Bullshit in Academic Writing: A Protocol Analysis of a High School Senior's Process of Interpreting *Much Ado about Nothing*

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This article reports a study of one high school senior's process of academic bullshitting as she wrote an analytic essay interpreting Shakespeare's Much Ado about Nothing. *The construct of bullshit has received little scholarly attention; although it is known as a common phenomenon in academic speech and writing, it has rarely been the subject of empirical research. This study is comprised of a protocol analysis of one writer as she attempted to produce an academic essay on a topic in which her understanding of the play's content was insufficient for the task of producing the essay. The coding system identified subcodes within the major categories of content, genre, and process that enabled the researchers to infer what is involved in academic bullshitting. The analysis found that, in the absence of sufficient content knowledge, a writer familiar in discourse conventions may employ knowledge of the genre of academic writing and processes for producing generic features to create the impression that her content knowledge is adequate. The study concludes with a discussion of the phenomenon of academic bullshitting and its implications for teaching and learning academic writing.*

> I can think of a million things to say, but it would be BS, and although a lot of people believe BS is like a giant part of writing, sometimes I think that too. But you have to have like a decent platform of BS in order to successfully BS your way through a paper.

Research participant and high school senior Susan Bynum made this remark during a think-aloud protocol that she produced in conjunction with her composition of an essay in which she analyzed Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing* for a British Literature class. For as long as The Bard has been a staple of the U. S. high school

curriculum, teachers have provided anecdotal evidence that Shakespeare presents immense challenges to secondary school readers (e.g., French, 1968; Robinson, 1989; Townsend, 1929). When students are put in the position of having to sound more learned than they are, they often bullshit their way through their assignments to create the appearance of knowledge according to scholarly specifications, even in its considerable absence. Their writing often is garbed in what Macrorie (1970) called *Engfish*: the spuriously elevated language seemingly endemic to school writing.

Susan, like many high school students across the ages, struggled with *Much Ado about Nothing*—particularly Shakespeare's employment of irony—and so had to resort to "BS" in order to compose her essay. Throughout her school career she had been a high-achieving student, yet she acknowledged that writing this analytic essay—assigned by her teacher as preparation for the sort of writing she anticipated they would produce for college professors—was among the most difficult school tasks that she had ever taken on. In order to complete it, she relied on her ability to "BS" within the academic form of argumentation that her essay needed to assume.

The notion of *bullshit* has served humanity well over the years to describe all manner of insincere and self-inflating performances. Before reporting our analysis of Susan's writing process as an instance of academic bullshit, we explicate our understanding of how this term has been treated in scholarly expositions. This review in turn informs our interpretation of Susan's composition of an academic text in which her understanding of Shakespeare's labyrinthine plot appeared insufficient for writing knowledgeably about the play's action, requiring her to produce her essay through what she characterized as BS. We studied her writing process by inquiring into the following research questions: *How did Susan's knowledge of genre and process contribute to her composition of her essay on a topic that required expertise she lacked in interpreting ironic plotting devices? To what extent and in what ways did her composing process illustrate academic bullshitting?*

A Bullshit Framework

The term "bull," meaning nonsense, originated in the 17th Century, perhaps deriving from the Old French term *boul*, which referred to fraud or deceit. Its excremental extension is dated by the *Oxford English Dictionary* to 1910 when T. S. Eliot—at the time a frustrated, unpublished aspiring poet—wrote a ballade entitled "The Triumph of Bullshit," a poetic diatribe against critics who rejected his poems. By 1915 his doggerel had shifted its focus from critics to ladies, perhaps symbolically or perhaps to target a new source of disparagement of his virtues. In both versions each stanza concludes with the memorable imperative to his tormentors, "For Christ's sake stick it up your ass." For reasons that remain obscure, Eliot did not publish the poem in his lifetime.

Whether or not Eliot is indeed the source of the term bullshit—Winchester (1998) notes that there are at least 35,000 occasions when an OED attribution

to first usage is incorrect—it has proliferated in the English language and across the international lexicon as a term to describe the bombastic, the spurious, the deceptive. Surprisingly, given the ubiquity of both the term and the term in action, the construct of bullshit has received little scholarly attention, particularly within the social sciences. It is this lacuna in the scholarly corpus that we hope to address with this study.

For the most part, consideration of the construct of bullshit has been the province of philosophers, who have typically explored the topic in a genre characterized by an ironic bemusement with the gravity and erudition with which they treat this mundane aspect of diurnal bovine life and its equally prosaic human adaptation. (See Eubanks & Schaeffer, 2008, for a rhetorical perspective on bullshit.) Because philosophers and rhetoricians working from hypothetical examples have provided the primary impetus for inquiry, as social scientists we are left with little empirical work upon which to found our own analysis of one student's process of academic bullshitting. A second problem is that bullshit's multiple connotations complicate the possibility of empirical study because, as Postman (1969) has observed, "One man's bullshit is another man's catechism" (p. 3; cf. Eubanks & Schaeffer, 2008). Our review attempts to sort through the rich philosophical *excreta* on record to extract what we understand to be pertinent to the study of academic bullshitting as produced by one accomplished writer struggling to produce a challenging literary interpretation.

Frankfurt on Bullshit

The classic treatment of the construct of bullshit is provided by Frankfurt (1986, 2005), who opened his treatise by observing that, even though the abundance of bullshit is among "the most salient features of our culture," philosophers are limited in understanding this phenomenon because "we have no theory" (2005, p. 1). To fill this void, he proposed "to begin the development of a theoretical understanding of bullshit, mainly by providing some tentative and exploratory philosophical analysis" (2005, pp. 1–2) for a field bereft of scholarly treatment of this construct. His belief in the originality of his exposition was corroborated by our search for scholarship, which produced just three conference papers on bullshit that predated or coincided with Frankfurt's original essay, only two of which were ever bound in collections (Martin, Wignell, Eggins, & Rothery, 1986, 1988; Perry, 1963, 1967).

Frankfurt (2005) posited that bullshit is a societal scourge that undermines an essential attachment to truth. In Frankfurt's conception, a person bullshits when faced with "obligations or opportunities to speak about some topic [that] exceed[s] his knowledge of the facts that are relevant to that topic," (p. 63), thus rendering the bullshitter "a greater enemy of the truth" than the liar (p. 61). For the bullshitter in such a situation, the goals range from trying out an idea that one has not fully developed in order to see how it sounds, to trying to masquerade as

more knowledgeable than one is. Frankfurt considered these goals nefarious, not because of the malevolence of the bullshitter toward the persons addressed but rather because of the cumulative effects of a cavalier treatment of truth in society overall.

From Frankfurt's (2005) modernist stance, bullshit blurs the line between truth and falsity and thus must not be tolerated blithely. He concluded his essay with a critique of relativism, saying that

> The contemporary proliferation of bullshit also has deeper sources, in various forms of skepticism which deny that we can have any reliable access to an objective reality, and which therefore reject the possibility of knowing how things truly are. These "antirealist" doctrines undermine confidence in the value of disinterested efforts to determine what is true and what is false, and even in the intelligibility of the notion of objective inquiry. (pp. 64–65)

Although we do not consider ourselves to be especially postmodern, we do not embrace the notion of objective truth presumed by Frankfurt (2005), even as we cannot deny his contention that much public discourse is replete with bullshit.[1]

Pragmatic Conceptions of Bullshit

Reisch (2006) made a distinction between semantic and pragmatic classifications of bullshit. He argued that Frankfurt (1986) focuses solely on semantic bullshit because of his concern with its truth value—the degree to which people's bullshit is divorced from their concern for veracity. Pragmatic bullshit, however, addresses the goals of the bullshitter in terms of trying to achieve something potentially legitimate while fudging the truth. The range of pragmatic bullshit includes any effort to represent the truth selectively, including making political claims, advertising products, performing at job interviews (Levin & Zickar, 2002), posturing at social gatherings, posing academically, and so on.

Reisch (2006) argued that pragmatic bullshitters are concerned with truth of a kind, but the conception of truth with which they operate is relative to their value system, which may or may not be evident to the addressee. Fuller (2006) paraphrased Benjamin Franklin's assertion that "one's truthfulness should always be proportional to the demands of the speech situation" (p. 243), indexing the flexibility of language use to achieve certain ends. Kimbrough (2006) argued that bullshit is, if not fundamental to competitive social situations, characteristic of them, arguing that "to forego the use of bullshit is thus to settle for being a loser" (p. 6). In this sense, bullshit is a sort of gamesmanship endemic to certain rhetorical situations, and one eschews it at one's peril (cf. Eubanks & Schaeffer, 2008).

Two concerns follow from the inevitable presence of pragmatic bullshit: the degree to which the bullshitees recognize it by means of what Postman (1969) called "crap detection" (p. 3) and the degree to which they tolerate bullshit once

they detect it. To Postman, educators ought to be fundamentally focused on helping students "to identify fake communication" (p. 3). Kimbrough (2006) took the position that those who lack sufficient bullshit filters are "suckers." He continued, "we may pity suckers, but we certainly don't respect them." His final judgment of the naïve, the gullible, and the vulnerable is that those "taken in by a line of bullshit [deserve] their fate" (p. 6).

Academic Bullshit

In various contexts in education, bullshit takes different forms and serves different functions. Cohen (2006) focused his critique on a bullshitter's penchant for adoxography: the inflated vocabulary and obfuscating syntax employed to veil a poverty of substance in academic essays. Postman (1969) referred to this "triumph of style over substance" as the "pomposity" subset of bullshit, without which "many people . . . would be unable to function" (p. 1). While Cohen's treatment of this variety of bullshit frames it as a product that can be judged irrespective of the intention of the author, Postman (1969) attributed intentionality. Postman argued that these bullshitters "use fancy titles, words, phrases, and sentences to obscure their own insufficiencies" (p. 1). Intention aside, an abstruse product places significant demands on the reader. Cohen observed that some readers find incomprehensible writing to be impressive and scholarly simply by virtue of its impenetrable prose, regardless of whether a more perspicacious reading could identify any substantive ideas or not.

Apprenticeship to a discipline appears to encourage two types of bullshit. The first is the sort scorned by Cohen (2006), the textual product that either is or is not bullshit regardless of authorial intent or situational conventions (a conception of textual quality that has been disputed by Nystrand [1986] and others who have critiqued Olson's [1977] view of the "autonomous" text). The second concerns the process of bullshitting, when one knows enough to figure out how to approximate the conventions expected within a disciplinary community, yet has limited content knowledge and so must mask this lack of knowledge with rhetorical chutzpah. As Nystrand might argue, the degree to which an utterance constitutes bullshit is dependent on the conventions of the setting, which cue the bullshitter as to the type of product that must be created in order to make a suitable impression. Fuller (2006) contended that the extensive training within doctoral programs, for example, produces "institutionalized immunity to bullshit" (p. 246) because "the time required to master a body of knowledge virtually guarantees . . . loyalty to its corresponding practices and central dogmas" (p. 245). If the academic community tolerates or elevates vacuous jargon, students will gravitate to this value and produce it comfortably in their speaking and writing.

The setting of text production must have a historical precedent of texts that are sincere, informative, or at least validated in order for a bullshitting opportunity

to be available to the apprentice scholar. De Waal (2006) wrote that "bullshitting can flourish only in an environment that is secured by people who do more than just bullshit" (p. 103). In the absence of a body of authentically produced texts, bullshit lacks conventions to mimic and thus risks being judged on its own merits. To Fuller (2006), "the accomplished bullshitter must be a keen student of what people tend to regard as true, if only to cater to those tendencies so as to serve her own ends" (pp. 242–243).

Students spend years learning the expectations of scholarly writing in their disciplines and are taught to venerate particular styles of argument and explication. Bartholomae (1988) argued that "students have to appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse," and in the course of this process "they must dare to speak [our language], or to carry off the bluff, since speaking and writing will most certainly be required long before the skill is 'learned'" (p. 273). That is, in learning how to write in a discourse community, students frequently must reach beyond their current abilities to produce something that they believe will impress their teachers, based on its semblance to disciplinary standards of scholarship. They must thus employ the *conventional knowledge* (Smagorinsky & Smith, 1992) that helps them to establish themselves as members of academic communities, even if they do not know what they are talking about.

Bullshitting may also involve procedural knowledge related to content. De Waal (2006) argued that when stretching to meet academic goals, a student "may resort to bullshitting when trying to bridge the gap between the results he needs and the results inquiry would bring him" (p. 110). By attempting to meet the expectations of a paper, the student is able to create space for what needs to be accomplished. Perla and Carifio (2006), taking a perspective that echoes Vygotsky's (1987) views of the fecund nature of articulated speech, argued that bullshitting is a necessary stage in the production of new ideas because it involves people experimenting with, according to Frankfurt (2005), "various thoughts and attitudes in order to see how it feels to hear themselves saying such things and in order to discover how others respond, without its being assumed that they are committed to what they say" (p. 36; cf. Barnes, 1992, for his notion of *exploratory talk*).

To Perla and Carifio (2006), then, bullshit "is *often* a highly dynamic and necessary matrix for the *development* of expressive, creative, critical and higher order thinking and representation that gives birth to the truth or/and new truths" (n.p., italics in original). In this conception, bullshit is an important developmental stage in the articulation of new ideas, a dynamic experience "that is highly generative (and allows for the thinking and expression of ideas in a less inhibited manner that may not consider the truth or falsity of the expression)" and often leads "to more precise ideas and conceptions that may (or may not be) weeded out by some form of reason, experience, formal testing procedure or logic" (n. p.).

Bullshit and Teaching

Postman's (1969) treatment of bullshit regards it as a posture rather than a process; that is, he did not inquire into the way in which a bullshitter produces bullshit, but rather emphasized the pernicious and disingenuous effects that bullshit may have on human relationships and how educators should approach this problem. Arguments for the responsibility of educators to teach bullshit specifically vary depending on the definition of bullshit employed. Martin, Wignell, Eggins, and Rothery (1988) addressed tacit cultural expectations, arguing that students must learn to communicate through "secret English," a coded register that is highly valued but is not taught explicitly. Students from backgrounds that do not enculturate them to specialized discourses are thus excluded from success as measured through use of secret English because they lack the knowledge required for bullshitting within the codes of disciplinary conventions. Martin et al. argued that teachers must explicate these expectations to allow students to critique the ideas behind academic writing: "Without conscious control of these tools students are in a poor position to critique their explanations and interpretations and construct alternative points of view" (1988, p. 171). By not distinguishing between the content of the ideas and the presentation of them, teachers encourage the production of bullshit.

Much of what is expected or valued in education seems to encourage and reward the ornamentation of vapid ideas with a patina of bullshit. For example, Perry (1963) discussed "examsmanship" as a phenomenon where students have learned to perform school writing tasks successfully without needing to demonstrate any significant grasp of content. Perry decorously referred to this substance-less performance as "bulling," which he defined as "to discourse upon the contexts, frames of reference, and points of observation which would determine the origin, nature, and meaning of data if one had any. To present evidence of an understanding of form in the hope that the reader may be deceived into supposing a familiarity with content" (n. p.). Again, the context of the task and the expectations the writer holds of the reader guide the successful bullshitter and elide the absence of substance.

Perry (1963) compared "bull" to student work he dubs "cow,"[2] a form of discourse in which the author endeavors "to list data (or perform operations) without awareness of, or comment upon, the contexts, frames of reference, or points of observation which determine the origin, nature, and meaning of the data (or procedures).... To present evidence of hard work as a substitute for understanding, without any intent to deceive" (n. p.). Perry based his views on an incident at Harvard in which a student was mistakenly herded into an examination room to write an essay for a course in which he was not enrolled. The student used his knowledge of academic discourse conventions to bullshit his way to an A- on the exam, causing considerable alarm when it was revealed that the assessors had granted a high mark to a student who conceded that he had no knowledge of the course content.

Perry (1963) argued that the student who understands and can produce conventions of the sort appreciated by a discipline's *cognoscenti* is received more warmly in academia than the student who can only "cow." Those who are limited to cow leave a general impression of "earnestness, diligence, and painful naïveté" among the professoriate (n. p.). "Good bull," Perry argued, "appears not as ignorance at all but as an aspect of knowledge" (n. p.). In the student who had appropriated the field's habits of mind but knew not its content, Perry and his Harvard faculty colleagues saw someone who was *one of us*—a much more welcome soul than the student who can study and remember information but has little sense of how to render it into disciplinary discourse. Bartholomae (1988) concurred, saying that the university 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. 273).

This knowledge comprises the "secret English" elucidated by Martin et al. (1986), who argued that the conventions of academic discourse are characterized by a particular social register, a way of perceiving, organizing, and communicating information in particular contexts. Such tacit learning favors those students already enculturated to attend to the register and develop the skills to produce what the field expects in its scholarship. Martin et al. argued that teachers could better serve their students by explicating knowledge of the community's conventions on which students ultimately will be evaluated, a view disputed by Luke (1996). Luke derived from Bourdieu (1991) the idea that those who are on the margins of a social group may have a difficult time transforming academic knowledge into value, capital, and power. Although Luke and Martin et al. agreed that schools serve exclusive groups of people in ways that are discriminatory to outsiders and create barriers to access within the community's value and reward system, they disagreed on the degree to which the status of those lacking cultural capital can be improved through instruction in discourse conventions.

Bullshit in academic contexts is thus most readily available to those whose cultural experiences provide them with tools that enable them to identify and adopt a discipline's epistemology and corresponding vocabulary (Gee, 1992). Those advantaged by such circumstances are thus able to determine felicitously what form is required for successful bullshitting, while other students may focus on the concrete information that is taught. Those whose experiences have not impressed upon them the value and means of particular, culturally-engrained, and locally-valued forms of expression then do not exhibit an understanding of the underlying expectations for ways of thinking, organizing, evaluating, and presenting information and so often produce what their assessors regard as steaming piles of cow instead.

Academic Bullshit: A Working Definition

Academic bullshit thus involves an ability to produce text that appears to meet a disciplinary standard yet masks the author's insufficient grasp of appropriate

content knowledge. Whether the capacity to bullshit one's way through academic discourse marks one as a knowing insider (Perry, 1967) or as a charlatan (Postman, 1969) remains in the eye of the beholder. A second dimension of academic bullshit concerns the potential for understandings to emerge through the process of spoken or written speech as one plays and experiments with new ideas (Perla & Carifio, 2006). This aspect of bullshit does not involve the disingenuous effort to inflate one's stature within a discourse community, but rather involves a process for developing ideas that may or may not become part of a finished product. The degree to which that final product serves as an instance of bullshit of a different variety is another matter.

Philosophers have thus far dominated the scholarly inquiry into the nature of bullshit and how it functions in society (e.g., Hardcastle & Reisch, 2006). If philosophical treatises on bullshit are not informed by empirical documentation, and if philosophical treatises comprise the majority of the scholarly treatment of bullshit, then the basis available for acting in relation to bullshit is largely speculative. Only Levin and Zickar's (2002) study of job interview performances and Martin et al.'s (1986) linguistic analysis of school discourse rely on data-based evidence to support their arguments. Our study of Susan's authoring of an interpretive essay on *Much Ado about Nothing* for her high school British Literature class thus provides the opportunity to study this widely acknowledged, yet curiously under-researched, phenomenon through empirical means.

Method

Researchers' Roles

The four coauthors of this study played different yet interrelated roles in the research. Susan Bynum was the student who produced the think-aloud protocol and was consulted regarding the interpretation of the protocols. Cindy O'Donnell-Allen was the full-time teacher of Susan's class and contributed to the writing of the manuscript. Peter Smagorinsky observed Cindy's class nearly every day it met for the whole school year, and with doctoral student Elizabeth Daigle co-analyzed the protocol and coauthored the bulk of the manuscript.

Data Collection

Susan was one of several students from Cindy's class who were provided with recorders and asked to think aloud while composing their essays at their chosen times and places. Of these students, Susan was the only one who provided a set of protocols for this assignment and thus serves as the focal student for this study. Susan produced protocols in five distinct sessions while writing her essay in response to a prompt from a menu of topics provided following a classroom showing of Branagh's (1993) film version of William Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing.*

Susan wrote this essay by hand in her room at home, beginning on Monday and concluding on Wednesday. We analyze the five sessions as a continuum of protocols that reveal what is available of her writing process over the course of three days. The day, approximate time, reason for ending the session, and length of each protocol are detailed in Table 1.

The protocol collection was situated and dialogic. In other words, Susan produced them in times and places of her choice, and they included conversations between her and occasional visitors (her friend, her family members) and with the tape recorder itself, which she addressed using the first author's first name; presumably, then, the tape recorder embodied him as a conversational partner (see Smagorinsky, 1997, 1998, 2001b; Smagorinsky, Augustine, & O'Donnell-Allen, 2007).

TABLE 1: **Protocol chronology**

Protocol	Day	Time	Reason for ending	Number of words in protocol
#1	Monday	About 6 PM	Mother interrupts	1,035
#2	Monday	About 8 PM	Unidentified interruption	3,830
#3	Monday	About 11 PM	Susan becomes fatigued	954
#4	Wednesday	Not available	Unidentified interruption	1,902
#5	Wednesday	90 minutes following 4th protocol	Susan concludes paper	1,256

Data Analysis

After consulting prior protocol studies of writers in this line of inquiry (Smagorinsky, 1991, 1997; Smagorinsky et al., 2007), Smagorinsky and Daigle read through the whole set of five protocols together, ultimately rejecting those codes and developing a new system that was refined throughout the coding process. The full set of codes is listed in Table 2. Here we will provide a general description of the coding system.

We found that Susan's composing broadly fell into three categories: knowledge of content, genre, and process. We next define each major category.

Content Knowledge

Content codes refer to the material that Susan drew on for the substance of her essay. We considered content to include the *action of the play*, the *assignment* to which she wrote in response, one instance where she drew from her knowledge of *popular culture*, and *prewriting from class* that she produced in response to prompts from Cindy.

TABLE 2: **Protocol Analysis**

Code	Frequency
CONTENT KNOWLEDGE	
Action of the play	11
Assignment	16
Popular culture	1
Prewriting from class	21
GENRE KNOWLEDGE	
Body paragraph function	17
Global structure	37
Model from class	4
Thesis statement	40
WRITING PROCESS KNOWLEDGE	
Block solution: Placeholder	10
Block solution: Proceeding	3
Characteristic writing tendency	10
Efficacy	30
Evaluation: Negative	18
Evaluation: Positive	14
Exploratory speech	28
Exploratory writing	24
Knowledge deficit relative to task	18
Orienting self	24
Problem-solving deferral	10
Problem-solving hierarchy	4
Problem-solving projection	12
Revision: Attention to phrasing	68
Revision: Rereading	75

Genre Knowledge

Genre codes refer to Susan's organization and arrangement of the content of the essay so that her presentation fit with the expectations for school essays. These codes accounted for occasions when she named the generic features and the function of this structure to facilitate her writing of the essay, including the *body paragraph function*, i.e., the role that specific paragraphs served in the overall structure and sequence of the essay; the *global structure* of the essay as a whole; a *model from class*, written collaboratively under Cindy's guidance, for how to structure the introductory paragraph of an essay written in response to the prompts; and the role of the *thesis statement* in establishing the point of her paper.

Writing Process Knowledge

Writing process codes refer to those operations through which Susan produced her essay, comprised of her experience of and solutions for being *blocked*, including using a *placeholder* in her text which she could revise later and *proceeding* with her writing even when she felt stumped; her recognition of *characteristic writing tendencies*, often cued by statements such as "I always . . . ."; her sense of *efficacy* as a student and as a writer; her *negative* and *positive evaluations* of her writing; her use of *exploratory speech* and *writing* as a way to generate ideas; her recognition that she had a *knowledge deficit relative to the task* that inhibited her ability to proceed with her essay; her efforts to *orient herself* in relation to the task; her *problem-solving* approaches, including deciding on a *deferral* of decisions until a more propitious occasion arose, creating a *hierarchy* regarding which problems were of greatest magnitude and attending to them first, and imagining a *projection* of a future rhetorical space for herself in which she outlined the procedures she would go through in order to complete later portions of her essay; and her *revisions* during and after various drafts of the essay, including both *attention to phrasing* and *rereading*.

Setting of Susan's Composing

Susan was one of the top-performing students in Cindy's class. She had been in honors English classes throughout high school but because of her hectic schedule had enrolled in regular-track English her senior year. Susan was ranked in the top 10% of her class and was also heavily involved in extracurricular activities. In prior publications from this classroom, Susan has gone by the pseudonym "Carly" (O'Donnell-Allen & Smagorinsky, 1999; Smagorinsky, 2001a; Smagorinsky & O'Donnell-Allen, 2000).

The protocols in this study were generated by Susan for an assignment that required the students to respond to one of several questions from a menu to interpret Branagh's (1993) film version of *Much Ado about Nothing*, a decision Cindy made because she wanted the class to experience a Shakespearean comedy. Prior to watching the film, she told the students to pay attention to the words of the beginning song—which served as the focus of the exam question that Susan chose to write on—because it would be a recurring theme.

Following the film, Cindy introduced the writing assignment, including the question that Susan chose (see Figure 1). She provided students with a line by line analysis of the song, focusing on key words and their definitions, including: sigh, constant, deceivers. Cindy instructed students to consider the play's themes and consider why the song was sung three times in the film and its role at the places of use. Cindy modeled a potential answer to one of the question options, asserted it as a claim, told students to use quotes from the play as data, and explained how a warrant could connect them together. Cindy then provided time for students to

write "as much as you can, off the top of your head" on one of the questions. This prewriting served as Susan's initial content when she later began her essay at home.

Cindy's instruction was situated within her school's and district's emphasis on college preparation. She designed the analytical essay to anticipate the sort of self-directed reading and analysis they could expect to see in college. College preparation was woven into Cindy's instruction throughout the year, serving as an adjunct to her overriding emphasis on students' personal connections to their studies and what she considered to be their authentic learning experiences. Rather than seeing "authentic" writing and more traditional academic writing at odds with one another, Cindy saw the necessity for teaching both, accepting Bizzell's (1982) argument that academic writing tasks can serve an "initiatory function" of the sort she envisioned and should not necessarily be viewed cynically as a "mindless chore imposed by some martinet" (p. 202).

Susan began her essay on Monday evening, producing it in her room along with the protocol that we analyze next.

Findings

Susan's metaphor of a "decent platform of BS" captures the essence of how she was able to produce an interpretive essay through her general understanding of how to fashion her fragile grasp of the play's contorted plot into prose that met

Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more,
Men were deceivers ever;
One foot in sea, and one on shore,
To one thing constant never.
Then sigh not so,
But let them go,
And be you blith and bonny,
Converting all your sounds of woe
Into Hey nonny, nonny.

Sing no more ditties, sing no mo
Of dumps so dull and heavy;
The fraud of men was ever so,
Since summer first was leavy.
Then sigh not so,
But let them go,
And be you blith and bonny,
Converting all your sounds of woe
Into Hey nonny, nonny.

Beatrice ironically recites this song at the beginning of the movie, and it accompanies the dance of the word. In the play, it is sung in Act 2 (after Don John's and Boracho's plot to deceive Claudio and before Benedick overhears of Beatrice's love for him in Leona's orchard). DISCUSS how the song captures the spirit of the entire play.

FIGURE 1: *Beatrice's Song and the Assignment*

expectations for academic writing. Our analysis attempts to capture the qualities of her process to explicate what a confident and successful student might accomplish in the face of a daunting school task.

We should emphasize before reporting the results that Susan's use of bullshit was more subtle than it was explicit, conspicuous, or profligate. Although she did refer to "BS" at one point, the bulk of our analysis follows from inferences we have made about her composing process rather than explicit statements of and overt efforts at bullshit on Susan's part. Our report of evidence thus includes few occasions when Susan appears to engage in cynical or deceitful efforts to complete her paper or fill it with inflated or pompous statements. Rather, her bullshit follows from her effective orchestration of her understanding of the genre of academic writing and various processes she employed to provide content within what she understood to be the appropriate structure.

Figure 2 includes Susan's essay. We report the protocol analysis in five segments that correspond temporally to the sessions in which Susan wrote her composition. *Throughout the reporting of results, we italicize coding categories when referring to them in relation to Susan's protocol.*

> The song much like the play, *Much Ado About Nothing* by William Shakespeare, is based on irony and symbolizes the relationship between Benedick and Beatrice. When we, as viewers, see this relationship metamorphosed from sworn enemies to lovers, this provides a great deal of ironic humor to the play.
>
> In the beginning of the play the song read by Beatrice is presented in a serious manner. She advises that ladies sigh no more [for men] because they are deceivers. Beatrice goes on to add this autonomous song for women to convert their sounds of woe into hey nonny, nonny sounds of carefree nonsense.
>
> However by the end of the play the song turns into somewhat of an ironic joke on Beatrice after she hypocritically falls in love with Benedick. Part of the humor this play possesses is that of irony. The reader becomes aware of both Beatrice and Benedick's beliefs and their mutual loathing for one another in the form of sharp tongues and quick wit. We see their feelings toward one another change after they overhear that the other is in love with them. The song presents itself once again at the end of the play after Beatrice and Benedick promise to marry. This pokes fun at Beatrice and Benedick's vow to remain unwed. This time the song is not given in a serious manner but as a final joke unto this comedy.
>
> However throughout the course of the play, the song is seemingly lost in the plot. The play's focus is on the unraveling plot of Hero, Claudio, Beatrice and Benedick. Although the song is lost the spirit of this song lives on through Beatrice's struggles with feelings for Benedick. The song's true humor is revealed at the end of the play when Beatrice and Benedick publicly admit their feelings for one another that they once hid with sharp tongues and quick wit. This provides the reader with one last ironic chuckle as the two vowed bachelors decide to marry.
>
> The song performed by Beatrice at the beginning of the play has a lasting impact throughout the course of the play. Its full humor is not appreciated until the outcome of the conflicts has been resolved. William Shakespeare used the song as an outlet for irony by the hypocritical couple, Beatrice and Benedick.

FIGURE 2: *Susan's Essay on* Much Ado about Nothing

Protocol 1

In her first protocol Susan oriented herself to the task, assembled materials from class to help her with her essay, roughed out a thesis statement, and began to realize the difficulty of the essay task.

Orienting Herself to the Task

Susan typically began new composing episodes with her *process knowledge* of *orienting herself* to the task. This orientation included a signpost of where she was in the process and what she intended to do next. She began her protocol, for instance, by saying,

> It is—like many students I am doing this the day before it is due, so the rough draft is due tomorrow, and it is Monday night, and I don't have my sheet with me that tells me of any of the things that I am supposed to do, but I wrote two different little papers [in class]. Right now, like we were supposed to write in class, and on the top of one of them it says, "Discuss how the song captures the spirit of the entire play."

Here Susan *oriented herself* to what she hoped to accomplish in this session, referencing the *assignment* and her procrastination in beginning her work in response to the prompt.

Assembling Materials from Class

To help herself get started, Susan drew on a set of materials from the classes in which Cindy prepared them for the essays. These materials included the *assignment* itself, which Susan had written down previously but did not have in its entirety when she sat down to write; a *thesis statement* from the *model from class* that Cindy and the students had coauthored during class; and *prewriting from class* in response to the essay prompt that she would write on. To begin, then, Susan drew on *content* and *genre knowledge* based on Cindy's classroom scaffolding.

The following excerpt reveals her consulting her second *prewriting from class* and then *reorienting herself* to the task with her materials assembled:

> Here is my other paper [from class]. It says, "*Much Ado about Nothing* is saturated with irony. Setting the tone for the entire play is Beatrice's song read at the beginning of the movie. Part of the humor in this comedy comes from the irony of Beatrice's and Benedick's feelings of love. This situation is funny because we see their loathing for one another in the beginning of the play. To their discovery of love to the ending—discovery of love to the ending when they both swallow their pride and speak publicly of their love for one another." 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, but I think I can remember it pretty good. I don't know, I always think that I know more than I really do. I can't believe I don't have that. Okay, [inaudible] to start this big boy off with. This will work. Okay, hope you can hear me down there.

Susan's lament that she "really need[ed] the song really bad" referred to her regret that she had left the assignment in her locker at school and needed to work from memory. Having situated herself relative to the task and gathered what she had available to begin her essay, Susan next undertook the drafting of the *thesis statement* that would guide her composition.

Roughing Out a Thesis Statement

Susan dedicated nearly half of the aggregated protocols to generating and refining her *thesis statement*. She began this process by saying, "The main points of this—I guess that is what I want to start off with because that would be easiest to do my thesis statement." We coded this statement as an instance of a *problem-solving hierarchy* in that Susan believed that her first task was to develop a *thesis statement*, from which the rest of the essay would follow. We also coded this statement as an instance of *efficacy* because she indicated a confidence in her ability to produce this key feature and foundation for the essay.

Next, Susan began roughing out the *thesis statement* that would guide what would follow in her essay. We coded the following segment both as *thesis statement* and as *exploratory speech* because of the way in which she haltingly generated the crux of the idea from which her essay could emerge:

> Beatrice and Benedick changing love. Okay and how this song captures the spirit of the entire play may be irony. The irony—or maybe I should—maybe I should focus on Beatrice and Benedick and different parts of their togetherness like the irony of it and the beginning of it, but I don't really—like at the beginning she is serious, like her when she is saying this. I mean, she is like serious in her beliefs, but she is not exactly serious in the song, but it is as serious as she gets I guess, and at the end this song is read once again, and it is meant for like humor purposes because it is kind of like poking fun at Beatrice for making this vow that obviously she can't keep.

Such *exploratory speech*, we infer, contributed to Susan's bullshitting process in that she was attempting to talk her way into ideas that had not yet occurred to her, due to the limited *content knowledge* she had when she began her essay.

Realizing the Difficulty of the Task

With the germ of a *thesis statement* begun, Susan said, "I don't know exactly what to put. I am really kind of stumped. Of course I am feeling the usual guilt of starting so completely late on this paper." Thus blocked, Susan continued, "But I guess I just need a rough draft. Hey, I just need a rough draft, I don't have to do this. Hey, I am not going to have to type this, I am good to go. Okay paper, I need real paper, not this trash that I am using." We identified this operation as a *block solution: proceeding* because she realized that, while writing her initial draft, she was working at the exploratory level and need not produce a polished interpretation; she could continue thinking and drafting in spite of the fact that she felt "stumped."

We also regarded this operation as an indication of her sense of *efficacy*, given that she did not allow the block to halt her progress but instead felt "good to go." We infer that Susan believed that this initial draft did not need to meet the expectations for a finished piece of academic writing, such as the example that Cindy had provided the class from a student from a prior year. At this stage of her composition, then, her sense of efficacy enabled her to realize that her essay could appear rough and incomplete and take on more finished form later.

With this recognition in place, Susan once again *oriented herself* to the task in anticipation of moving forward, saying, "Back to the main points I want to make. I am going to go through the old papers that I wrote, and I wonder why I really chose these, you know. I don't know why I chose this one [essay question] because I wrote it [during prewriting], and I thought, boy, this is going to be tough to just milk stuff out of it." We coded Susan's recognition that the task would require her to "milk stuff out of it" as an instance of her recognition of her *knowledge deficit relative to task*, a shortcoming that would require her to call on her bullshitting abilities in order to complete the essay. Before getting this process underway, however, Susan was called to dinner and the first protocol came to an end.

Protocol 2

In her second protocol Susan spent the majority of her time developing the *thesis statement* that would guide the remainder of her essay. During this effort she developed strategies for proceeding with her writing, drew on resources such as the *assignment* to help her formulate the thesis statement, projected the *global structure* of the essay that would follow from the thesis statement, and *evaluated* both her understanding of the play and the quality of her writing. These operations appeared recursively in this protocol as she sought to articulate her thesis statement amidst a number of interruptions from phone calls and family. We infer that Susan also began to recognize the difficulty of her task and to thus infuse bullshit into her essay.

Strategic Jump-starting of Thesis Statement

Susan began the second protocol by orienting herself to the task, first greeting the first author and then saying, "And when I said, '[Good] evening, Pete,' I really meant about 8:00. It is not too late, it is prime time late and juices should be flowing. But it isn't academy awards night." She then employed a strategy for getting started, consulting her *prewriting from class* to consider possibilities for the driving point of her essay: "I am going to go through this [prewriting] and find some little things that maybe I wrote that I liked and kind of copy off of myself." Based on her *prewriting from class*, Susan used *exploratory speech* to develop a tentative *thesis statement* for her essay, saying,

> Maybe a good point to start would be, we see they are loathing for one another at the beginning of the play to the discovery of love to the ending they both swallow their pride

and speak publicly of their love. It is not the basis, the song captures the spirit of the entire play, and it is going to drive me crazy. I guess the song is what keeps it a comedy, oh, ka-ching!—song—keeps—I have a little note pad here that I am jotting everything down on. Song keeps—oh boy, what did I say—play—a comedy. That is kind of how it captures so, I guess I could be maybe—

In this segment Susan located an entry point for her writing, focusing on the central tension she saw, Beatrice and Benedick's ironic and vacillating love and hatred for one another over the course of the play. Her ability to find a strategy to begin her essay quickly, and her "ka-ching" moment of insight—that the song anchors the play's comedic perspective on a twisted relationship—suggest to us her sense of *efficacy* as a writer.

Susan then projected how the thesis statement could serve to organize the *global structure* of her essay:

I don't know, like start it out with a broad thing and through each paragraph kind of make it a little less broad, like narrow down what I am trying to say a little bit better. Like start with the song keeps playing a comedy to—it is ironic to Beatrice and Benedick, I don't like that at all, not at all. You probably should have chosen somebody who is a little more decisive in their writing, somebody that maybe starts on, oh, Saturday evening or something, not that anyone would do that, but you know.

With this planning behind her, Susan began composing:

Okay, maybe I should start it out with like I did in my paper [prewriting from class]. In the beginning of the play, the song read by Beatrice is read in a serious manner. She is expressing her vow to be an unmarried maiden her whole life, and I could—yeah, and it says Beatrice sets the tone for the play which we don't find out until, and I put men are villains, but I don't know exactly, I think I was feeling a little animosity, you know. Beatrice sets the tone for the play by her ironic song, but I don't want to say captures because it is like somebody said, they don't want to like reiterate the question in your thesis because she [Cindy] already knows what the question is.

With her general thoughts on how to formulate her thesis statement underway, Susan employed another strategy, getting her writer's notebook in which she had roughed out during class a thesis statement for one of the essay options that she had not chosen as part of Cindy's scaffolding of their essay writing. After answering the phone and conversing briefly, she reviewed how the class had generated a thesis statement for a separate prompt, and then employed the *block solution* we identified as *proceeding*: "Maybe I should not worry about this right now because I am just in the rough draft stages, and if she [Cindy] does not like it, then she can help me change it, and if I don't like it, then I still have time to change it." Susan's understanding that she was working on a provisional draft that she could revise

and repair later was coded three times in her protocols, and on each occasion this strategy allowed her to move forward with her writing even when she felt stymied. We considered each such occasion to be an instance of her *efficacy* as a writer, a feeling of confidence that, we infer, enabled her to envision a completed essay down the road in spite of obstacles she experienced at the moment.

After again consulting the writing from class, Susan generated a phrase that she felt merited being written down: "What am I trying to say here? I am trying to say that the reason why the song captures the spirit of the entire play is because the song itself is irony, and it very much symbolizes . . . the relationship between Beatrice and Benedick." She then realized that the process of providing the protocol could serve her strategically in producing her essay because it captured her exploratory speech. She said, "You know what, I really like this because I always say stuff, and I can't remember it, and by having it recorded I can go back and listen to it. Hope you don't mind. Hold on." After listening to her recorded thinking aloud and adjusting the volume for the researcher's convenience, Susan read what she had written thus far: "The reason why the song—the reason why the—captures spirit of play is because the song itself is irony and it symbolizes the relationship between Bennie and Beet." Satisfied with this statement as a possible opening sentence, she said,

> I guess that might be a good starting point. A good, you know, kick in the mud starting point, get down and dirty, got my big toes in the water, okay, and I keep going back, discuss how the song captures the spirit of the entire play. I don't care how it captures it. I know it, it is in my head, I don't want to write it down, but I am going to because it is a big assignment.

In deciding that this thesis was acceptable, she also recognized the role that this *thesis statement* would play in the *global structure* of her paper and in her awareness of the process she employed in writing academic papers. After briefly becoming flustered over the task of talking while writing, Susan again employed the strategy that we coded as *block solution—proceeding*, saying, "Start out by saying, the song—but then it says captures. It is kind of like, who cares, who cares—I will change it later." This strategy again suggested her sense of *efficacy* as a writer in that she knew she could, and indeed would improve the phrasing later without dwelling on it and bogging down her progress at the moment.

The Bullshit Begins

For the next 224 words of the second protocol, Susan continued to work on her *thesis statement* in this manner before considering the *global structure* of her paper. At this point in her composing process, Susan used the thesis statement she had generated strategically to formulate the paragraphs she would need in order to flesh out the points of the paper's governing claim. Her understanding of *genre*

knowledge thus came into play as a framework for organizing and sequencing the points she hoped to make in relation to this thesis:

> And I can go on to say how the song symbolizes Beatrice and Benedick, and I could say, they could be big paragraphs—they could be big paragraphs—we'll make big paragraphs like one says how the song symbolizes the irony in Beatrice's point, because Benedick is really not in there. I mean, I wish that I could say like I could do one paragraph about Beatrice and one about Benedick, but Benedick—it was not his song, therefore he does not have a right to have this because he was—I mean, although he was feeling this—the song. Am I making any sense? Oh well, it was Beatrice's song is what I am trying to say, so it should be one paragraph about Beatrice's feelings toward Benedick, how they changed. One—okay, let me write this down. Beatrice's feelings—feelings works—towards Benedick and how their love changes.

But Susan's effort to record these thoughts was temporarily stymied by her recognition of her *knowledge deficit relative to the task.* This deficit had been evident in her previous concern that she was not making sense, a recurring problem in her effort to explain her understanding of the play's many ironies. As she began to write, however, the magnitude of the task became clearer to her:

> Another could be the irony, I guess, of the whole play, but I mean, I guess I could say the song keeps the play a comedy because it kind of—but I am not sure if that statement is entirely true. I mean I can think of a million things to say, but it would be BS, and although a lot of people believe BS is like a giant part of writing, sometimes I think that too. But you have to have like a decent platform of BS in order to successfully BS your way through a paper.

Susan's realization that the task was beyond her immediate capabilities, an obstacle so great at this point that she began to doubt the validity of the *thesis statement* she had labored to produce, opened to her the likelihood that she would have to resort to bullshit to complete the assignment. Her *genre knowledge* allowed her to imagine a template for the completed essay, one that her sense of *efficacy* gave her confidence she could produce. What followed in her protocol illustrates what we see as her production of bullshit as a function of her tenuous grasp of the play's ironic plot and *content* and thus her strategic use of her knowledge of the *genre* of academic writing and her understanding of *writing processes* with which she had had prior school success in producing texts within the conventions of this genre.

Return to the Thesis Statement

After briefly considering the thesis statement, Susan took a phone call and then returned to her essay. She again questioned her understanding of the play, revealing her *knowledge deficit relative to the task*:

> 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? I mean, I tried to think of them in one of these papers [written in class], and I could not think of more than one ironic part. I could think of, wow, it is ironic that Beatrice and Benedick like sit there, and ar—ar—ar—and then they are like in love with such a silly little plot. I mean, I guess that is ironic, sort of, but is that really irony? You know, like the further I get into it, the further I go away from it. It is really bugging the crap out of me.

Susan's *block solution* was to *proceed* by attempting to talk her way through the *thesis statement* by means of *exploratory speech*:

> Okay, right now our starting sentence is, William Shakespeare uses the song in *Much Ado about Nothing* to symbolize the irony of the characters in the play and the play itself. The song like the play is irony, and also—oh, where am I at? Okay. William Shakespeare uses the song in *Much Ado about Nothing*—wait, the song like the play is irony, and it also symbolizes—see I like that, the song much like the play is based on irony and also symbolizes the relationship between Benedick and Beatrice, so William Shakespeare uses the song in *Much Ado about Nothing*—wait—the song like the play is irony. And it also symbolizes—see, I like that. But the song, much like the play is based on irony—irony and also symbolizes the relationship between Benedick and Beatrice. So, William Shakespeare used—uses song in *Much Ado about Nothing*—no, I don't like that. William Shakespeare's, *Much Ado about Nothing* basically has a song—song, and okay, the song in William Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing* was much like the play in that the song much like the play—okay I will just figure that out. That will get prettier later.

In this segment Susan employed a strategy that we often coded in her protocol, that of a *problem-solving deferral.* She had produced a rough version of the *thesis statement* and knew that it needed work, but chose not to stop her overall progress to refine the statement. Rather, she projected the possibility that she could return eventually to make her writing "prettier later," which we additionally coded as an indication of her sense of *efficacy* as a writer.

Susan continued generating her *thesis statement* in this manner, pausing to say, "If I could just get a strong beginning paragraph, I'm sure that I could write" the rest of the essay. We coded this statement both as an indication of her sense of *efficacy* and as a *problem-solving hierarchy*, a code we applied when Susan explicitly named the priorities she would need to follow in order to produce the essay. Moments later she suffered yet another interruption, this one from her brother, as she was attempting to define the role of the song in the play: "Her song expressing her vow to be an unmarried—unmarried—I'm really glad I can hear that—unmarried maiden. I love having this around—right next to the bathroom. You can hear everything. Somebody's got to go—this is horrible. Thanks, Big Dave. Okay. Yeah."

With Big Dave's machinations behind her, Susan resumed her effort to continue with her introductory paragraph, pausing to plan the *global structure* of the essay and again recognizing her *knowledge deficit relative to the task*:

The tone for the play is set at the beginning when Beatrice reads her song expressing her vow to be an unmarried maiden. I would like to get on to the other paragraphs and kind of like do each paragraph and kind of get a stable base for each paragraph, but then I am not quite sure. 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.

In the absence of the paper, Susan again used the *block solution* of *proceeding*, this time returning to her phrasing and thinking about how to sharpen it:

Okay, here is what I have. Let's make this prettier. It looks—let's redo this. Okay. William Shakespeare uses the song in *Much Ado about Nothing* to symbolize the irony of the characters. I could say characters, Beatrice and Benedick in the play. In the play itself, that does not make much sense, but then we have the song, much like the play is based on irony and also symbolizes a relationship between Benedick and Beatrice. I mean I could say that, and yet it is pretty much redundant, it is like the same sentence. Just one is better than the other. Actually both of them pretty much stink.

Although she evaluated both sentences as inadequate, Susan ended up including both in the final version of her essay, one in the introduction and one in the conclusion. Her frustration continued as she attempted to generate the *thesis statement* that would guide her essay. As the following excerpt reveals, Susan continued to struggle with her effort to write clearly about the play's ironic and serpentine plot.

William Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing* spotlights the song capturing the spirit of the whole friggin' play, and it is based on irony. Okay, let's write this down. William Shakespeare's play *Much Ado about Nothing* spotlights his song in the beginning. This song much like the play is based on irony and symbolizes the relationship between Benedick—if I could just put William Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing* in the second sentence, I would be good to go, and that is what I am trying to do, and it is not working. The song much like the play *Much Ado about Nothing* by William Shakespeare is based, oh that will work, the song much like the play—but what song—it is kind of like, Hello, which song are you talking about? But I will write it anyway. The song much like the play *Much Ado about Nothing* by Shakespeare—William Shakespeare—William "I give no stage directions" Shakespeare is based on irony and symbolizes the relationship between Benedick and Beatrice. Now this could be a thesis. At first I was like doing this at the beginning, but it is much like the play, *Much Ado about Nothing* by William Shakespeare. But it is based on irony—but it is not based on irony, you stupid girl. It is saturated with irony. It's not based on—I mean, the irony makes it funny. So back to song—yeah, how can I say the song much like the play, the song is in the play, so the song symbolizes the play, and the song symbolizes the relationship.

Susan's formulation of the *thesis statement* provided her with an organizational template from which she felt she could produce the body paragraphs of her essay:

"Let's go back and write this down. The song symbolizes relationship. Irony adds comedy. In turn, the relationship is the irony and the relationship adds comedy and so A equals B, B equals C, C equals D—yeah, C plus D actually. That should be enough." We coded this segment as her planning of the *global structure* of the essay, a decision that enabled her to move to the next stage of her composition, the first body paragraph.

Beginning the First Body Paragraph

Following another interruption from a family member, Susan became frustrated again with her difficulty with the essay prompt, saying, "If I had that stupid [assignment] sheet, I would probably switch questions, because I remember one question being about the three stupid conflicts of stupid Hero and Claudio and [inaudible]." She again returned to her essay, generating several sentences for her first body paragraph before a family member intruded again, leading Susan to take a moment to apologize to her recorder: "Hold on. Sorry, Pete. When I get going, something always stops me. [Pauses recorder.] Okay, hi, again."

Susan returned to her essay, revising her first body paragraph phrasing with attention to word choice and clarity. She consulted a thesaurus for a particularly difficult choice, ultimately selecting "autonomous" from the choices, a word she had trouble pronouncing yet included in the draft, and ultimately in the final version of the essay, albeit incorrectly. We infer that Susan's effort to include words from outside her normal vocabulary as an instance of bullshitting as she attempted to sound erudite through her use of thesaurus suggestions.

Following another brief interruption, Susan reread her opening paragraph and determined that it would suffice. At this point she took stock of her progress with the paper, saying, "I guess I maybe have a lot to write on this. It is just putting them into actual paragraphs maybe. I am coming into each problem separately—who knows." This statement suggests that Susan recognized the generative potential of bullshitting, that in which *exploratory speech* and *exploratory writing* could produce useful ideas through the process of articulation. At this point Susan experienced a final interruption during this session from a family member, one that ended her second protocol.

Protocol 3

Susan produced a brief protocol beginning at about 11PM on Monday, shutting down when overcome by fatigue. In this protocol she planned the *global structure* of the paper, began the second body paragraph, and briefly planned globally and began her third body paragraph before retiring for the night. Her building frustration with the task became evident, leading Susan to employ a number of strategies for simply getting on with the paper in spite of frequent statements negatively evaluating her efforts. We next detail these processes with evidence from the protocols.

Planning Paper at the Global Level

As she typically did to begin a writing session, Susan began by *orienting herself to the task*. She opened by saying,

> Okay, where is this thing? Okay, it is probably about 2 hours later now, and I am just writing the same stuff I have been writing or whatever, actually I just started looking at it again, and it is a lot easier now because I see where I am psychotic. And I am going to start the beginning with like I had it—it had to be like my thesis, and the thesis which is the song, which I had, well never mind.

In this excerpt Susan reviewed the brief writing she had produced to that point, determined that the opening to the paper was sufficient, and recognized evidence of "psychotic" composing—those areas that were in disarray and in need of attention. Her *thesis statement*, she concluded, served as what she had previously referred to as "a decent platform of BS"—a satisfactory focus for the paper that would follow.

Susan next projected what would follow from this *thesis statement*, engaging in planning of the *global structure* of the paper by considering the quality of her thesis statement:

> Here is what I am going to do. I am going to say, William Shakespeare uses the song in *Much Ado about Nothing* to symbolize the irony of the characters, Beatrice and Benedick in this play. I don't know how that works, but it is pretty late, and I am pretty much just sick of this whole thing. So I think I am just pretty much going to start it, then that is going to be my first sentence, maybe my topic, maybe the thesis sentence.

Susan's frustration with the essay, including her effort to engage with its complex ironies late in the evening, led her to accept what she had written regardless of its quality and moving on in order to complete a portion of the essay. Her *knowledge deficit relative to the task* was nearly prohibitive at this point, yet she had resources available to continue writing, even with what she believed was little to say.

After rereading again, Susan did additional evaluation and planning of the *global structure* of the paper, suggesting that she employed her *genre knowledge* when frustrated as a way to at least provide a structure for ideas, even if she had yet to formulate those ideas. She said,

> I guess in the next one I could put maybe—let's look at my notes here and say—I have these several different notes like feelings—okay, Beatrice's feelings to Benedick like change. That is kind of like in here, but I guess I could elaborate on it more, maybe that would be good. Okay, well, no, I kind of said enough in the first one. Yeah, maybe I could just say, the song highlights the irony through the play—I mean, well, I have used the word ironic already in this thing. I am wondering if this beginning paragraph is just not too broad of a spectrum to work off of. I don't really know what to use.

With this remark Susan found herself at an impasse. She had composed a *thesis statement* but was not certain it provided the proper focus for her remaining paragraphs. She did know, however, that aligning the body paragraphs with the thesis statement in the introduction was a critical feature of an academic essay. Yet she was not satisfied that at this point in her composing process she had achieved this coherence, either in her writing or in her planning of the essay.

Beginning the Second Body Paragraph

Susan's solution to her plight was to determine how to take what she had written and convert it into the beginning of a new body paragraph. As Figure 2 shows, she began the second body paragraph of her essay with "However," a decision she made at this point in her composition:

> Okay, I use Beatrice's feelings before the thing, but I say an ironic joke on Beatrice after she hypocritically falls in—maybe I can make that hey nonny, nonny—maybe I could make "However," like that starting point a new paragraph.

With this decision in place, she was able to begin formulating the paper's second body paragraph. As detailed below, Susan employed several dimensions of bullshit to continue writing while frustrated with her *knowledge deficit relative to the task* and her fatigue with the late hour. Her understanding of the essay's *global structure* led her to plan a second body paragraph without well-developed content; and she used *exploratory speech* and *writing* to generate possibilities for what might constitute this paragraph:

> I would go on to say part of the humor that this play—part of the humor that this play presents maybe or this—part of the humor it possesses is that of irony. The reader—oh, but should I say watcher because technically, we did not read this, we watched it, but I suppose it is all the same. I will go ahead and put reader. The reader—and where was my—the reader becomes aware of both Beatrice and Benedick's beliefs and their mutual loathing with quick witted tongues. Does that make sense—quick-witted tongues? Is there such a thing as a quick witted tongue, or should I say quick wit? Do you think quick wit would work? In their mutual loathing with quick wit—the reader becomes aware of Benedick and Beatrice's beliefs in their mutual loathing with quick wit. With quick witted tongues. Let's just put tongues there because it seems like we need something.

Susan's decision to "just put tongues there because it seems like we need something" illustrates her use of a *block solution: placeholder* as a way of moving forward when her phrasing only approximated her meaning but lacked precision or sufficient belletristic panache for her taste. Although the third protocol is largely lacking in evidence of *efficacy*, we coded this segment as such an instance because this routine of employing placeholders allowed her to compose on with the knowledge that she could return and, as she was prone to say, "make it prettier" at a later time.

Susan continued in this vein, drawing on her *prewriting from class* and employing *exploratory speech* and *writing* to generate the remaining content for this draft of the second body paragraph. When finished with the paragraph, she said that it "probably makes no sense, and I am pretty much at the point where I don't really care."

Planning Globally and Beginning the Third Body Paragraph

Susan concluded the protocol by planning the paper's *global structure* and beginning the third body paragraph, which she quickly abandoned as beyond her capabilities at such a late hour.

> Let's see, put this all together. Okay, I have two paragraphs right now, hear that the other is in love with them. Now I would like to start a new paragraph. Something about the—the song presents itself once again in the end of the play. Okay, if the song presents itself once again in the end of the play after Beatrice and Benedick have promised to marry. The song pokes fun at Beatrice and Benedick's vow to remain unmarried—unwed. I guess I think—yeah, I am really exhausted. I will do the rest of this in the morning. Famous last words.

In this segment Susan employed what we coded as a *problem-solving projection*: her statement that she "would like to start a new paragraph." We considered this planning to indicate both her *efficacy* as a writer and her metacognitive awareness of what she needed to do next in order to produce an academic essay. She also prepared herself for the next aspect of the paper's *global structure* that she would need to attend to in order to complete her essay. With these decisions in place, Susan concluded the session and went to bed.

Protocol 4

Susan returned to her essay on Wednesday. In the protocol she provided, she began by orienting herself to the task and planning at the global level, formulated and worked on her third body paragraph, reread and wordsmithed the paper from the beginning, and returned to complete the third body paragraph.

Sizing Up the Task and Planning the Global Structure

Susan began her fourth protocol session by *orienting herself* to the task, saying,

> Okay, I am back. It's—let's see, today would be Wednesday. Tomorrow the full paper will be due, and I still have yet to finish the conclusion or discover another body paragraph. So, I am going to read over this real quick and see exactly what I want to do, but I won't say anything, and I won't think anything. I am just going to read it over, and if I think anything then I will turn you back on because I have a feeling that I am running out of tape, and because I am just babbling on and on. So I am reading over this. Be right back.

After pausing the recorder to reread her essay, Susan briefly evaluated what she had written, saying, "Some of [the three paragraphs] have stuff to do with each

other, others don't, so I guess I could use these." Although the paragraphs did not quite fit together as well as they might, she decided to include them nonetheless as good enough for the purposes of the assignment.

After reading what she had written out loud for the recorder, she planned the paper's *global structure*, saying,

> And then I am going to put a concluding sentence on that one, and then I start the next paragraph by, "However by the end of the play, the song turns into somewhat of an ironic joke on Beatrice after she hypocritically falls in love with Benedick." Part—and then I guess I could start—this is where I could start, and with a new paragraph being, "Part of the humor that this play possesses is that of irony."

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. Indeed, Cindy had taught them to develop their argument with attention to the support of claims by warranted evidence, rather than the number of paragraphs that claims, evidence, and warrants might occupy. 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.

Formulating and Writing the Third Body Paragraph

After rereading her essay, Susan picked up with where she had left off before rereading. Focusing on the text that she had already written, Susan employed *exploratory speech* and *exploratory writing* to generate the next stage of her interpretation, saying,

> I don't like how this sounds, but that is okay—also capping off this play with—I don't know how to say that without humor, but I just don't like that at all because it is like a good closing. It is like one last joke, so I could say the last joke in the play—well, you don't get it until the end kind of. The joke becomes or the song presents itself once again at the end of the play after Beatrice and Benedick promise to marry. This pokes fun at Beatrice and Benedick's vow to remain—Oh, didn't I just say that? This song presents itself once again at the end of the play after Beatrice and Benedick have promised to marry. This song pokes fun at Beatrice—okay then Benedick's vow to remain unwed. Then I scratched out after capping off this with added humor or also whatever. I would like to put this song is a neat—it kind of like wraps everything up. It like puts it in little tie. You know, it is like here is a bow—just pretty much put a fork in it, it is the last joke you know. How can I say that, Mother of God above. Beatrice and Benedick's vow to remain unwed. How could I say this, this song is the finale. I will just write down a bunch of little ideas on a different sheet of paper. Okay, it caps it. It kind of ties it up. Helps to become a comedy, blah, blah, ties up, this song, as the song is presented in the end—see it says, okay, this time the song—I will have to write this down on my notes—this time—yeah, this time the song is not in a serious manner presented—given

in a serious manner but as a final joke unto this comedy. Maybe you could hear me if my hand wasn't over my mouth. But I hope that you could hear that okay. Yeah, that sounds fine with me.

In spite of this positive evaluation, Susan immediately decided, "I have just got to tidy this up because it is really ugly right now." She then reread two different versions of the *thesis statement*, both of which she had generated in the second protocol, and planned the *global structure* of her paper in light of the two statements: "One can be the introduction, and one can be the conclusion and symbolize the irony of the characters in the play." After *rereading* the *thesis statement*, she expanded her introduction to elaborate on the thesis, consulting the *assignment* to evaluate her fidelity to the task and its focus:

I don't like want to repeat a bunch of stuff, and I feel like I am kind of doing that. Yeah I really am. Okay, "Discuss how the song captures the spirit of the entire play." I am not quite sure I have done that. I feel kind of like I have gotten off track, but I am not quite sure how. I guess I feel like I politically answer the question, which means I pretty much in a roundabout way like answered—I don't know—just the wrong question, but that is okay. We are going to start off with this, Buddy, and we will start off by saying, this song—no, the—it would be the song much like the play—see does that make sense? I don't think that makes sense.

We coded statements such as Susan's acknowledgment of her futility as a *knowledge deficit relative to the task*; even at this late stage of her composing process, she was having a difficult time articulating her focus for the essay. Furthermore, she was losing her sense of the paper's global alignment, as evidenced by her recognition that she was neither answering the prompt nor making sense with the writing that she had produced, however "off track."

Susan *reread* her *thesis statement*, then checked her recorder to see how much tape she had remaining. Her next statement suggests that, even with the immense frustration she was feeling about the quality of what she had written, she retained her sense of *efficacy* that she could complete the essay by the deadline: "Sorry, Pete. Oh man, how much tape do we have in this thing? Oh, we have time. I can kick butt and go real fast."

Rereading the Whole Paper and Completing the Third Body Paragraph

Susan next reread her essay, pausing to *revise with attention to phrasing*, e.g., "This provides a great deal of humor. A great deal of ironic humor to the play, to the, should I say play or movie, it is a movie we are watching but technically it is a play, hello, what to say, well you know, hey, I will just put play because then it won't remind us or we watch the movie but anyway, this provides a great deal of ironic humor to the play." In closing her introductory paragraph she said, "Let's see—provides a great deal of ironic humor to the play and now how to end that. I

wish I could say, sit back, relax, and enjoy the rest of my paper. Okay we will leave a little space there, we will leave a star saying, hey." In this instance Susan employed a *block solution: placeholder*, leaving a space to which she could return later and fill in appropriate text.

Susan then returned to composing new text, saying "I feel like I am saying the same thing over and over again, and maybe that is because I really am. I hear my—okay, and then at the ending would be, The song presents itself once again in the end of the play. Okay maybe this middle—I can definitely work on this middle thing." Her recognition that she was repeating herself suggests to us that she recognized her *knowledge deficit relative to the task* and thus her repetition of what she did know. With this recognition, she turned to the *global structure* of the paper as a way to move forward with her essay in spite of having an infirm grasp of the play's ironic action.

Returning to "this middle thing," which was a body paragraph, Susan reread a few sentences and then reconsidered her planning of the global structure, saying, "I said earlier I was going to make that another paragraph. I don't think it can be." She then attempted to understand the play's irony by making the one reference to *popular culture* that we found throughout her protocols: "Why is it ironic that two people fall in love that once hated each other? Why? I don't know. Ironic is like the Alanis Morisette song. I saw no black flies in Chardonnay." Susan's *knowledge deficit relative to the task* again frustrated her, yet she moved forward with her composition, using *exploratory speech* to generate the next segment of text:

> However, through the course of the play the song in—the song doesn't—it does not capture its full meaning until the end, when they actually say they love each other. I could talk about the song capturing kind of Beatrice's own silent sounds of woe because she—it seems like—I mean, she says she does not want to get married, but obviously she does because she just goes head over heels for the first guy she finds out that likes her or whatever that business is. I wish I had that song—man, oh man. Okay, sigh no more ladies, sigh no more—itch on my leg mind you—sigh no ladies, sigh no more for men were deceivers ever. They—why can't I remember this?—and turn your sounds of woe into hey nonnie, nonnie. I am really glad that is the whole thing that I can remember. I will go ahead and just write [this sentence]. However through the course of the play the song is lost, and Beatrice and Benedick—my foot's asleep—okay let's write this on another piece of paper. It could be really important. Okay, so we have, however—oh, hold on.

Susan's "hold on" was directed to the recorder, indicating an interruption that ended this session.

Protocol 5

Susan began her fifth protocol by sizing up the task, saying, "Okay, it is like an hour and a half later, and now that I forgot what I was doing, and I was once on

a roll, and now like I started going again." After briefly rereading her third body paragraph, she planned the *global structure* of her paper, saying, "I have my first [body] paragraph and intro are done pretty much, yeah. The first [body] paragraph is done. I am working on the second [body] paragraph." This work included *revision: attention to phrasing* as she attempted to complete the essay, such as in the following excerpt:

> Although—although maybe the song is lost—Beatrice or song is not kept going, you know. The song is still being sung basically. Although the song is lost. I don't know, maybe that—who knows—all well. Although the song is lost—how about quotes, that will work. Beatrice—yeah, Beatrice's—although the song is lost, the—what is that called, the theme basically—the theme of the song—the spirit of the song lives on through Beatrice's struggle—that is not a very large struggle with her feelings—with feelings for Benedick.

From here Susan engaged in a *problem-solving projection*, determining how she would complete this idea in the remainder of the paragraph, saying, "Then I could go on to say, although the song is lost, the spirit of the song lives on through Beatrice's struggle with feelings for Benedick. And then all of the stuff that I had to say—this is going to be a pretty big paragraph." We considered such statements as a sign of Susan's *efficacy* with her writing: her understanding that she would be able to transform her ideas and notes into a completed text, even as she struggled to phrase her ideas. Yet at the same time she expressed continuing frustration over the difficulty of doing so. Immediately after projecting the completion of this paragraph and demonstrating efficacy, Susan said,

> I have a feeling that this paper is not going to be very long. Let's see, okay. Gosh I hate to go from like Beatrice's feelings of like just—Beatrice's struggles with feelings for Benedick too. And at the end of the play. It is like there is a transition there. I mean I have, this is so completely confusing. I have never worked so hard on a stupid paper that is not a very large paper this much in my life.

We coded this phrase as a *knowledge deficit relative to the task* as she recognized that her thinking at that point was inadequate to the task of completing the essay. She immediately employed a *block solution* of *proceeding*, deciding, "Okay, maybe I am going to read it again." She *reread* her essay from the beginning, eventually pausing to *revise with attention to phrasing*:

> It is like the source of humor through the whole play, so the song's true meaning—the song's true humor is presented—I've been using the word presented entirely too much. You would think I could come up with a better word than presented. [Consults thesaurus.] Isn't there something brought forth, presented—okay, presented, where are you. It's all about ripping the pages out. Okay. Hello. Prepared—no, that is a different word.

> Presents, bestowed—hey, I thought of that before I even looked—bestowed, granted, conferred. Bestowed—the song's true humor is bestowed—what is that uncovered—revealed—that is what I want. It is revealed. It isn't until the end of the play, which sounds better, the song's true humor is revealed at the end of the play.

With this word selected, Susan returned to a consideration of the whole text, giving consideration to the *global structure* of the text and considering what to include in the final version of the essay:

> Okay, you know what else I could put in the first paragraph? I really like the part of Beatrice and Benedick's beliefs of mutual loathing for one another in the form of sharp tongues and quick wit, I like that, so maybe I will use that after unraveling plot of Hero, Claudio, Beatrice, and Benedick. And it will go on to say Beatrice and Benedick—shoot, maybe I could put it in the first one. I really like that, but maybe it won't fit in this. I will find a place for it. Okay the song's true humor is revealed at the end of the play when the characters—when Beatrice and Benedick reveal—no I already used the word reveal—let's see, the song's true humor is revealed at the end of the play when Beatrice and Benedick admit—publicly admit their hypocritical maybe—their feelings toward one another that they once hid with—okay and this is run on, but that is okay—we will fix it—that they once hid with—where is that with sharp tongues and quick wit.

Susan's protocol here reveals her sense of *efficacy* as a writer as she engaged in a *problem-solving deferral* ("I will find a place for it.") and *block solution: proceeding* when she identified a run-on sentence but decided "that is okay—we will fix it. That is very much a long sentence. I can make that prettier." We considered this segment to suggest that Susan's ability to bullshit her way through the paper had a basis in her sense of efficacy as a student writer and understanding that she could write through difficult areas and return to correct problems later in the process. After further wordsmithing, Susan evaluated the *global structure* of the paper:

> Okay, I have three body paragraphs, and I feel that is kind of following an essay. I don't feel like it says as much as it could say at all. Okay let's get on to the rough crap of conclusion. Okay I realize I have a very short time left, let's see here conclusion, right.

Susan then reread her final paragraph, then said, "I feel like that has nothing to do with, but it's a good feeling—oh, my gosh, and we were supposed to do the whole—like read the book—nuts. Okay that was worth a grade. I will have to get with someone in the morning. They can look at this."

Susan next referred to a segment of the text that she had composed in the second protocol and reconsidered in the protocol, that being her *thesis statement*, at that time stated in two different sentences. She had said of these sentences during the second protocol that "It is pretty much redundant, it is like the same sentence. Just one is better than the other. Actually both of them pretty much stink." During

the fourth protocol she had decided that "One can be the introduction, and one can be the conclusion," a decision grounded in the convention of academic writing that the conclusion restates the thesis statement. Here, at the conclusion of her fifth protocol, she made a final decision regarding the phrasing of the conclusion of the essay: "Yeah, William Shakespeare used the song as an outlet for ironic humor and hypocrisy. I don't like that. Use this song as an outlet for ironic humor by the hypocritical couple, Beatrice and Benedick. Final paper, right there."

Discussion

We present Susan's composition of a take-home exam on *Much Ado about Nothing* as an instance of a high-achieving high school senior struggling to produce an essay on a challenging work of literature and resorting to what we characterize as bullshit in order to compose a paper that met expectations for academic writing. We see this study as offering the field a way to think about how students engage with the curriculum through the mediational tools at their disposal. The tools available to Susan enabled her to employ bullshit "as an aspect of knowledge" (Perry, 1963, n. p.): as a means by which to produce academic text that met the conventions of academic writing and helped to compensate for her difficulties in interpreting the text.

In retrospect, Susan remarked that

> This was a fascinating opportunity to view a forgotten part of my life. Admittedly, I don't remember many assignments from 13 years ago, but I do recall this particular task if for no other reason than I was allowed to record my prattle for you. I remember thinking that I was ill-prepared for the assignment because I felt the directions weren't as specific as in previous tasks, and my knowledge and resources were limited. (Resources being those left in my locker.)
>
> I absolutely did not think of my actions as a deliberate deception, but rather a filling of space with the inconsequential. I may have been confident in my ability to finish the paper, but I would never have been overly confident in thinking I could dupe my teacher with false information. After all, my own mother was a teacher, and Lord knows she could smell a lie at 15 feet.
>
> I do find it mildly ironic that as a subject for a BS study, I later earned my degree in journalism-public relations.

Her reflection confirms our interpretation that in producing bullshit she was not attempting to be duplicitous, but rather that she was trying to complete an assignment, albeit by the "filling of space with the inconsequential." Our study has attempted to track that process and argue that she was doing somewhat more: that she was using sophisticated, if often tacit, knowledge of how to produce academic writing and, while generating what she termed inconsequential material, produc-

ing ideas that she made more consequential through her knowledge of genre and writing process.

In our theoretical framework we reviewed a number of scholars whose conception of bullshit has its basis in various degrees of fraudulent performance. Bullshit, they argued, involves posturing, posing, exaggerating, masking, propagandizing, and other types of disingenuous acting as a way to convey an impression of greater accomplishment than a more thorough appraisal would produce (e.g., Frankfurt, 1986; Postman, 1969). Undoubtedly, much academic bullshitting involves such feigned and insincere performance, whether in writing or in other forms of presentation. In Susan's bullshitting, however, we found few occasions on which she came across as cynical in this manner. Aside from brief references to "the rough crap of conclusion" and other such remarks, Susan appeared to be a thoughtful, if pragmatic, student attempting to use whatever knowledge she had to complete a difficult assignment in a conscientious way. If our analysis indeed has provided an operationalized instance of academic bullshitting, then guileful deceit is not necessarily a criterion of our definition.

The theorists upon whom we based our framework further concluded that bullshit is not possible without a receptive bullshittee (Fuller, 2006). In the academic realm, that audience is typically the teacher, situated within a field that has a history of validated work that bullshit strives to approximate. In this setting, work that meets the conventional expectations of a genre may be valued over work that simply reports on content without garbing texts in the social register of the field. From this perspective, teachers invite pompous prose when they require students to produce interpretations of overly-difficult literature in a mimicry of literary scholarship (Postman, 1969).

In Susan's case, however, we see only limited affectation, such as her use of the thesaurus to sound erudite and inflate her representation of knowledge through the use of words outside her conversational vocabulary. Instead, we interpret her protocols to infer that she found the play difficult to understand in the absence of heavily scaffolded instruction from Cindy, 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. The customary emphasis on intellectual mendacity in philosophical accounts of bullshit, then, appears absent in Susan's case for the most part.

Thus far our account of Susan's academic bullshitting appears static in that we have characterized her knowledge of the play as being fixed at a low level. Yet we see her use of her writing process as a central dimension of her bullshitting ability. Her use of exploratory speech and writing—what we characterized as components of her writing process knowledge—enabled her to generate new insights through the process of articulation (see Barnes, 1992; Perla & Carifio, 2006; Smagorinsky, 2001a; Vygotsky, 1987). Her "ka-ching" interjection indicated one occasion of discovering ideas through verbal exploration, and we infer that there were many

other such moments. Susan's bullshitting process thus did not simply mask a lack of knowledge. Rather, it enabled her to generate new knowledge as she wrote.

Although we were not able to collect protocols from other students during the exam period, we assume that Susan's breadth of knowledge was not shared by all students. Studies of writing process have found that students do become prohibitively blocked when strategies for proceeding are not available (Rose, 1985). What enabled Susan to use bullshitting as a compositional tool appeared to be her sense of efficacy as a student and her metacognitive orchestration of genre and process knowledge both to present and to extend her knowledge of the play so that her content knowledge could be elided, finessed, or viewed as sufficient.

Susan's effective use of bullshitting thus demonstrates one way in which students employ their academic advantages to succeed in school. Perhaps their enculturation to the ways of school begins early in childhood, as Heath (1983) argued in her study of both mainstream students and those from racial and cultural subgroups. Perhaps these advantages accrue especially to children from professional or academic families, such as the children of teachers studied by Heath and students such as Susan, whose mother was a teacher. Perhaps students from working class families must create new and separate identities in order to bullshit and thus pass as members of the academy, as Hannah (2001) concluded from her study of blue collar college students. Perhaps many reasons account for why students such as Susan and Perry's (1963) Harvard student writer have appropriated an understanding of process and genre to such efficacy-building levels that they can write on topics of which they have little knowledge yet pass as "one of us"—as students knowledgeable in their disciplines and its ways.

We see our study as being limited in its specific classroom applications. We might argue that teachers should avoid assigning topics on which few students may write with authority; and yet from a Vygotskian (1987) perspective, we are reluctant to recommend against encouraging students to stretch their thinking by having learning lead development. Indeed, we see the possibility that bullshitting can serve as a key developmental tool in its promotion of exploratory thinking and speech through which learners may approach tasks at new levels of complexity. With this prospect in mind, we see bullshitting as a useful strategy for writers to employ, as long as it does not take on the airs found so heinously disingenuous by philosophical theorists.

In discussing this study with others, we have typically been met with the question, "So then, is bullshit good or bad?"[3] We have typically responded, "Good question." We entered this study with the conventional belief that bullshit is bad—that when people bullshit us, they do so with the intention of deceiving us, inflating their accomplishments, impressing us in the absence of achievement, and otherwise investing their self-presentation with bombastic manipulation designed to advance their status. We like to believe that our considerable skills at

crap detection, as Postman (1969) has called it, have enabled us to see through the pretention and see the bullshitter, as Frankfurt (1986) might say, as a fraud who undermines a society's integrity. If Susan had exhibited bullshit of the sort vilified by Postman and Frankfurt, our study would be quite different, and we might conclude with cautions such as Blau's (2003) admonition that when teachers get bullshit in student writing, they have only themselves to blame for encouraging writing distinguished by a tedious and vacuous pomposity.

Yet, as Eubanks and Schaeffer (2008) have argued, bullshit carries other meanings that we see realized in Susan's writing process. Eubanks and Schaeffer take the position that bullshit can be good, echoing Perry's (1967) view that effective bullshit draws on knowledge of a discipline's discourse conventions and how to produce them. In this sense, bullshit serves as a useful, and perhaps indispensable, tool enabling one's development as a scholarly writer. They maintain that "composition theory explicitly advocates that students do just what makes academic writing seem to many like bullshit: to develop an identity within a community of discourse—that is, to gain 'genre knowledge.'... Along the way to professional writing competence, there is bound to be some bullshit" (Eubanks & Schaeffer, 2008, p. 385; cf. Bartholomae, 1985). Such bullshit involves the projection of a completed product according to disciplinary conventions (including a discipline's seemingly bullshit jargon), an understanding of how to produce these conventions, a sense of efficacy regarding one's capacity to become the writer expected by experienced members of that discourse community, a willingness to use speech and writing to try out new ideas that may or may not pan out, and the cheek to write oneself into a specific disciplinary identity and its attendant rhetorical expectations. Bullshit thus involves a degree of risk, of going beyond what one begins the writing process with and stretching one's knowledge so that its articulation meets disciplinary expectations—of performance before competence, as Cazden (1981) asserted in applying Vygotskian (1987) principles to issues of teaching and learning.

From this perspective, bullshit is indeed good stuff, perhaps even teachable. Although we have yet to see in any state or district curriculum documents an explicit requirement for students to become better at bullshitting, we do find that the generative potential of bullshitting as we have operationalized it for this study may benefit student writers as they learn to write within disciplinary expectations.

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NOTES

1. We further distinguish our perspective from Frankfurt's (2005) in rejecting his views on the value of the material properties of shit itself, whether excreted by bulls or other fauna. "There are similarities between hot air and excrement," he said,

> which make *hot air* seem an especially suitable equivalent for *bullshit.* Just as hot air is speech that has been emptied of all informative content, so excrement is matter from which everything nutritive has been removed. Excrement may be regarded as the corpse of nourishment, what remains when the vital elements of food have been exhausted. (p. 43; emphasis in original)

Feculence, he continued, is "repulsive," and so presumably is bullshit itself; "it cannot serve the purposes of sustenance, any more than hot air can serve those of communication" (p. 44). And yet the fecundity of feces is well-known to gardeners, farmers, and other tillers of the soil who seek it as a prized constituent of a fulsome earthly medium for growing robust flora. Composted excrement of the bovine species is especially sought for such purposes.

2. We should note that our poststructuralist dairy-farmer consultant, Tara Star Johnson, has alerted us to the possibility that the assignment of the less potent class of bovine effluvium to the female of the species suggests an unfortunate gender bias. Perhaps it is worth noting that Perry's Harvard University was, in 1967, an all-male institution.

3. We have also consistently been asked, "Who was that kid?!?"

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