CONVENTIONS AND THE TEACHING OF WRITING

Thomas G. O'Donnell

It is exactly because the language which contains a culture changes with the changes of that culture that philosophical awareness of ordinary language is illuminating; it is that which explains how the language we traverse each day can contain undiscovered treasure. To see that ordinary language is natural is to see that (perhaps even see why) it is normative for what can be said. And also to see how it is by searching definitions that Socrates can coax the mind down from self-assertion—subjective assertion and private definition—and lead it back, through the community, home.
     —Stanley Cavell, *"Must We Mean What We Say?"*

The term "convention" makes regular appearances in a variety of academic disciplines, including philosophy, literary criticism, and composition studies. In each of these disciplines, however, the term functions differently: philosophers like J. L. Austin appeal to conventions as securing the force of utterances, making it possible to tell a warning from a joke (Dasenbrock, "Rhetoric" 200); literary criticism is interested in narrative conventions— customary ways of telling stories—and a range of other conventional practices. In composition studies, we talk about "discourse conventions," the "conventions of a discourse community," and "academic conventions," usually while arguing for or against certain practices. And for us, making sense of conventions is especially pressing since we are most intimately involved in teaching them. Helping students acquire efficiency with any communally regulated practice is sufficient to establish a pedagogy as conventionalist (Dasenbrock 198). When we debate

the matter, we usually disagree as to which conventions have value and why and whether teaching "academic writing" poses a threat to the home languages of students. And these issues take on additional complexity when very different conventions are enumerated and compared: citing sources is a communally regulated practice, and so is using a colon to introduce a list; summarizing literature in a master's thesis is a convention, but so is any meaningful use of the verb "summarize."

The last convention I listed may seem out of place among the others because it is of a sort composition scholars tend not to discuss. Words have conventional uses and conventional meanings. But, conventions of meaning and use are of a different source than conventions of capitalization or comma placement. bell hooks uses small case letters in writing her name, but this challenge to established convention does not threaten meaning, nor does imagining the practice becoming wide spread arouse much alarm. Conventional uses of words in writing and speaking, however, involve meanings that we care about in altogether different ways. As a result of these differences, violating conventions of meaning and use—unlike new ways of punctuating or capitalizing or employing parentheticals—will rarely seem "innovative" precisely because they will be incomprehensible, hence insufficient candidates for innovation.

In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein speaks of philosophy in terms of health and nutrition: "A main cause of philosophical disease—a one sided diet: one nourishes one's thinking with only one kind of example" (593). My aim here is to expand the diet of composition studies by cross-referencing our treatments of conventions with those of philosophy and literary theory. Any starting point in explicating typical meanings of conventions in composition studies is bound to seem arbitrary. I have chosen landmark essays by David Bartholomae and Patricia Bizzell for two reasons: both were instrumental in making the term a staple of our discourse, and both positions emerge from opposition to the Flower and Hayes cognitive model of composing. That model, they argue, suffers from oversights its methods cannot detect. In

searching inside the mind for insights into how writers write, what is outside—communities of speakers connected by overlapping conventions of language—remains hidden. Bartholomae and Bizzell show that writing does not result from a cognitive algorithm; it comes forth when an audience is imagined, replete with a repertoire of familiar conventions. Despite their shared opposition to the Flower and Hayes model, Bartholomae and Bizzell have significant differences. Bartholomae argues for (or sometimes assumes) the value of academic conventions and the necessity of teaching them. Although Bizzell once shared this view, she now sees academic discourse as unduly privileged by the university, more a means of classifying and marginalizing than of escorting or initiating (see "Shared Discourses" and note #2).

Although Bartholomae's "Inventing the University" is over a decade old, I still find myself making frequent use of terms and phrases I inherited from it: challenging commonplaces, "initiating students into academic discourse," helping them acquire a "position of privilege" from which they can confidently speak to insiders—real and imagined. I still find Bartholomae's account of the student's (almost) double-bind position in the academy both convincing and compelling:[1]

> The student has to appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse, and he has to do this as though he were easily and comfortably one with his audience, as though he were a member of the academy or an historian or an anthropologist or an economist; he has to invent the university by assembling and mimicking its language while finding some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, on the one hand, and the requirements of convention, the history of a discipline, on the other. He must learn to speak our language. (135)

Consider the array of verbs and verb phrases in the passage: appropriate, be appropriated *by*, invent, assemble, mimic, (find a) compromise, learn. What, if anything, do these activities have in

common? Some conjure incompatible pictures of agency: if I "invent," surely *I* invent. If I am "appropriated," something is done *to* me (agent has become object). Bartholomae's account of academic discourse is uncommitted at a telling place: where a writer must assert herself, somehow, in a way that strikes through the presence of the conventional. In "Inventing the University," the writer goes from a prison house—"A writer does not write . . . but is, himself, written by the languages available to him" (143)—to activities that *do* seem to promise individuation, what Bartholomae describes as "finding some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history . . . and the requirements of convention" (135). Successful academic writing depends on learning to "speak our language" (135), obtaining a "position of privilege" (156), "sounding like someone else" (142), "stylistically working against the inevitable presence of conventional language" (143).

Bartholomae's problem with the Flower and Hayes' model is that it focuses on mental states that are presumed to precede writing, thereby eliding "the way subjects are located in a field of discourse" (141). Basic writers are held to be *outside* a discourse they are aware of but cannot control (139), and Bartholomae's interest in converting these outsiders to powerful insiders determines the conventions highlighted in his seminal reading of student texts. Although it never becomes clear whether the writer or language dictates the movement from outside to inside, it is clear that conventions are related to style; mastering them is necessary to striking an appropriate academic ethos. Bartholomae is not interested in conventions of use in which meaning is threatened. His attention is on "set phrases, rituals and gestures, habits of mind, tricks of persuasion." Although Patricia Bizzell's phrasings are different, her early approach to the problems basic writers confront is similar, but her account also introduces confusions which can be cleared away by a rudimentary taxonomy of the conventions writing teachers routinely treat.

It is important to repeat the point that Patricia Bizzell's positions on conventions—especially academic conventions—

have changed rather dramatically. The evolution of her thinking can be traced in the essays collected in *Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness*. In her 1982 article, "Cognition, Convention, and Certainty: What We Need to Know about Writing," Bizzell is a strong advocate of initiating students into academic discourse, and I focus on this essay because it was so influential. It has had an enduring impact in shaping how composition scholars understand and talk about conventions. What seems most distinctive about Bizzell's position is that she downplays the significance of rules and focuses instead on how conventions change to meet the historically-situated needs of specific discourse communities:

> We should not think of what I am calling a discourse community simply as a group who have decided to abide by certain language-using rules. Rather, we should see the group as an "interpretive community" . . . whose language habits are part of a larger pattern of regular interaction with the material world. Because this interaction is always an historical process, changing over time, the community's conventions also change over time. This is not to say that the community's interpretive conventions are arbitrary or that they totally determine individual behavior. They are not arbitrary because they are always conditioned by the ongoing work in the community and sanctioned by consensus. (226)

This picture is accurate for a good many conventions. Many conventional practices with language result from processes akin to consensus-building, conventions that a community's members can actually alter; these kinds of conventions dramatically distinguish the discourses of academic disciplines from the home languages of basic and first year writers. Compositionists can find a ready example in the now (nearly) extinct mandate concerning the first person: "Don't use 'I' in your writing!" Consensus is notably relevant in this instance since resistance to this senseless convention can be traced to rebellions within a specific,

identifiable discourse community—namely, teachers who recognized the limitations of such a boneheaded requirement. Most conventions of language, however, are not of this kind— that is, there is no process recognizable as consensus in accounting for their origins or maintenance. I haven't *agreed* to use the words "pity" or "fact" or "consequence" or "relegate" as other English speakers do, nor is it clear what form a disagreement would take if I still wish to be understood. As Bizzell mentions, it's not worth pursuing "rules of use" since what matters is not knowing a rule for using the word "describe" but simply knowing *how* to describe and how to recognize the descriptions of others (and, along with these abilities, how to recognize faulty, misleading, or partial descriptions). But, the absence of rules should signal the absence of a real "scenario of convening" in which conventions are determined. In other words, there are no traceable consensual procedures for most of the conventions that make meaning possible. As a result of her focus on specialized conventions— those most clearly determined by consensus—Bizzell ends up placing academic conventions at an awkward distance from the knowledge students bring with them when they arrive at the university:[2]

> Through discourse analysis we might offer them an understanding of their school difficulties as the problems of a traveler to a foreign country—yet a country in which it is possible to learn the language and the manners and even "go native" while still remembering the land from which one has come. (238)

Again, the analogy accounts for only certain kinds of conventions. The difficulties a traveler faces involve making known in a foreign language what is already known in one's native language: the central activity is translating. The temptation to see academic discourse as foreign to students surely has much to do with the fact that the most conspicuous lapses in comprehension are those in which an unknown word is encountered. A stock

word in experimental psychology —dyad—can be "demystified" by looking it up or having its meaning explained. At other times, academic terminology cannot, in any comparable way, be *translated*, e.g. "intentional fallacy," "dialectical materialism," "electra complex." So long as we conceive of conventions as a set of practices we command but our students have yet to acquire, we are also conceiving of *learning* in certain ways. If a student does not yet know how to integrate or cite sources in a research paper, the convention *is* alien to her, and the learning she needs to do can be accurately described as becoming familiar with something new. The kinds of conventions writing teachers are so often led to take up, however, are different in that there is nothing new that needs to be known and there is nothing to be explained. Instead, there is a need for a *reminder* of what one's words mean (imply) by listening to what other users of the language hear in those words. The pedagogically exciting news is that when conventions of meaning and use are in need of investigation, the role of the writing teacher begins to resemble the role of the philosopher, and the authority of the teacher in such cases is no greater than that of her students—or, for that matter, any other native speaker of English.

In "What is Narrative Convention? (Wittgenstein, Stanley Cavell, and Literary Criticism)," R. M. Berry notes fundamental differences between the kinds of conventions that engross Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations* and those that tend to be discussed in literary criticism. At times, Berry remarks, it may seem that two different words are being used, but "What seems tempting about imagining 'convention' as two different words is that it suggests the depth of misunderstanding that can occur whenever Wittgenstein and literary criticism are read together" (19). Literary theorists, for example, sometimes speak of conventions in terms of "development and expansion." This is a

way of talking about "convention" that literary critics find familiar but that the *Investigations* rarely engages in. In the numerous examples of customs, usages, practices, rules,

institutions, games, grammar in the *Investigations*, no
discussion—hardly any serious mention—of development
or expansion occurs . . . . Wittgenstein's conventions seem
such *poor candidates* for development. Going by a sign-post;
continuing the series 2, 4, 6 . . . ; looking where a finger
points; using a color-table to find blue; recognizing four
marks on paper as a human face—how could anyone *care* to
expand them? That Wittgenstein's indifference hints at still
deeper disagreements is underscored by a pattern of
remarks that one might say, "fly in the face" of expansion
and development: "(Philosophy) leaves everything as it is"
(§ 124); "(E)very sentence in our language is 'in order as it
is'" (§ 98); "(O)rdinary language is all right" (*BB* 28); "What
has to be accepted, the given, is—so one could say—forms
of life" (§ 226). (Berry 19)

When Wittgenstein investigates conventions, he is notably
uninterested in practices or procedures that invite "expansion and
development"—or, for that matter, innovation, subversion, or
challenge. This is not to say that he maintains a theory of
conventionality that rules out such accomplishments. It is just that
the meaning-making activities he takes up are part of "the given"
that he calls "forms of life"—exigencies of human life and conduct
that it is difficult to imagine changing. Wittgenstein's conventions
are so enmeshed in patterns of feeling and response, actions and
reactions, that it is never easy to imagine what would inspire the
wish to "subvert" or "challenge" them.[3] There are, no doubt,
variations in how different cultures ask questions, but there is no
culture lacking ways to question. It is easy to imagine that a
Spanish speaker learning English might ask if English, like Spanish,
has two words for "corner" depending on whether it's a street
corner (*esquina*) or the corner of a room (*rincon*). It would be
exceptional, however, for this same inquirer to ask if English
speakers ask questions, or describe things, or notice rhymes, or
correct one another, or talk about the future. Clearly these are
not the kinds of conventions that literary critics have in mind

when they speak of "narrative conventions," "bourgeois conventions," or "the convention of omniscience" (Berry 19). They are not the kinds of conventions Bartholomae has in mind when he speaks of "positions of privilege" or "sounding like someone else." They are not the kinds of conventions likely to be altered by consensual procedures. They are closer to the kinds of conventions literary theorists have designated constitutive. Again, I cite Berry:

> Stanley Fish, having been impressed by differences in the ways conventions are discussed, has tried to distinguish between two senses of "convention": a "stricter sense" that he attributes to speech-act theorists and a "looser sense" ("roughly equivalent to 'accepted practices'") that he attributes to literary critics (Fish 222-3). His examples of conventions in the "stricter sense" are the rules for speech-acts (e.g. to make a request, you must believe that the person to whom it's made can fulfill it), and his examples of conventions in the "looser sense" are narrative conventions. James Kastely . . . has tried to clarify Fish's distinction by identifying his "stricter sense" as the sense that guides a "philosophical inquiry" and his "looser sense" as that which guides a "sociological inquiry" (Kastely 288). The conventions that interest philosophy, according to Kastely (and Fish), are "constitutive rather than regulative." Such conventions are necessary if a practice or concept is to be possible at all. To depart from them is not to perform an act incompetently or innovatively, but to fail to perform it, and if they are "dismantled," the activity stops altogether. (Berry 20-21)

Composition theorists have focused on conventions in the "looser sense"—the kinds Fish and Kastely call *regulative*. In "Inventing the University," conventions are "commonplaces, set phrases, rituals and gestures, habits of mind, tricks of persuasion, obligatory conclusions and necessary connections" (146).

Bartholomae is not under the impression that basic writers cannot "reach conclusions" or use the words "conclude" and "conclusion" meaningfully. He is concerned with the *kinds* of conclusions they reach and the limitations imposed by naive commonplaces. Bartholomae's conventions *regulate* the discourse of specific communities. In Berry's words, they "represent the 'conventional' (normal, customary, official, etc.) way of doing or meaning something" (21). A failure to master these conventions does not interfere with meaning, but it does determine the kinds of meaning that can be made. In Bartholomae's approach to basic writers, the issue is not meaning or understanding; although the writing of these students is comprehensible, it is simply inadequate when held to the standards of academic discourse. The most beleaguered student writing Bartholomae samples in "Inventing the University" doesn't suffer from conceptual woes but from a paucity of authority "rooted in scholarship," and this lack shows up in the voice the writer is forced to strike when she senses what is expected of her but does not have the practice to deliver it:

> They slip, then, into a more immediately available and realizable voice of authority, the voice of a teacher giving a lesson or the voice of a parent lecturing at the dinner table. They offer advice or homilies rather than 'academic' conclusions. (139-37)

Bartholomae's focus on regulative conventions emerges from his most pressing concern as a teacher—preparing basic writers for the demands of academic writing. His attention is naturally drawn to regions of the conventional that distinguish and segregate the language of student writers from the language of the academy. Without downplaying the importance of these conventions, I want to draw attention to conventions of meaning and use that approach the constitutive; they are not as restrictive as explicit performatives (e.g. Berry's example of requesting), nor are they good candidates for innovation or subversion. For

lack of a better term, I will refer to them as conventions of ordinary use, and they are instantiated whenever meaning is made. To sharpen the contrast between conventions that regulate our various discourses and conventions of ordinary use that constitute meaningful communication, I've chosen a passage of academic writing by Dana Gulling Mead and Kerri K. Morris precisely because the authors aspire to be unconventional:

> Before we go any further, we should say a word or two about the method of this article, that is, about our collaboration. *A Word that* **can** *mean cooperation with the enemy, as Donald Stewart observes, "a person who assisted the Nazis" (66).* We are conscious of the treachery of language and hope to incorporate that quality into our discussion. One voice (*text*) injects (*inoculates*) our text (*voices*) with a supplemental text while another represents a "straight" text. *Isn't it interesting that "straight" implies "hetero," but a straight text is a homo-logic one? This alternative text is "gay," which implies "homo," but it's really a hetero-logic text. It is fun, cheerful, subversive, and deviant. Already our language is turning on us.* In so doing, we take a monologic or linear text and revise it into a dialogic or recursive one. We will play with the techniques that Winston Weathers discusses in *An Alternate Style*, using double voice extensively. Bold italic serves as a visual signal to distinguish our two "voices." *Perhaps we will even allow many voices to speak and become multilectical* (521-22)

I would call this passage unconventional, but its status as such is accomplished by manipulating *regulative* conventions—the strategic use of italics and bold print, frequent parenthetical asides, the employment of neologisms ("homo-logic"). It is unlikely that these innovations would be accepted in other discourse communities, even other academic journals: self-

conscious announcements about the status of one's language ("already our language is turning on us") might only come across as charming to readers like us with an attenuated interest in the operations of language. It is more than coincidence that this article made an appearance in a journal refereed by other compositionists—an audience predisposed to delight in the play of language. When Bizzell speaks of conventions as being "sanctioned by consensus," she is noting a feature of regulative conventions, and it is a form of consensus that ultimately provides Mead and Morris with an outlet for their multilectical conversation. But even in Mead and Morris's deliberately experimental text, meaning depends on conventions of ordinary use—those that approach the constitutive. Uses of words like "method," "extensively," "incorporate" and so on do not *challenge* conventional meanings and uses; they instantiate those uses. It is unconventional to set off large portions of texts in italics or bold-face print, but attempts to use a word in an unconventional way runs the risk of jeopardizing understanding. This is a risk most writers strive to avoid, even in performances aimed at innovation—perhaps *especially* in performances aimed at innovation. "The more radical our departure from received conventions," writes Reed Way Dasenbrock, "the more we risk unintelligibility; but the more we respect and follow received usage, the more we risk boredom" ("Response" 525). Mead and Morris avoid boredom, but this avoidance depends on readers finding their words intelligible, and intelligibility is at the heart of conventions of ordinary language. When the authors announce that they "are conscious of the treachery of language and hope to incorporate that quality," they demonstrate mastery of the conventional meanings of "conscious" and "treachery" and "hope." If readers don't know the ordinary meanings of these words, the attempt to create an "alternative," "gay," and "fun" text would fail altogether: such terms of evaluation are *responses* to what is understood, not substitutes for understanding.

The constitutive/regulative distinction popularized by Fish and Kastely can help writing teachers hone a pedagogical

responsiveness to different kinds of conventions, but clearly that distinction should be regarded as provocative rather than inclusive. Mead and Morris are not beholden to the rather strict rules typical of speech acts (e.g. to apologize, you must sincerely be sorry); hence, we cannot impute a particular intention behind phrases like "treachery of language." What seems certain is the tacit belief on the part of the authors that readers are familiar with ordinary uses of the words "treachery" and "conscious." It may be right to say that "treachery" is being used in an innovative way, but it is not the case that the word can be used in *any old way* and stand as a candidate for innovation. We don't say "hand me a treachery," nor do we pause in the middle of conversations to ask interlocutors if they are conscious (viz. it's not a game we play with the word conscious). If people did speak in these ways, in these situations, the assumption would not be that they are innovating but that they are unfamiliar with conventional uses and meanings. Whatever we wish to call these conventions, they are of the sort that guide a philosophical inquiry. At times, that is, it behooves writing teachers to become philosophers.

Composition theorists have tended to focus on aspects of conventionality that demarcate: for Bartholomae this means conventions that keep students from "speaking our language;" for the early Bizzell it means not being able to "go native" without demystifying specialized conventions. Both want to explain how basic writers can learn the discourse of the academy; hence, they are naturally led to attend to differences between how such writers analyze, define, argue, and describe and how academics perform these operations. When conventions of ordinary use are in dispute, however, a more cooperative relationship suggests itself: students and teacher can investigate meaning together, using their own linguistic habits as raw data. When class discussions or student writing requires these kinds of investigations, the conventions that need scrutiny are not ones where a specialist has any more authority than any other speaker of English. Instead of occupying a position where we know and our students do not, inquiries into what we (= English speakers)

ordinarily say and mean assume a parity of authority. In Wittgenstein's terms, investigating conventions of meaning and use involve *reminding ourselves* of the daunting array of language games we already know how to play. Among others, he lists giving orders and obeying them, asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, and praying (25). For Wittgenstein, the point of discussing language by way of games (and many theorists of language have done so, de Saussure most notably) is not, as some believe, to emphasize language as a rule-governed practice.[4] The point is to shift attention from reference to activity: "the term 'language *game*' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of a language is part of an activity, or of a form of life" (23). The implication for writing teachers is that what our students say and write will provoke questions about our form of life—the activities, customs, habits, conversations, curiosities, and concerns that bond us and alienate us from others. By being sensitive to uses of language that point to a conflict between intention and implication, teachers can smell out the need for philosophical investigation. By patiently assembling reminders, we can discern and display what our conventions are and what they require of us.

Several years ago, my students and I were writing about habits, routines, customs, compulsions, and related psychological/ behavioral phenomena. One writer, Vivian, presented an essay entitled "Too Blunt or Not Too Blunt" when it was her day to present the class with a draft of a work in progress. Here is the part that initiated our class discussion.

Being blunt can also be a disadvantage, because there is such a thing as being too blunt. For example, one day while I was at my job, at a Coffee Shop, my boss asked me what I thought of her new boyfriend. Well, the man was grotesque. He had nappy long hair that he put in a ponytail; I think he was trying to be Steven Segal. He was also the hairiest man alive. He had hair coming out of the back of his shirt, out of his nose, and he had one very large eyebrow.

In other words, he just wasn't my type. Before I said anything I remembered that she was my boss, and therefore was the one who paid me, so I kept my explicit feelings to myself. I simply said "He's not my type." Well, that was not the correct answer. She then asked what that was supposed to mean. I said "Well, I do not find him attractive in the least bit, I would not date him even if he was the last man alive." Again, I gave the wrong answer. My consolation prize for getting the wrong answer was that now I had to sweep and mop, the entire store, by myself. Oh, joy.

In a way you can compare this attitude to an innocent child. When a person asks a child what they think, the child answers honestly. When the child matures, she learns that some things are better not repeated. In this way you can compare me to a little child. I do know when to keep my mouth shut, but sometimes I just can't keep my thoughts to myself. I am going to try to limit my comments, though. The reason for this being that to some people I come off as a vicious person (bitch). I never mean to be rude, I just try to be truthful. Unfortunately, not many people want to hear the truth. They would rather hear something that caters to their feelings. Well, if that is what you are looking for, do not ask my opinion.

I tend to read the last line of the essay as a taunt or a provocation: "You know what you'll get from me if you ask *my* opinion! Go ahead and exclude me from your disingenuous games." If you can't deal with hurt feelings, Vivian warns, do not ask her what she really thinks about anything you care about. If the dialogue Vivian shares is any indication of the kinds of "truths" she typically doles out, requests for her opinion seem sure to diminish among those she speaks with regularly. I'm not convinced that's what she really wants. That is, I don't know how much of what she says is posturing and how much of it is rooted in

fundamental confusions about the meanings of the words she uses. As I read "Too Blunt or Not Too Blunt," I begin to suspect that Vivian can't quite mean what she wants to mean with the words she employs. She can't mean what *I* mean by the words "blunt," "truthful" or "honest" when I use them, and my uses, my sensitivities to semantic norms, may have implications for what *we* say. These are, after all, not matters of taste or opinion; they are matters of convention. Vivian tries to exempt herself from conventions of tact and diplomacy when she asks readers to "compare her to an innocent child." I resist that comparison. The reason we don't hold children fully accountable for what they say is that they do not understand that there is more to "truth" than fidelity to facts, that speaking truthfully is not the same as the unedited spouting of convictions or opinions. Words can hurt, offend, provoke, and incite. Part of maturing as a user of the language is being able to foresee such consequences with ever-increasing acuity.

What might be preventing Vivian from seeing them? Unless she has led a sheltered life, she has had a wealth of experiences observing how her words cause others to react. Portions of her essay lead me to see her as blinded by her own constricted terminology, unwilling or unable to consider communication in any other terms than "correct" or "wrong." Consider the conversation with the boss again: *I simply said "He's not my type." Well, that was not the correct answer. She then asked what that was supposed to mean. I said "Well, I do not find him attractive in the least bit, I would not date him even if he was the last man alive." Again, I gave the wrong answer.* It is as though Vivian is trapped in a set of terms that occlude serious assessment of what went on. She evades responsibility by refusing the vocabulary of responsibility, but this refusal is complicated by the fact that her assertions—very strictly speaking—*are* true. When she characterizes herself as "truthful," she's right in a limited sense. What is so puzzling is why she sees words like "correct" or "wrong" as germane to an analysis of the incident she relates. Vivian sounds like a logical positivist, willing only to consider statements in terms of verifiability. As long as "I

would not date him even if he was the last man alive" is TRUE—as long as the words express what she *really* thinks—it should be exempt from any other form of assessment. This stance prevents her from having to assess the rhetorical dimension of her interaction, as well as providing her with a thin justification for the avoidance: she's unusually honest; she calls it like she sees it; she's like a child. I think she knows, on some level, that her candor is not on par with that of a child. "Truth," "right," "wrong"—what kinds of words are these for finding out why saying "I would not date him even if he was the last man alive" might make someone upset? The problem that is so evident in "Too Blunt or Not Too Blunt" is that the terms Vivian employs in investigating what went on screen her from precisely what she needs to know.

What if we take up the question the essay explicitly invites readers to consider: *Is* Vivian too blunt, or is she not too blunt? After reading the scene she describes, the question seems unapproachable without a provisional understanding of what "blunt" means. If Vivian's use strikes another English speaker (you, me, other students) as "wrong"—as a misuse—what's been discovered is a sensitivity to a convention of ordinary use. "Blunt" is conventionally used in certain contexts to describe certain people or certain statements, but not just any person and not just any statement. J. L. Austin begins his research on the ordinary use of words by consulting definitions in dictionaries, listing synonyms, listing synonyms of synonyms, then looking up definitions of synonyms, and so on (Urmson 212). My dictionary defines *blunt* as "outspoken, brusque" (*American Heritage*), and synonyms include "plain" and "downright," but also "stringent" and "brutal" (Rodale). Definitions and synonyms provide a starting point, but more important to Austin's methods is collecting *samples* of use and crafting what he calls "stories"—scenarios in which we are compelled to use certain words but not others.

In the workshop in which Vivian shared her essay, one student took issue with her use of *blunt* by suggesting an alternative account: "When you say 'I would not date him even if he was the

last man alive' you're not being *blunt*. You're being downright *rude*." Another remarked on the uses of "truth" and "truthfulness": "When you know that what you say is going to hurt someone's feelings or piss them off, you can't just say it because you think it's true. There's more to it than that." We generated more cases highlighting conflicts between telling the truth and conventions of politeness. One student came up with a memorable case: "If you find your grandmother's Thanksgiving turkey to be dry, can you tell her so and end up being praised for your honesty?" In responding to this scenario, another student came up with more terms for us to think about: "No, you'd probably be considered 'cold' or 'inconsiderate' or 'uncaring,' but not 'truthful' . . . at least not *just* truthful." We also discussed cases of the "How do I look?" variety and invented instances where telling a lie might be justified or even required. Most of our realizations ended up clarifying the responsibilities we have as language users—not to "truth" or to "facts" but to the people with whom we speak, the readers to whom we write.

Stanley Cavell says that ordinary language procedures place words "in alignment with human beings in particular circumstances who can be imagined to be having those experiences and saying and meaning those words" ("Avoidance" 270). In Austin's work, the most important thing is for those circumstances to be *imagined* as thoroughly as possible. There are, after all, a number of conceivable contexts in which saying "You look awful" or "That's a hideous tie" are appropriate, maybe even expected, but to find out if these statements are "blunt" or "rude" or "truthful," the story needs sufficient detail. For Austin, details are a means of stimulating the imagination but also a way of clarifying or dissolving disagreements: "The more we imagine the situation in detail, with a background of story—and it is worth employing the most idiosyncratic or, sometimes, boring means to stimulate our wretched imaginations—the less we find we disagree about what we should say" (183-4).

In our consideration of the Thanksgiving story, *imagining* someone being blunt with Grandma prompts students to bring in

words like "cold" and "inconsiderate" and "uncaring." Generating competing terms for the same phenomena helps students realize how arranging what they already know about English can help them distinguish confusions about meaning from legitimate disagreements. An utterance in one context may be "inconsiderate," in another merely "blunt," and in another "truthful." Although these are questions about meaning, they are not questions where a dictionary can decide things, nor are they cases where a specialist has anything authoritative to offer. By recalling what we tend to say in certain situations, by fashioning stories and comparing examples, by assembling reminders, we discover the depth of our investment in conventions of ordinary language. Peter Elbow explains that "When an individual speaker means things by a set of words which the community of listeners does not 'hear,' he tends to give in to the community and stop meaning things by those words" (155). Vivian may persist in meaning (= intending) the words "truthful" or "blunt" in ways other speakers don't hear, but she is not the benefactor of our investigations. She is the impromptu instigator of an inquiry that allows us to work as a community to arrange what we know, to develop habits of inquiry marked by patience and imagination, to create stories that leave us, to use Austin's phrase, "agreeing about how to reach agreement" (183). We are not choosing or demystifying or challenging conventions. We are finding out what our conventions are, what they require of us when we speak and write. It is at these times that the work of the writing teacher is indistinguishable from the work of the philosopher.

In her excellent article "What Discourses Have in Common: Teaching the Transaction Between Writer and Reader," Pesche Kuriloff introduces two ways of framing student development in terms of conventions: "We can think of student development as a process of learning the conventions or we can think of it as a process of coming to know their readers" (498). The first of these options strikes me as empowering teachers; we are the ones who know the acceptable gestures, the set rituals, the discipline specific meanings of "describe," "analyze," and "define." The

second route is more conducive to the procedure of ordinary language philosophy. If "coming to know readers" is construed as soliciting meanings from peers, sounding out what is heard in the words of peers, the second route can always provide us with a quick entry into philosophy. "Because the connection between using a word and meaning what it says is not inevitable or automatic," writes Cavell, "one may wish to call it a matter of convention. But then one must not suppose that it is a convention we would know how to forgo. It is not a matter of convenience or ritual, unless having a language is a convenience or unless thinking and speaking are rituals" ("Avoidance" 270). I want to close by suggesting that we can better know how to investigate conventions by estimating the communicative costs of what it would mean to forgo the practice being examined.

In "Bewitching Composition: Metaphors of Our Discipline," Mead and Morris are able to inaugurate a number of novel conventions that challenge and enrich readers of composition journals. Those same innovations, however, function against the background of conventional uses and meanings of words that are utterly unexceptional, utterly ordinary. Consider another passage:

> Left to inscribing the margins, minorities, the oppressed and the voiceless must challenge "official histories" because their stories have been erased and because they have been composed by the power groups. *On what page do part-time writing teachers tell their story? Who listens to writing instructors with one-hundred and twenty students?* These silenced others must speak over (*revise*) dominant texts, remind those in power that they have been forgotten. (527)

In some ways, this is a passage only a composition scholar can appreciate: the uses of "text" and "erased" and "revise" *are*, in fact, "metaphors of our discipline"—distinct ways we talk to one another, markers of our own history, echoes of our prior

discussions.   Readers outside our discourse community would have trouble understanding much of what's being said; we might say they lack exposure to our special conventions. But, there are also ordinary words that most readers will know as well as anyone. Words like "story," "because," "challenge," "composed," and "power" do not challenge conventions of meaning; they enact them.   "Tennis rackets are wielded with greater or less skill," writes Gilbert Ryle: "But, with some unimportant reservations, it is true to say that coins, checks, stamps, separate words, buttons and shoelaces offer no scope for talent. Either a person knows or he does not know how to use and how not to misuse them" (32). I am familiar with conventions which are odd or unimportant to my students, but most of the conventions I rely on in speaking and writing leave little scope for talent. I can't use the word *blunt* any better than any other seasoned speaker. And like other speakers, I am sensitive to uses that conflict with mine. I may at any time be mistaken. It may be *me* who is out of alignment with language, hence with some aspect of the communal world I inhabit. One good way to find out, however, is to assemble reminders, create stories, recall what we say and when we say it. When it comes to conventions we cannot easily forgo—conventions we cannot agree to and cannot do without—we are all *insiders*. Stepping *outside* is not an act of innovation but a symptom of alienation.

Notes

[1] In suggesting that the student writer's position is *almost* double-bind, I imply disagreement with Richard Boyd's characterization of "Inventing the University." Boyd's article raises serious questions about Bartholomae's approach to academic discourse, among them the undeniable fact that "Students are not to be consulted on the all-important question of which language they will speak; they are simply 'appropriated' into a foreign discourse community where we as instructors have all the power" (337).

[2] This marks one place where Bizzell's views have changed as her concern with the exclusionary consequences of teaching academic discourse have become more pronounced: "I now reject even this moderate, 'bi-cultural' view of teaching academic

discourse, mainly because I now see it as too wasteful of the brilliant rhetorical resources that could be brought to common discourses by cultures that were largely excluded from the formation of academic discourse" ("Shared Discourses" 272).

[3] The relationship between "forms of life" and Wittgenstein's treatment of conventions has philosophical underpinnings and implications that are beyond the scope of this essay. Lynne Rudder Baker makes the important point, however, that "forms of life" is never used by Wittgenstein as a theoretical construct.

> To call forms of life conventional is, in part, to distinguish them from empirical regularities. In the first place, empirical regularities are discoverable by induction, hypothesis, and experiment; forms of life are not so discoverable. Since these scientific procedures presuppose the very forms of life that render them intelligible, they are not available for the investigation of forms of life. One result is that Wittgenstein does not use, cannot use, 'forms of life' as a theoretical or explanatory concept. (278)

Baker's view accords with many remarks in the *Investigations*, especially "We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place" (109).

[4] In "Arts of the Contact Zone," Mary Louise Pratt includes a rather vexing remark about language as a game:

> When linguistic (or literate) interaction is described in terms of orderliness, games, movies, or scripts, usually only legitimate moves are actually named as part of the system, where legitimacy is defined from the point of view of the person in authority—regardless of what other parties might see themselves as doing. (592)

This view is dramatically incompatible with what Wittgenstein and Saussure intend in speaking of language in terms of games. In the *Investigations* the analogy of games tethers linguistic activity to the variety of human activities. His list of examples includes commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting (25), as well as guessing riddles, forming hypotheses and testing them, asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying (23). In Wittgenstein's use of "language games," the question of "legitimate moves" is a not an issue of authority, nor can it be, precisely because "illegitimacy" is not decided by an authority figure but by the norms of use that prevail in a given language game. "Walking fast" won't count as a question not because someone decides it won't but because of the grammars of interrogatives in English. Moves that do not register as moves can be neither accepted nor rejected. They are simply incomprehensible.

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