitive environment of higher education,

and pressures (societal and parental) that university students faced to succeed. Sang viewed himself as helping the students in his cultural community, not as a ghostwriter. He said he wanted to work for students who appreciated his work, and that he thought he could really help. He was aware of the stigma about the work, and identified as someone who helped, not a "scammer or plagiarizer." He commented that he wrote for university students, as college students did not have the money to pay for his services.

Louis (Interview Date: September 2020)

Louis lives in Kenya and has been ghostwriting for about 4 years. He wrote as part of a team, viewed his role as helping students, and identified more as tutor than ghostwriter. He was sympathetic to the realities the students face today—juggling many responsibilities—and saw the experience at university as more social than academic. He did not think a university degree was critical for success. He offered to help with my own thesis writing, and asked me to be in touch when I needed assistance.

Sawyer (Interview Date: September 2020)

Sawyer lives in Canada and is new to ghostwriting. She identified as a writer, in her "lucrative side hustle." Sawyer started dabbling with ghostwriting by "helping" her friends, but then saw her opportunity and created her business. Sawyer saw the value in essay writing as a skill, as it "organized your thinking," but wondered if it was outdated, as so many students struggled to write. She suggested that although some students were lazy and procrastinated instead of completing their assignments, some were desperate and overwhelmed. She found the work rewarding, and simultaneously wanted to support students by tutoring them and enhancing their assignments.

Preet (Interview Date: September 2020)

Preet lives in India and has been ghostwriting for 4 years. He is a college graduate and uses technology exclusively to work. His least favourite part of the job was the tight turnaround, and the long hours of screen time. His favourite part of the job was getting paid. Preet thought he had strong online research skills and was interested in learning and acquiring knowledge. He prided himself on offering a genuine service to students, and that his services were reliable. He was happy to do the interview, as he had never spoken to anyone about what he does, although his friends were aware.

Appendix C. Interview Questions

Interview Questions: Teaching Staff

1. How long have you been teaching? Discipline?
2. Do you teach primarily at a college or university?
3. What is your view or definition of academic literacies?
4. How would you describe your own citation and referencing skills?
5. Had you heard of contract cheating before our discussion about my research project?
6. What do you know about contract cheating?
7. Have you ever had an incident of contract cheating in one of your classes? What about impersonation?
8. What about detection? Do you think you would know if a student outsourced their assignment?
9. Have you ever been approached to become a ghostwriter? Do you know any faculty that have been asked?
10. Does your institution provide educational opportunities for faculty about academic integrity and/or contract cheating (e.g., at the CTL)?
11. Does your institution have an AI module for students? For staff/for faculty? What are your views on its quality?
12. Tell me about your process of creating an assignment for your students. What things do you consider?
13. Do you every design personalized or reflective assignments? Or assignments based on an in-class experience?
14. How do you relay the assignment expectations to your students? (e.g., in writing? with rubrics?)

15. How do you ensure that your students understand what is expected for the course and the institution? (i.e., citation/referencing, understanding misconduct policy, scholarly research, and writing).
16. Do you specifically teach about academic integrity? Do you discuss contract cheating in your courses? How?
17. Do students ever ask you to explain things to them about the assignment requirements? What are common issues or questions? Has it ever led you to change the assignment?
18. How do you use instructional technology to teach? Online proctoring?
19. What do you think of the essay? It is a contested form.
20. What about the use of the essay in the workplace? Is it needed?
21. Have your assessment design practices changed over time?
22. What is the most challenging aspect of writing a paper for a student?
23. Do you ever ask students to write assignments in active or passive voice? [more for grad students].
24. Have you ever engaged in a curriculum mapping activity? If yes, did it include conversations about academic integrity?
25. Do you ever find that your students ask each other, informally, about assignment requirements?
26. Have you ever had a parent reach out to seek academic help for their child?
27. What conditions are critical for student success?
28. What is your view of plagiarism in higher education? Is it an issue? Is it normalized?
29. What is your opinion about the value of a university or college credential?
30. What about the skills the students are missing out on, when they outsource

their work? Are they of value?

31. Do you think that students consider contract cheating as academic misconduct? If not, why?
32. Why do you think they do it? (i.e., lack of skills, laziness, lack of time).
33. What do you think has contributed to the number of services for students, like yours?
34. Are you aware of any strategies employed by the universities or colleges to reduce students' engagement with contract cheating services?
35. Do you think your students are concerned about their digital privacy?
36. Do you think ghostwriting services are increasing in number? Why?
37. Has there been an increase in incidents of contract cheating since institutions have moved online due to COVID-19?
38. What is something that you think would surprise a ghostwriter or student to know? Or is there something you would like to tell a ghostwriter if you could?
39. What steps can faculty and administration take to improve the culture of academic integrity?

Interview Questions: Student

1. What year are you in at school?
2. Are you at a college or university?
3. What is your program/discipline? What courses do you like the best?
4. How would you describe your own writing and citation skills?
5. What academic skills do you need to be successful in university or college?
6. What do you find the most challenging academically about university or college?
7. What are your favourite types of assignments? (i.e. essays, exams, group work?) Why?
8. How could your institution support you better with your academics?
9. Have you ever seen or completed a module on academic integrity? Was it good? Was it valuable?
10. Do your teachers teach about academic integrity in class? What about contract cheating? Writing and researching skills?
11. Where do you complete your schoolwork? (domain/location)
12. Had you ever heard about contract cheating or assignment outsourcing before?
13. Have you ever paid someone to complete your assignments? (and submitted them?)

IF YES:

1. Have you ever been charged with a breech of academic integrity?
2. Do you consider it academic misconduct?
3. How did you come to be involved with hiring others to complete your assignments?
4. What do you need to know about your ghostwriter before you hire them?

5. Why did you choose to do it? (e.g. lack of skills, laziness, lack of time).
6. How do you use technology to engage with these services?
7. Do you ever use social media to communicate with these services?
8. Tell me about your process. Describe for me a typical interaction with a ghostwriter.
9. How do you ensure you are letting the writer know what is expected for the assignment for your professor?
10. Do you ever collaborate with the ghostwriter in the writing process?
11. Are you concerned about the ghostwriter telling your institution, or asking for more money?
12. How do you protect your privacy online? (or are you not worried about this).
13. What do you do if you are unsure about what is required in an assignment?
14. Do you ever ask your professor to provide you with feedback on an assignment?
15. What do you think about the essay as an assignment? Is it valuable?
16. How does the essay impinge on your ability to make meaning?
17. How would you prefer to write? Show your knowledge or make meaning?
18. Who benefits from continuing to use the essay as a form of assessment? Who is disadvantaged?
19. What resources do you need to complete the transaction? (technology or other).

IF NO:

1. Do you know anyone who has? (a friend or acquaintance?)
2. Do you think it is academic misconduct?
3. What do you do if you are unsure about what is required in an assignment?

4. Do you ever talk to your classmates or other students informally about assignment requirements? Is it helpful?
5. Do you ever ask your professor to provide you with feedback on an assignment?
6. What do you think about the essay as an assignment? Is it valuable?
7. What resources do you need to complete the transaction? (technology or other)

Attitudes and Perceptions

1. What is your opinion about the value of a university or college credential?
2. Do you think it's important to have strong academic literacies?
3. What do you think has contributed to the number of contract cheating services for students?
4. Are you aware of any strategies employed by the universities or colleges to reduce students' engagement with ghostwriting services?
5. Has there been an increase since all schools have moved online during the coronavirus pandemic?
6. What is something that you think would surprise a ghostwriter or student to know? Or is there something you would like to tell a ghostwriter if you could?
7. What steps can faculty and administration take to improve the culture of academic integrity?

Interview Questions: Ghostwriter

1. How did you come to be involved with this type of work?
2. How do you advertise your services?
3. Do you work for an essay writing company, or are you freelance?
4. How do you use technology to offer and deliver your services?
5. Do you ever use social media to communicate with clients or recruit new clients?
6. Tell me about your process. Describe for me a typical interaction with a client.
7. Where do you work? (domain/location)
8. How do you ensure you are writing in a way that is expected for each student and the institution?
9. Do the students typically understand the assignment that has been given to them?
10. How do you know what is expected of your writing for the student?
11. Do you ever collaborate with the student in the writing process?
12. Do the students ever bring you feedback from the professors/instructors, either on drafts, or on the final assignment?
13. Do they ever ask you to explain things to them about the written assignment? (do you think they feel more comfortable asking you than their teachers?)
14. What do you need to know about your client?
15. What types of assessments do you provide most often? Why do you think that is?
16. What other types of assessments are requested?
17. Do you have a preferred citation style? Are you versed in many?
18. How do you constantly switch genres and disciplines?

19. With the thesis or dissertation writing…tell me about this work…
20. How does assignment design support or challenge your work?
21. Have your practices changed over time?
22. What part of the job do you enjoy the most? Dislike the most?
23. What resources do you need to complete your work? (technology or other).
24. How do you address personalized assignments? Or assignments based on an in-class experience?
25. What is the most challenging aspect of writing a paper for a client?
26. What is your experience trying to avoid plagiarism and detection in your writing?
27. How are you typically paid for your services? Any alternate payment methods?
28. Have clients ever informed you that they were accused of cheating?
29. Do you ever have fussy clients who ask for certain things, for example, writing in active or passive voice?
30. Are students concerned about their privacy? Are you?
31. Do you try to protect your digital identity?
32. What is your view of plagiarism and writing education provided to students? (are students taught attribution practices, paraphrasing skills, etc.)
33. The essay as a tool to assess student learning is contested. What are your views on the value of the “essay” in higher education?
34. What is your opinion about the value of a university or college credential?
35. What about the skills the students are missing out on developing? Are they of value?
36. Have you ever had a parent reach out to seek help for their child?

37. Do you think that your services amount to academic misconduct for your student clients? If not, why?
38. Do your clients consider it misconduct? Do they consider themselves cheaters?
39. Why do you think they do it? (lack of skills, laziness, lack of time, language proficiency).
40. What do you think has contributed to the number of services for students like yours?
41. Are you aware of any strategies employed by the universities or colleges to reduce students' engagement with services like yours?
42. Do you think services like yours are increasing in number? Why?
43. Do you know anyone else who does this type of work?
44. Has there been an increase since all schools have moved online during the coronavirus pandemic?
45. What is something that you think would surprise a faculty member to know?

Appendix D. Follow-up Survey Questions

1. During your time working with student clients and their assignments, what are some common issues you encounter when you receive an assignment sheet or, in other words, the assignment criteria, from the professor?
2. I understand that some of your clients request to work collaboratively with you on an assignment, for example, in Google Docs. If you have done this with a student client, what have you learned from working collaboratively with students about their writing abilities and needs?
3. For those with whom you work collaboratively, do you see their writing skills develop and progress over time (assuming they return as customer)?
4. Do your student clients ask you about academic elements? Please check any that apply.
    a. spelling, word meaning
    b. sources, citations and referencing
    c. assignment criteria
    d. essay or assignment content
    e. knowledge specific to the higher education system, the culture of higher education
2. Can you give an example of a time when your student clients were seeking information on any of the above items you selected?

Appendix E. Participant Information Sheets

Information Sheet: Teaching Staff

Teaching Staff/Faculty

Participant Research Information Sheet

REC Reference No: HU-200059

Title of Project: Assignment Outsourcing and Literacy Brokering–Exploring the Relationship

Researcher: Emma Thacker, EdD Candidate, e.j.thacker@keele.ac.uk

Researcher Supervisor: Cora Lingling Xu, PhD, l.xu@keele.ac.uk

Aim of the Research: The aim of the research is to better understand assignment outsourcing in higher education by exploring the relationships among ghostwriting, academic literacies, and literacy brokering. This approach views literacy as a social practice, shaped by several things such as history, location, institutions, and power relations. This doctoral thesis project has three objectives:

1) to understand the nature of literacy brokering between ghostwriters and their student clients;
2) to understand how ghostwriters, students, and teachers perceive assignment outsourcing services in terms of academic literacies exchanges, practices, and outcomes; and
3) to explore how assignment outsourcing may be understood from a Canadian post-secondary perspective.

What is assignment outsourcing? Assignment outsourcing happens when a third party, sometimes called a "ghostwriter," completes work for a student who then submits the assignment to their academic institution for academic credit when this input is not permitted. The ghostwriter is the individual who writes the essay or

assignment (in whole or in part) for the student. There may be a financial exchange for these services.

Invitation. I am a doctoral candidate at Keele University in the United Kingdom (UK), who resides in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. You are being invited to take part in the above-mentioned research study, at some time during the period of June 2020–April 2021. Before you decide whether you wish to take part, it is important for you to understand why this research is being done and what it will involve. Please take the time to read this information carefully and discuss it with friends and relatives if you wish. Please ask me if there is anything that is unclear or if you would like more information. I would be happy to chat informally before you decide if you would like to take part.

Why have I been chosen? You have been invited to participate in this study because you teach in a post-secondary academic institution.

What will happen if I take part? If you agree to take part, you will be asked to participate in one interview (approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour in length). I may also contact you after the interview, with some follow-up questions. I, Emma Thacker, will complete the interview with you, either over the phone, or via technology (e.g., Skype or Zoom—video is not required). The interview and any follow up will take place at a mutually agreed upon time. As the researcher, I will ask you a set of questions for your response. These questions will be about academic writing services in higher education, your experiences, and perceptions. Following the interview, the interview data will be transcribed and anonymized. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to read and sign (digitally) a participant consent form.

What if I don't want to carry on with the study? Participation is voluntary. You are free to decide whether you wish to take part or not. Should you choose to

participate, you can refuse to answer any of the interview questions. As a volunteer, you can also stop the interview at any time, or withdraw from the study up to 6 weeks following the final interview, without giving a reason. If you do withdraw from the study after some data has been collected, you will be asked if you are comfortable for the data collected thus far to be retained and included in the study. If you prefer, the data collected can be destroyed and not included in the study.

What are the benefits (if any) of taking part? If you agree to participate in the research study, you will be offered $25.00 CDN (per interview). This cash token is intended to reimburse you for your time. While you may have personal reasons for participating in the study, one benefit you may find is that the process is interesting and provides satisfaction. Your participation in the research study may also benefit society by helping researchers learn more about teaching and learning and support positive change in higher education.

What are the risks (if any) of taking part? I will maintain your confidence and anonymity. As you may be aware, academic assessment outsourcing services are not illegal in Canada, the United Kingdom, and many other countries in the world. All participant identities will be fully anonymized and concealed in all field notes, the final thesis report, and any other publications. Participation will be strictly confidential, and as such, participation in the research project itself will not place teaching staff, students, or ghostwriters at risk for breach of their institutional academic misconduct policy. While this project does not anticipate that the interview process will cause any distress, depending on how you feel about academic outsourcing, the questions and/or discussion may cause you some discomfort. As a research participant you are free to end the interview at any time, and you do not have to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable.

Research Data: The interview recording, any collected documents and the subsequent interview transcript will be anonymized and stored in a password-protected computer and folder. These data will be retained for 10 years (or less), as per Keele University policy, after which time the folder will be destroyed. The data, when made anonymous, may be presented at academic conferences, or published as book, journal article, or thesis.

Funding and Ethical Approval: This research project is not funded by any corporation or academic institution. Research involving human participants is reviewed by an ethics committee to ensure that the dignity and well-being of participants is respected. This study has been reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at Keele University and has been given a favourable ethical opinion. The ethics protocol for this project was approved on March 3, 2020.

What if there is a problem? If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, you may wish to speak directly with me, and I will do my best to answer your questions. I can be reached at e.j.thacker@keele.ac.uk. Alternatively, if you do not wish to contact me directly, you may contact my doctoral supervisor, Dr. Cora Lingling Xu, at l.xu@keele.ac.uk.

If you remain unhappy about the research and/or wish to raise a complaint about any aspect of the way that you have been approached or treated during the course of the study, please contact the approving Research Ethics Committee Chair:

REC Name: Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, Keele University, Staffordshire, United Kingdom Email: humss.ethics@keele.ac.uk

Thank you for taking the time to read this research participant information sheet and for considering volunteering for this research.

Information Sheet: Student

Student

Participant Research Information Sheet

REC Reference No: HU-200059

Title of Project: Assignment Outsourcing and Literacy Brokering—Exploring the Relationship

Researcher: Emma Thacker, EdD Candidate, e.j.thacker@keele.ac.uk

Researcher Supervisor: Cora Lingling Xu, PhD, l.xu@keele.ac.uk

Aim of the Research: The aim of the research is to better understand assignment outsourcing in higher education by exploring the relationships among ghostwriting, academic literacies, and literacy brokering. This approach views literacy as a social practice, shaped by several things such as history, location, institutions, and power relations. This doctoral thesis project has three objectives:

1) to understand the nature of literacy brokering between ghostwriters and their student clients;
2) to understand how ghostwriters, students, and teachers perceive assignment outsourcing services in terms of academic literacies exchanges, practices, and outcomes; and
3) to explore how assignment outsourcing may be understood from a Canadian post-secondary perspective.

What is assignment outsourcing? Assignment outsourcing happens when a third party, sometimes called a "ghostwriter," completes work for a student who then submits the assignment to their academic institution for academic credit when this input is not permitted. The ghostwriter is the individual who writes the essay or assignment (in whole or in part) for the student. There may be a financial exchange

for these services.

Invitation: You are being invited to take part in the above-mentioned research study, at some time during the period of May 2020–April 2021. This project is being undertaken by Emma Thacker who is a doctoral student at Keele University in the United Kingdom (UK), who resides in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Before you decide whether or not you wish to take part, it is important for you to understand why this research is being done and what it will involve. Please take the time to read this information carefully and discuss it with friends and relatives if you wish. Please ask me if there is anything that is unclear or if you would like more information. I would be happy to chat informally before you decide if you would like to take part.

Why have I been chosen? You have been invited to participate in this study because you are a student in a post-secondary academic institution and may be aware of, or engaged in, assignment outsourcing.

What will happen if I take part? If you agree to take part, you will be asked to participate in one interview of approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour in length. I may also contact you after the interview, with some follow-up questions. I will complete the interview with you either over the phone, or via technology (e.g., Skype or Zoom—video is not required). The interview and any follow up will take place at a mutually agreed upon time. As the researcher, I will ask you a set of questions for your response. These questions will be about academic writing services in higher education, your experiences, and perceptions. Following the interview, the interview data will be transcribed and anonymized. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to read and sign (digitally) a participant consent form.

What if I don't want to carry on with the study? Participation is voluntary. You are free to decide whether you wish to take part or not. Should you choose to

participate, you can refuse to answer any of the interview questions. As a volunteer you can also stop the interview at any time, or withdraw from the study up to 6 weeks following the final interview, without giving a reason. If you do withdraw from the study after some data has been collected, you will be asked if you are comfortable with the data collected thus far to be retained and included in the study. If you prefer, the data collected can be destroyed and not included in the study.

What are the benefits (if any) of taking part? If you agree to participate in the research study, you will be offered $25.00 CDN (per interview). This cash token is intended to reimburse you for your time. While you may have personal reasons for participating in the study, one benefit you may find is that the process is interesting and provides satisfaction. Your participation in the research study may also benefit society by helping researchers to learn more about teaching and learning, and support positive change in higher education.

What are the risks (if any) of taking part? I will maintain your confidentiality and anonymity. As you may be aware, academic assessment outsourcing services are not illegal in Canada, the United Kingdom, and many other countries in the world. All participant identities will be fully anonymized and concealed in all field notes, the final dissertation report, and any other publications. You do not need to inform me of your real name, where you reside, or go to school. Participation will be strictly confidential, and as such, participation in the research project itself will not place teaching staff, students, or ghostwriters at risk for breach of their institutional academic misconduct policy. While this project does not anticipate that the interview process will cause any distress, depending on how you feel about academic outsourcing, the questions and/or discussion may cause you some discomfort. As a research participant you are free to end the interview at any time, and you do not have

to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable.

Research Data: The interview recording, any collected documents and the subsequent interview transcript will be anonymized and stored in a password-protected computer and folder. These data will be retained for 10 years (or less), as per Keele University policy, after which time the folder will be destroyed. The data, when made anonymous, may be presented at academic conferences, or published as book, journal article, or academic dissertation.

Funding and Ethical Approval: This research project is not funded by any corporation or academic institution. Research involving human participants is reviewed by an ethics committee to ensure that the dignity and well-being of participants is respected. This study has been reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at Keele University and has been given a favourable ethical opinion. The ethics protocol for this project was approved on March 3, 2020.

What if there is a problem? If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, you may wish to speak directly with me, and I will do my best to answer your questions. I can be reached at e.j.thacker@keele.ac.uk. Alternatively, if you do not wish to contact me directly, you may contact my doctoral supervisor, Dr Cora Lingling Xu, at l.xu@keele.ac.uk. If you remain unhappy about the research and/or wish to raise a complaint about any aspect of the way that you have been approached or treated during the course of the study, please contact the approving Research Ethics Committee Chair: REC Name: Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, Keele University, Staffordshire, United Kingdom Email: humss.ethics@keele.ac.uk Thank you for taking the time to read this research participant information sheet and for considering volunteering for this research.

Information Sheet: Ghostwriter

Ghostwriter

Participant Research Information Sheet

REC Reference No: HU-200059

Title of Project: Academic Outsourcing and Literacy Brokering—Exploring the Relationship

Researcher: Emma Thacker, EdD Candidate, e.j.thacker@keele.ac.uk

Researcher Supervisor: Cora Lingling Xu, PhD, l.xu@keele.ac.uk

Aim of the Research: The aim of the research is to better understand assignment outsourcing in higher education by exploring the relationships among ghostwriting, academic literacies and literacy brokering. This approach views literacy as a social practice, shaped by several things such as history, institutions, and power relations. This doctoral thesis project has three objectives:

1) to understand the nature of literacy brokering between ghostwriters and their student clients;
2) to understand how ghostwriters, students, and teachers perceive assignment outsourcing services in terms of academic literacies exchanges, practices, and outcomes; and
3) to explore how assignment outsourcing may be understood from a Canadian post-secondary perspective.

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these services.

Invitation: You are being invited to take part in the above-mentioned research study, at some time during the period of May 2020–April 2021. This project is being undertaken by Emma Thacker who is a doctoral student at Keele University in the United Kingdom (UK), who resides in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Before you decide whether you wish to take part, it is important for you to understand why this research is being done and what it will involve. Please take the time to read this information carefully and discuss it with friends and relatives if you wish. Please ask me if there is anything that is unclear or if you would like more information. I would be happy to chat informally before you decide if you would like to take part.

Why have I been chosen? You have been invited to participate in this study because you are advertising academic essay writing services online, and I have inferred that you are offering this service.

What will happen if I take part? If you agree to take part, you will be asked to participate in one or two interviews of approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour in length, spaced approximately 6 weeks apart. I may also contact you after the interview, with some follow-up questions. I, Emma Thacker, will complete the interview with you, either over the phone, or via technology such as Skype or Zoom—video is not required. The interviews and any follow up will take place at a mutually agreed upon time. As the researcher, I will ask you a set of questions for your response. These questions will be about the work of academic writing services in higher education, your experiences, and perceptions. Following the interviews, the interview data will be transcribed and anonymized. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to read and sign (digitally) a consent form.

What if I don't want to carry on with the study? Participation is voluntary. You

are free to decide whether you wish to take part or not. Should you choose to participate, you can refuse to answer any of the interview questions. As a volunteer you can also stop the interview at any time, or withdraw from the study up to 6 weeks following the final interview, without giving a reason. If you do withdraw from the study after some data has been collected, you will be asked if you are comfortable with the data collected thus far to be retained and included in the study. If you prefer, the data collected can be destroyed and not included in the study.

What are the benefits (if any) of taking part? If you agree to participate in the research study, you will be offered $25.00 CDN (per interview). This cash token is intended to reimburse you for your time. While you may have personal reasons for participating in the study, one benefit you may find is that the process is interesting and provides satisfaction. Your participation in the research study may also benefit society by helping researchers to learn more about teaching and learning, and support positive change in higher education.

What are the risks (if any) of taking part? I will maintain your confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research project. As you may be aware, academic assessment outsourcing services are not illegal in Canada, the United Kingdom, and many other countries in the world. You do not need to inform me of your real name, or where you reside and conduct your work. All participant identities will be fully anonymized and concealed in all field notes, the final dissertation report, and any other publications. Participation will be strictly confidential, and as such, participation in the research project itself will not place teaching staff, students, or ghostwriters at risk for breach of their institutional academic misconduct policy. While this project does not anticipate that the interview process will cause any distress, depending on how you feel about your work, the questions and/or discussion may cause you some

discomfort. As a research participant you are free to end the interview at any time, and you do not have to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable.

Research Data: The interview recording, any collected documents and the subsequent interview transcript will be anonymized and stored in a password-protected computer and folder. These data will be retained for 10 years (or less), as per Keele University policy, after which time the folder will be destroyed. The data, when made anonymous, may be presented at academic conferences, or published as book, journal article or academic dissertation.

Funding and Ethical Approval: This research project is not funded by any corporation or academic institution. Research involving human participants is reviewed by an ethics committee to ensure that the dignity and well-being of participants is respected. This study has been reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at Keele University and has been given a favourable ethical opinion. The ethics protocol for this project was approved on March 3, 2020.

What if there is a problem? If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, you may wish to speak directly with me, and I will do my best to answer your questions. I, Emma Thacker, can be reached at e.j.thacker@keele.ac.uk. Alternatively, if you do not wish to contact me directly, you may contact my doctoral supervisor, Dr Cora Lingling Xu, at l.xu@keele.ac.uk.

If you remain unhappy about the research and/or wish to raise a complaint about any aspect of the way that you have been approached or treated during the course of the study, please contact the approving Research Ethics Committee Chair:

REC Name: Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, Keele University, Staffordshire, United Kingdom

Email address: hums.ethica@keele.ac.uk

Thank you for taking the time to read this research participant information sheet and for considering volunteering for this research.

Appendix F. Participant Consent

Title of Project: Contract Cheating and Academic Literacies—Exploring the Relationship

Researcher: Emma J. Thacker, e.j.thacker@keele.ac.uk

Researcher Supervisor: Dr. John Howlett, PhD, j.howlett@keele.ac.uk

REC Reference Number: HU-200059

Before you consent to participating in the research, please read the participant information sheet and then mark each box below with your initials if you agree. If you have any questions or queries before signing the consent form, please speak to the researcher.

1. I confirm I have read and understood the research information sheet dated [insert date] and/or the project has been fully explained to me. (If you will answer No to this question please do not proceed with this consent form until you are fully aware of what your participation in the project will mean.)
2. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project, and have had these answered satisfactorily.
3. I understand that my taking part in this project is voluntary. I also understand that I can discontinue participation at any point and I can also withdraw myself and my data from the research, up to six weeks after the final interview date without giving a reason. I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want to take part and there will be no adverse consequences if I choose to withdraw.
4. I understand that data collected during this research will be processed in accordance with data protection law as explained in the Participant Information Sheet.

5. I confirm that I am aged 18 years or older.
6. I understand my personal details such as name, phone number, email address etc. will be collected but will not be revealed to people outside the project.
7. I consent for my interview to be audio recorded. The recording will be transcribed and analyzed for the purposes of the research. The recordings will be stored securely, under password protection, and will be destroyed after ten years.
8. I understand and agree that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs. I understand that I will not be named in these outputs but that there is a risk that I could be identified.
9. I understand and agree that the Research Supervisor will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.
10. I understand that whatever I say in the interview is confidential unless I tell the researcher that I or someone else is in immediate danger of serious harm, or the researcher sees or is told about something that is likely to cause serious harm. If that happens, the researcher will raise this with me during the interview and tell me about what could happen if I continue to talk about it and explore how I would prefer to deal with the situation. The researcher will encourage me to seek support to help me make the situation safer. If the researcher feels unsure that I will go and get support, they will talk to me about what they need to do and what might happen next. In an extreme case where a child is at serious risk, and I choose not to seek help/advice the researcher has a duty to disclose this to the relevant agencies.
11. I understand that should I disclose possible criminal offences that have not

been investigated or prosecuted, in the course of the interview, the researcher may report the matter(s) to relevant agencies. I am aware that contract cheating services are not illegal in Canada.

12. I understand that the results of this research may be published and/or presented at meetings or academic conferences. I give my permission for my anonymous data, which does not identify me, to be disseminated in this way.
13. I would like to be made aware of the completion of the research project, and the online location of the final academic dissertation.
14. I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials generated as part of this project to Keele University.

Appendix G. Sample: Coded Transcription

and admission letters. Do you ever get anything more substantial like master's thesis or methodology chapters or something like that?

JACK Most of the work you get is from the first or second year students? Third year, I guess as you know, third year is where it starts to get pretty difficult. If you can't do your own work then, there's no point in staying. So it's usually first or second year students, and I figure a lot of them, they're not going to finish anyway. Right. So it's a little bit, so I can take the whole thing with a grain of salt, you know what I mean?

EMMA So you don't think that they're going to finish the degree?

JACK No, no, not at all. So it's just like laziness. I can't understand the spare cash some of these students have. I mean, when I went to school like 60 bucks was a ton of money, right? So some of them are spending, they pay me one hundred fifty, two hundred dollars to do an essay. I just can't believe how much money they.

EMMA Well I know I hear about it at the university all the time how broke they are, but then they're lined up around the block buying Starbucks coffees.

JACK That's the way it is. [00:16:10]<unint>. [0.0s]

EMMA It's true. And have you seen your practices change over time? Like maybe with years of.

JACK How would it change over time? Like it comes and goes in waves for me I find, like I might be interested in writing well for a few months and then I'll be there, I won't care less about the, I'll care less about the grammar mistakes or the spelling or things like that gets made. How it goes like that in waves. I'm not a very good writer. Right. I think the problem I've got is that I'm not a very good typist. Like I wouldn't be able to work as a professional writer because I can't type eighty words a minute or something. Like I'm a very slow writer, but when I'm interested in something it's quite readable, yeah.

EMMA Is that one of the perks that you get to learn about a bunch of different things through the work.

JACK Absolutely. You get to study into a different thing every day.

EMMA I'm sure you I'm sure you probably are a good writer, but it may work in your favor if you're if you're not a great writer, because neither are the students.

JACK They get a good mark on it, like it's really rare I'll get a complaint, but I mostly get A's or B's for them. So, that inspires them to keep their keep their name up at the top. And that's good. Right.

EMMA Right, right. Do you ever get like a student tell their friend instead of a word of mouth?

Keele UNIVERSITY

Appendix H. Ethics Approval Letter

3 March 2020

Dear Emma Thacker,

Project Title:	Contract Cheating and Literacy Brokering—An Exploration
REC Project Reference:	HU-200059
Type of Application	Main application

Keele University's Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee reviewed the above project application.

Favourable Ethical opinion

The members of the Committee gave a favourable ethical opinion of the above research on the basis described in the application form, protocol and supporting documentation.

Reporting requirements

The university's standard operating procedures give detailed guidance on reporting requirements for studies with a favourable opinion including:

- Notifying substantial amendments
- Notifying issues which may have an impact upon ethical opinion of the study
- Progress reports
- Notifying the end of the study

Approved documents

The documents reviewed and approved are:

Document	**Version**	**Date**
Thacker_Ghostwriter Participant Infor Sheet and Consent Form_V1 – Emma Thacker	1	03/03/2020
Thacker_Student Participant Infor Sheet and Consent Form_V1 – Emma Thacker	1	03/03/2020
Thacker_Teaching Staff Participant Infor Sheet and Consent Form_V1 – Emma Thacker	1	03/03/2020

Yours sincerely,

Professor Anthony Bradney

Chair, Keele University HumSS Faculty Research Ethics Committee

Appendix I. Sample: Invitation to Participate in Research Study

Dear [insert name provided in advertisement]

My name is Emma Thacker. I am a doctoral student at Keele University, UK. I am located in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. I am working on a research project that is studying essay and assignment writing services for students in Canadian post-secondary institutions. I would like to invite you to participate in a 1 hour interview with me at a mutually agreed upon time. If you are agreeable, we can conduct this interview via Skype/Zoom or over the telephone. A small financial gratuity is offered as compensation for your time.

If you are interested, please see the attached information sheet which includes a consent form. The information sheet describes the research study purpose, methods, and information about maintaining confidentiality and your anonymity. I welcome any questions you may have as you consider this invitation. You can reach me at my university email address: e.j.thacker@keele.ac.uk

Regards,

Emma Thacker, EdD Candidate

Keele University

e.j.thacker@keele.ac.uk

Appendix J. Deductive Codes and Definitions

Table 4

Code Definitions and Sources

Code/Code Category	**Code Definitions, with Contract Cheating Example/s**	**Source/s**
Academic Socialization	Processes of acculturation and enculturation, and the induction of students into the culture of the academic institution. e.g., orientation; mentorship	Lea & Street, 2006
Activities	What participants do with texts. e.g., enabling password protection; posting flyers on campus	Hamilton, 2010
Domain and Settings (i.e., place and space)	A Literacy Domain involves values and purposes, not just a place, and refers to the different social areas of our lives. May include digital spaces, and may be private or public. e.g., education/school; work; home A Literacy Setting is a particular space (physical or digital) where literacy is practised. e.g., university library; online message communities	Hamilton, 2010; Pahl & Rowsell, 2005; Scribner & Cole, 1981
Identities inscribed in the practice	Literacy Identity refers to "the ways that a person constructs the self as a reader, writer, and user of language" (Wagner, 2021). e.g., writer; student; helper; academic	Ivanič, 1998; Satchwell et al., 2013; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986; Wagner, 2021
Landscape, eduscape	Literacies Landscape or eduscape is a metaphor to describe the academic literacies and their characteristics featured within the phenomenon of academic ghostwriting. This notion speaks to the	Appadurai, 1990; C. Luke, 2006

Code/Code Category	Code Definitions, with Contract Cheating Example/s	Source/s
	interconnectedness, impermanence, and boundary blurring of multiple literacy and social practices, both locally and global	
Literacy Event	A Literacy Event is an occasion in which a written text is involved in a social interaction. An event is the "moment of composing a literacy text" (Pahl & Rowsell, 2005, p. 9) e.g., using Google Docs to write/co-write essay (Google, n.d.)	Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Heath, 1983; Pahl & Rowsell, 2005
Literacy Practice	Literacy Practices are patterned by social institutions, and power relations. Some are more dominant/visible. They are embedded in larger socio-cultural practices. These practices involve values, attitudes, feelings, and social relationships (Street, 1993, p. 12). They are "general cultural ways of utilizing literacy which people draw upon in a literacy event" (Barton, 2007, p. 37). e.g., literacy brokering; ghostwriting	Barton, 2007; Street, 1984, 1993, 1995
Literacy Texts (i.e., artifacts)	Literacy Texts are written, drawn, or typed artifacts. They are the outcome of social literacy practices/events and are traces of identity. e.g., assignment sheet; lecture notes; texted emoji	Pahl & Rowsell, 2005
Meaning Making (outcomes and processes)	Actions, perspectives, attitudes, and values associated and constructed with literacies. "Meaning-making actions	Whitmore & Meyer, 2020

Code/Code Category	Code Definitions, with Contract Cheating Example/s	Source/s
	are expressions of agency; we influence our worlds as we are influenced by them. We cannot separate the deep meanings that compose and reflect our identities from the meanings we bring to and make of texts" (Whitmore & Meyer, 2020, p. 6)	
Participants/Agents	Those persons involved in an interaction with a written text. e.g., teaching staff; student	Hamilton, 2010
Relationships	Those participants that engage in literacy events in the context of contract cheating. e.g., student–ghostwriter	Hamilton, 2010
Resources	Assets, real or perceived, that contribute to literacy practices, events, and texts. Literacy Resources includes the concept of cultural capital, which includes the concept of techno-capital. Techno-capital is cultural capital related to technology. e.g., laptop; APA handbook; Wi-Fi	Bourdieu, 1983/1986; Hamilton, 2010; Rojas et al., 2003
Study Skills	Cognitive skills that are taught and learned and can be assessed for use in an educational setting. There is an emphasis on mechanics and technique. The study skills model is associated with a deficit view of literacy. Skills are situated within literacy practices. e.g., writing with grammar and punctuation	Barton, 2007; Lea & Street, 2006
Text genre/s	Patterned categories of text type, both spoken and written. Genres are	Bazerman, 1988; Lea & Street, 2006; Satchwell et al., 2013

Code/Code Category	Code Definitions, with Contract Cheating Example/s	Source/s
	socially constructed and shaped by context, mode, and purpose. e.g., academic essay; blog	