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Real Problems or Devious Tricks: Why Do Students Bullshit?

Introduction:

When I write a humanities essay or paper, the approximate analogy to my writing technique is juicing a lemon, or putting a potato through a ricer. I write slowly, laboriously squeezing facts and analysis out of my brain. For example, when faced with an essay for Western Literature, I spent an entire weekend trying to wrap my head around it and produce material. When I showed up to Chemistry, the day the paper for Literature was due, I spotted another student I knew from both of my classes rapidly typing on his laptop, furiously creating text at an amazing speed. I quickly deduced that he was just starting to write his essay, due in an hour. After having typed straight through chemistry, he ran over to the computer center, printed a copy of the finished essay, perfectly formatted and page-length requirement satisfied.

As my previous classes had centered on science, math, and other non-writing intensive subjects, this was my first real introduction to the level of “bullshit” present in college academics, and I was amazed. I read a bit of his essay, and it seemed passable, even good. Further, this student continued to do well in the class and receive good grades, an indicator that the professor agreed. Professor Michaud introduced academic bullshit as a topic of academic research through a comedic reading of the abstract written by Smagorinsky et. al. (2010) in their paper on the subject. The topic simmered in the back of my brain until I had to come up with a

list of potential paper topics. Initially, my question was “How do students bullshit so well?” Over time and research, however, my question has shifted to “why do students bullshit?”

This paper seeks answer this question by connecting the construct and behavior of “bullshitting” amongst college students with real-world problems faced by those writers, defining bullshit not as a trick used to receive good grades but as a way around a lack of content knowledge and a way to imitate membership in the discourse community and gain acceptance for the work being produced. To make this connection, the paper will first outline several problems faced by beginning undergraduate academic writers, specifically a lack of content knowledge and a lack of authority in the academic discourse community. Secondly, it will outline the ways that students employ bullshit to solve these problems. Thirdly, it will discuss the implications of this research for students and teachers.

Problems Faced by Student Academic Writers

In the field of composition studies, many previous researchers, including Perl (1979), Bartholomae (1985), Bizzel (1982), and Hannah (2001) have studied problems faced by academic writers, specifically introductory academic writers. These problems have traditionally been broken into two categories. The first, lack of content knowledge, is simple, and occurs when students do not know enough about their subject matter to properly compose real material. The second relates to authority and initiation in college discourse communities, and is a complex external pressure applied to the writers by their professors, forcing the students to constantly adapt on the fly to new and unspoken community conventions.

Content Knowledge

In her article “The Composition Process of Unskilled College Writers,” Perl examines the writing process of “Tony,” a 20-year-old ex-marine. She found that he had internalized a

consistent writing process, and was not merely a blank slate. More pertinent, however, was her findings about his differences when composing in genres. “The more distance between the topic and himself, the more difficulty he experienced, and the more repetitive his process became.”

(Perl, 1979, p. 326)

Just as students write in unfamiliar discourse, however, students also write about unfamiliar material. Smagorinsky, et. al. encountered this phenomenon a great deal when they conducted a protocol analysis of a high school student named Susan while she attempted to compose an essay about “*Much Ado About Nothing*.” Her realization that she lacked significant content knowledge came while creating her thesis statement and assembling sources from class, when she ascertained that she had left her copy of the assignment sheet (that had the song she was supposed to be writing about), at home. “Now these are papers we did in class, and I think I am going to use that as my basis of my paper, and I really, really need the [Hey nonny nonny] song really bad” (Smagorinsky, Daigle, O'Donnell-Allen & Bynum, 2010, p. 382) This had a serious effect on her ability to compose, as she had to dance around making distinctive points. She also questioned her own understanding of the play, further hampering her efforts. “The song highlights the irony in *Much Ado*. Why does it highlight the irony in *Much Ado*? Because it kind of is like there is more—how many ironic parts are there?” (p. 388)

This lack of content knowledge curses Susan throughout her writing process as she searches for examples and plans the structure of her paper. “I am just confused how to do this because I don't really know what I am doing. I am so visual, and it is horrible not having that actual paper in front of me to just keep looking back on. So I am kind of S.O.L. [Shit Out of Luck] over here.” (p. 389)

Authority and Initiation in the Academic Discourse Community

All standard college English and writing textbooks require that before attempting to compose, the students should seek to understand, and write for, “their audience”. However, Bartholomae suggests that to do that, students must feel as if they have some authority over the discourse community, and over their professor. “The writer who can accommodate her motives to her reader’s expectations is a write who can both imagine and write from a position of privilege. She must, that is, see herself within a privileged discourse. . . She must be either equal to or more powerful than those she would address.” (Bartholomae, 1985, p. 44) This is difficult for students because of the way the school system is arranged. Professors are the experienced members of the discourse community simply because of their own time spent in school, and their own work.

However, even if the students don’t gain authority over the teacher, Bartholomae argues that in order to be successful in his class, a student “has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community.” (p. 39) As he puts it, “I don’t expect my students to be literary critics when they write about *Bleak House*. . . . I do, however, expect my students to be, themselves, invented as literary critics by approximating the language of a literary critic writing about *Bleak House*.” (p. 49) Most students, however, fall somewhere short of this goal; as they can merely approximate the writing, not actually absorb it.

Eubanks and Schaeffer seem to agree with Bartholomae on this point, arguing that the tone and skill with which the papers are written is just as important as the content enclosed in those papers. “Becoming “a member of the community of scholars” depends at least as much on the

ability to discuss matters about which one possesses few facts as upon knowledge of facts themselves.” (Eubanks & Schaeffer, 2008, p. 86)

Bizzell attests to the existence of a literary litmus test in her article “College Composition: Initiation into the Academic Discourse Community.” She describes how in her first years of teaching, the freshman composition class was used to initiate students into the academic discourse community, or to weed them out if their writing was not deemed satisfactory.

The nature of the required product [an essay or paper] – “correct, intelligent, stylish” – was taken to be virtually self-evident. . . . the composition class rewarded writing that tallied with standards of correctness and stylishness already established by the academic discourse community.” (Bizzell, 1982, p. 106-7)

Severe punishments were leveled against students who failed to comply with the unwritten guidelines were often denied entry into the community.

“Under the guise of polishing students’ written products, then, the freshman English course often “served” the college mainly by culling those students who had not already begun their initiation into the discourse community. . . . the freshman English course regularly “flunked out” a certain percentage of each entering class.” (Bizzell, 1982, p. 107)

Given that professors expect students to quickly internalize the values of the discourse community, the students must play extremely fast lexical catch-up to be judged well and given good grades. Bartholomae, however, presents another option, and one that will be discussed in the next sections. “He [the student] must learn to speak our language. Or he must dare to speak it or to carry off the bluff, since speaking and writing will most certainly be required long before the skill is “learned.” (Bartholomae, 1985, p. 40)

Bullshit as a Coping Mechanism

Content Knowledge

Students can be faced with a lack of content knowledge for many reasons, as discussed above. One technique they employ to solve this problem is “bullshitting” papers. The mechanisms of bullshit are well known. From vainglorious, inflated oratory to copious analysis of overall themes without references to specific parts of a text. What are less well known, and more debated, are the reasons that students use bullshit in their writing. Depending on the point of view of the reader, a student using bullshit can be attempting to cynically perform no work on a paper, while still getting good grades, or to disguise a lack of content knowledge while creating new knowledge along the way. The first view is primarily presented by Eubanks and Schaeffer, while the second is presented by Smagorinsky et. al.

Eubanks and Schaeffer have an unflattering description of bullshit as they believe students use it. At best, bullshit is simply lacking facts to back up voluminous but vague analysis. At worst, it is the work of students who “Combine disregard for the truth with the inevitable classroom pretense that the writer truly cares about his or her academic development” (Eubanks and Schaeffer, 2008, p. 386) and use it to fool their professors into giving them a good grade.

Another possibility is the students could simply have no idea about any of the details of their work, but decide to write about it anyway. Bullshit then becomes:

“relevancies, however relevant, without data” (p. 65). That is to say, when a student can write intelligibly and intelligently about a book the student has not read, that is bull. It is interpretation by guesswork. (p. 386)

While Eubanks and Schaeffer gave a broad, prototypical definition for bullshit as students use it, Smagorinsky, et. al attempt to define it in more precise, experimental terms. They

acknowledge the view taken by Eubanks and Schaeffer, saying that their research could lead to the belief that “her [Susan’s] use of the thesaurus to sound erudite and inflate her representation of knowledge through the use of words outside her conversational vocabulary.”” (Smagorinsky, Daigle, O’Donnel-Allen & Bynum, 2010, p. 400) was a cynical move, key-words “representation of knowledge”. In the world of Eubanks and Schaeffer, “representation of knowledge” is all that is improved by bullshit.

However, Smagorinsky, et. al. believe that what was really going on was that the student was doing the best she could given her situation: “Instead, we interpret her protocols to infer that she found the play difficult to understand in the absence of heavily scaffolded instruction from Cindy [her teacher], and that she used genre and process knowledge as a way to produce an interpretive text in spite of that limited grasp of the play’s meaning.” (p. 400) Further, the bullshit helped to increase Susan’s knowledge, instead of merely the representation of knowledge. “Susan’s bullshitting process thus did not simply mask a lack of knowledge. Rather, it enabled her to generate new knowledge as she wrote.” (p. 401)

Authority of the discourse community

Students who aren’t accepted into the discourse community because of their writing face a very serious problem. Several articles in the past have alluded to how they might use bullshit to work around this problem, though they don’t call it by this name. Gee, for example, describes the problem this way:

There is, thus, no workable "affirmative action" for Discourses: you can't be let into the game after missing the apprenticeship and be expected to have a fair shot at playing it.

Social groups will not, usually, give their social goods whether these are status or solidarity or both-to those who are not "natives" or “fluent users" (though “*mushfake*:" discussed

below, may sometimes provide a way for non-initiates to gain access.) (Gee, 1989, p. 10)

This “Mushfake” writing is a way of countering the discourse requirements through skillful impersonation of the genre. “*Mushfake Discourse*” means partial acquisition coupled with meta-knowledge and strategies to “make do” “*such as* having a memo edited to ensure no plural, possessive, and third-person “s” agreement errors.” (p. 13) This is also noted in the Smagorinsky article in the form of Susan’s structuring her paper into the genre that she believes her teacher will accept:

These paragraphing decisions enabled Susan to organize the paper into topics that corresponded with a five-paragraph structure, a template to which she had been exposed during her high school years although not one she had been encouraged to produce in Cindy’s British Literature class.” (Smagorinsky, Daigle, O’Donnel-Allen & Bynum, 2010, p. 394)

This type of bullshit can be monumentally unsuccessful when performed incorrectly. To pull off the method correctly, a student must be well-informed of the proper requirements for the work. In Susan’s case, the proffered 5-paragraph essay that had been reliable in the past was not quite what the teacher intended:

Indeed, Cindy [the teacher] had taught them to develop their argument with attention to the support of claims by warranted evidence, rather than the number of paragraphs . . . Susan, however, appears to have internalized the five paragraph structure as a default organization for academic writing and used it to provide the basic genre for her essay. (p. 394)

However, it seems that the essay was close enough to the desired format to be accepted.

Conclusion:*Implications for Teachers*

The primary implication for teachers is that when students hand in papers laced with bullshit, they may not be doing so in a cynical attempt to receive good grades while putting in no work. Students face a variety of problems when composing, and the problems themselves have numerous and diverse sources.

The institutional expectation that students be able to compose perfect, thoughtful writing without assistance (an expectation still held by some college professors) may be overzealous. Further, it scares students into attempting to feign membership of the community by producing acceptably formatted essays using the bullshit methodology.

Students also face content knowledge shortcomings. Some of these may be due to inattentiveness in class, but some may also be due to ineffectual teaching, or in Susan's case, accidentally leaving the assignment sheet in her locker. In this case, students who produce bullshit may be doing so due to a lack of other options. Further, the bullshitting heuristic process may lead to original thought, of the type that does not fit in teachers' traditional definition of "bullshit."

In conclusion, teachers should not immediately punish students for using bullshit, but should treat it as a symptom, and act to find the original problem. However, if after a careful examination students are found to be using bullshit to do no work but still get a good grade, then proper actions should still be taken.

Implications for Students

Students should recognize that bullshitting on a paper is not as deadly a sin as they might initially believe. However, before employing bullshit, they should carefully examine their

motivations for doing so. If they are planning to use bullshit to avoid work but receive a good grade, they should abandon the ambitious notion that professors cannot recognize when bullshit is employed. Professors do notice, and they do not appreciate this rhetorical subterfuge. As such, it is foolish to attempt to “trick” professors into giving good grades.

If, however, students believe they are employing Bullshit as a last resort, then they must examine the steps that brought them to that point, and their true motivations. If they are covering for a lack of content knowledge, they may still use bullshit, but try to create original thought in the process. Simultaneously, they should pursue other options to gain the knowledge they require. This is particularly true now in the days of the Internet, where texts and educational resources are widely available. Students should also plan for such possibilities, and begin their essays before the day they’re due, giving the students time to really think and plan out what they want to say, instead of throwing words on the paper and seeing what sticks.

The situation that pushes most for bullshit is when students are attempting to satisfy their professors’ demands on the form of the essay. When this occurs, bullshit is acceptable until the student can achieve a firm grasp of the conventions and style of their community.

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