Avatar: The Last Airbender

An Academic Trial

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Key:
Aang - Confronted party
Professor Katara - Confronting party
Professor Sokka - Another professor in the Airbending department
Fire Nation Studies 108 - Course
Beifong - Theorist in Fire Nation Studies

Summary/Pre-Trial:
When grading [Aang’s] final paper for her [Fire Nation Studies 108] course, [Professor Katara] was suspicious that [Aang], a freshman, had not written the paper himself. In addition to very sophisticated writing, the paper also contained a footnote not linked to any sentence in the text which gave a [mathematical function as an explanation for a bending phenomenon]. After attempting to contact [Aang] by email several times, [Professor Katara] brought the case to Honor Council, who sent the matter to an academic trial. After the fact-finding portion of the trial, the jury came to a statement of non-violation.

Fact-Finding:
[Professor Katara] began by explaining why she thought [Aang’s] final paper in her class was not his own work. Instead of seeing the progression of thought she usually sees in student papers, she felt “frozen” by the sophisticated, technical analysis in [Aang’s] paper (which focused on an essay by [Beifong]), and she thought it unlikely that a freshman could produce such work. The end of the paper contained a footnote, not attached to any sentence in the paper, that expressed the idea of the [“eclipse effect,”] which was not in any of his sources, in highly [mathematical] terms. After reflecting on [Aang’s] previous work for the class and trying unsuccessfully to meet with him, [Professor Katara] contacted Honor Council.

She explained that she had enjoyed having [Aang] in class. When she had initially met with [Aang] about his final paper, she had been intrigued by his idea since it focused on an aspect of [Beifong’s] essay which was usually overlooked. But [Aang] had been unable to explain what had inspired his topic and their meeting had ended in less than the allotted time. [Professor Katara] said that [Aang’s] previous performance in the class was not at this level, and the final paper was not the kind of improvement she had seen before in a student. She also pointed out that this paper had different typeface and margins from [Aang’s] previous papers.
[Aang] then explained that he had decided to take a different approach on the [Beifong] final paper because he was not happy with the outcome of his first assignments. He stated that he hadn’t put much work into this paper and that he had done a close reading of the texts. He had spent five to ten minutes on the footnote, in which he wanted to express the trend he saw in mathematical terms which he felt he had communicated poorly, and forgot to refer to it in the text. He had not used the Writing Center, and there were no TA sessions for the class.

When asked about the level of the paper’s argument, [Professor Kataras] said that it seemed like an advanced graduate student had written it. For the [“eclipse effect,”] [Aang] responded that he was simply trying to explain the phenomenon he had observed and thought his function was obvious. A juror asked for an explanation of [the black sun], which [Professor Kataras] had cited as an example in which the paper seemed very advanced. Aang offered an explanation, which [Professor Kataras] said was not quite right. [Aang] said that his description of [the black sun] was basically the same as [Professor Kataras’] and that the idea was discussed extensively in class. [Professor Kataras] disagreed.

A juror then asked what [Aang] was trying to say in one line of the essay, which seemed disconnected from the rest of the paper. After a long pause, [Aang] said that he was trying to explain connections between some theorists and popular culture.

A juror asked [Professor Kataras] how her meetings with [Aang] throughout the semester differed from their final meeting. For the final meeting, he did not have a sketch of his ideas like he usually did, but she thought nothing of it because it was the end of the semester. There also was no follow-up as there had been after previous meetings. [Aang] said that he and [Professor Kataras] were very bad at verbal communication, which is why he had left abruptly from their final meeting.

The Trial Chair then asked the parties if either of them would like to speak to the jury alone. [Aang] declined and left [Professor Kataras] to speak to the jury. She explained that while she does not like to contradict a student in front of other students, the explanation [Aang] had provided the jury about some of the ideas in his paper was wrong, and the information in his paper was correct, which suggested to her that he did not understand the material in his paper and had not written it himself.

**Interim:**

The Trial Chair contacted [Professor Sokka], another professor in the [Airbending Department], and asked him to review [Aang’s] two previous essays in the course, the essay in question, and [Aang’s] first draft. He asked [Professor Sokka] if it seemed conceivable that an undergraduate had written the third paper, and if he thought that the student who wrote the first two papers could have produced the third.

**Fact Finding, Part II:**

The jury then met to review the paper drafts, notes, and expert witness response with the parties. After reviewing [Aang’s] work, [Professor Sokka] felt that the typos and grammar errors in the other papers were likely due to the fact that Aang was not a very methodical writer. He saw the writing become more academic and substantial through each draft and overall felt that the paper was not intellectually beyond what a freshman could produce.

[Aang] largely agreed with [Professor Sokka’s] conclusion, stating that he now realized that he had taken some liberties with his argument about [Beifong] and another source, which could have accounted for how confident his conclusions seemed to be. [Professor Kataras] disagreed with [Professor Sokka], saying that she had gotten to know [Aang] and his work and had more context on
the issue. She said that she was still stuck on the footnote, which [Sokka] did not address in his response, and found it unusual that [Aang] had included so many readings which were not on the syllabus.

When asked what [mathematical] background she thought could have produced the footnote, [Professor Katara] responded that it could have come from knowledge of [statistics], which [Aang] had not taken. A juror pointed out some inaccuracies in the [math] and suggested that it could be consistent with [Aang’s] little background in [math]. [Professor Katara] responded that this was not the point and that the footnote was the main cause of her uneasiness.

When asked what she thought about the outline and previous draft of the paper, [Professor Katara] stated that she found it odd that [Aang] hadn’t brought up this “evidence” himself in Fact Finding and instead had so many inconsistencies in his telling of the events. When asked how much time he had spent on the paper, [Aang] said that the first draft had taken about two hours and he had subsequently edited it on his computer.

Jury Deliberations/Statement of Non-Violation:

During jury deliberations, jurors struggled to determine whether a violation of the Honor Code had occurred. While there were inconsistencies in various parts of the paper, it also seemed that each of the inconsistencies could be explained to some degree. They agreed with [Professor Sokka] that [Aang’s] essay drafts indicated a progression in his thought which could lead to the final product. But they shared some of [Professor Katara’s] suspicions that [Aang] could have created or edited these documents after the fact, if he had not written the paper, especially since the fact that he had saved drafts of the essay did not come up during Fact-Finding.

After much discussion, jurors decided that if they could determine when the drafts of the essay were written, they could figure out with some certainty what had happened when [Aang] was writing his paper. After some investigation, jurors realized that Word documents contain timestamps which indicate when a document was created and last modified. Timestamps on the documents containing the first two drafts of the essay had both been created in the weeks before Finals and had not been modified since. The first draft had been created and was last modified about two hours later, which was consistent with [Aang’s] recollection that it had taken him two hours to write the paper. The second draft had been created at the same time as the first, which implied that the first draft was saved under another name without overwriting the original file. The second draft was last modified during Finals. As a result, the jury concluded that [Aang] had written the paper himself and had not violated the Honor Code. The jurors then consented to the following Statement of Non-Violation:

While the jury shares some of [Professor Katara’s] suspicions, the jury has come to a statement of non-violation for the following reasons:

i. The writing style of the essay is not sufficiently different from the first two essays to indicate a different authorship.

ii. The student was able to produce drafts of the final paper, which were in accordance with his timeline. This timeline was corroborated by the timestamps of the documents in question.

iii. While we recognize that the expert witness did not have the full context of the course, his opinion was that the paper was within the student’s abilities.

iv. Though the footnote appears incongruous, the jury does not feel that it alone warrants a statement of violation.
Discussion Questions:
1. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of a jury’s ability to overturn a professor’s judgment regarding academic violations. Consider that this process is not widely used in other colleges.
2. Was it within the jury’s purview to look at the timestamps on [Aang’s] paper drafts?
3. How should Honor Council handle cases in which one of the parties cannot be reached for a substantial period of time?
4. Should juries propose resolutions even when a statement of non-violation is reached?