The Epistemology of Plagiarism

What this talk/discussion is <u>not</u> about

1. Concrete advice (assignment ideas, detection software recommendations) on plagiarism detection/prevention.
2. Proper citation technique.
3. Plagiarism in a composition course (or other courses where writing is the end, not a means.)

The real problem of plagiarism

- Approaching it as an ethical issue concedes a crucial point: plagiarism is *effective* (in increasing grades.)
- Extensive ethical 'training' efforts are (dubiously) effective.
- The real problem: *interference with assessment.*
- Plagiarists are attempting to <u>appear knowledgeable</u>: delivering material they deem evidence of knowledge.
- Plagiarism is (I argue) primarily an epistemological problem, and only secondarily an ethical one.

The epistemology of plagiarism

- What evidence do we attend to, to identify plagiarists? How do 'successful' plagiarists manage to deceive us?
- What do they choose to plagiarize? What knowledge do they think they are deceiving you about?
- *Plagiarism can (does!) carry evidence of the student's understanding of material.* (Even if you don't identify it as plagiarised.)

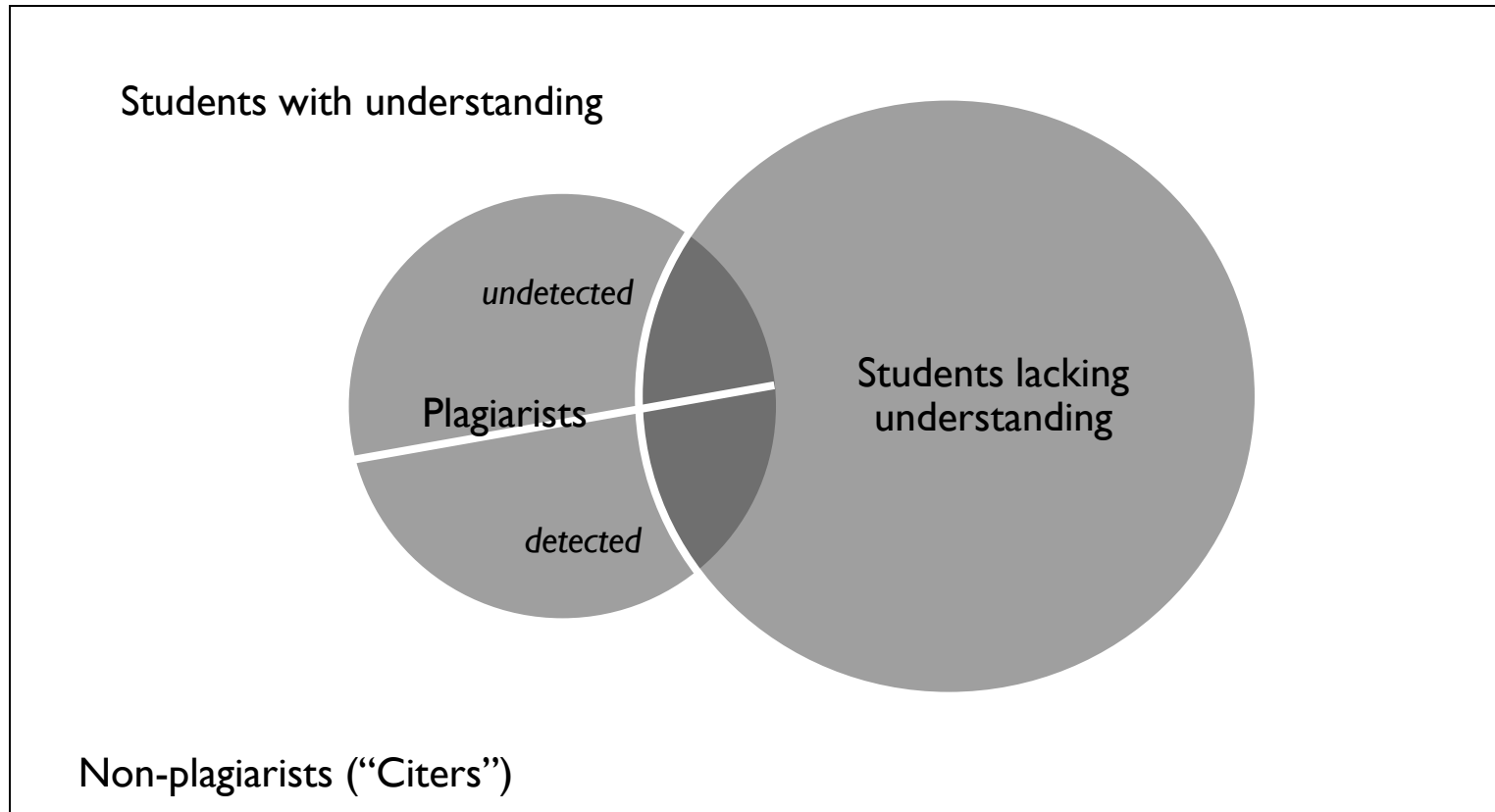## The bad news: the underdetermination problem

(From philosophy of science & epistemology, the underdetermination thesis is simply that any set of observations (no matter how large) is insufficient to logically pick out a unique account of how those observations were produced.)

- In terms of plagiarism: no assignment is ever <u>perfectly</u> "plagiarism-proof" or "cheat-proof". Any assessment or measurement is <u>possibly</u> vulnerable to spoofing.
- Some plagiary will carry minimal evidence of student understanding. (E.g., 100% 'ghost-written' papers.)

The good news: we can differentiate between 'knowledgeable' and 'ignorant' plagiarism

- Plagiarists choose sources, passages, sentences that they *think* meet the assessment's expectations.
  - Ignorant plagiarists will pick sources that are inappropriate or 'clumsily matched' to the task at hand – in the same manner that honest students will authentically construct inappropriate or clumsy understandings/applications of concepts to the paper's task.
  - E.g., Require students to include metaanalyses of arguments ("why is this the most relevant point, in this circumstance?") or other substantial evaluative moves that are specific to the particular task.
- If the plagiarist can successfully construct an appropriate and relevant critically self-reflective argument out of others' words, can we say they don't know the material as well as someone expressing "in their own words"?
- The ethical means of communicating their understanding (stealing!!!) is now a *separate* concern. This is ***good***.

What does the plagiarism you <u>don't</u> catch look like?

Students with understanding

undetected

Plagiarists

detected

Students lacking
understanding

Non-plagiarists ("Citers")

(as with most Venn diagrams, not drawn to scale.)

Some questions we can ask using this diagram:
- Are any of these categories empty?
- Which category/ies of students concern you, as a teacher? Why? (And: are the whys the same across categories?)

MONTCLAIR STATE
UNIVERSITY