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ABSTRACT
        Recent research has invited critiques of the
authoritative descriptions of composing found in many rhetoric
textbooks. The concept of "convention" may be especially useful in
rethinking the teleological basis of these textbook descriptions.
Conventions found in composition textbooks need to be unmasked as
arbitrary concepts which serve to perpetuate the decisions of others
and to impose a linear order upon what is necessarily a chaotic
process. The authority of printed textbooks coupled with the
inclination of many students to reduce the complexity of writing
tasks may outstrip some composition teachers' recent efforts to
qualify textbook conventions and to encourage a more critical
perspective. While the distinctions of invention, writing, and
revising should be preserved, English teachers need to re-examine
their attitudes toward these distinctions and how to best teach
students to appreciate them. Instead of using clusters, Pentads, and
brainstorming lists, a writer could begin with pleasure reading,
physical exercise or dreaming. Requiring students to proceed with
composition in conventional ways excuses them from the requirement to
judge the contextual appropriateness of composing conventions and
from inventing their own strategies for writing. (Two pages of
references are attached.) (MHC)

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Decomposing Composing Conventions[1]

In recent years, it has become evident that research
articulating writing process assumptions has invited criticism
and speculation about many of the implications buried within
authoritative descriptions of composing.   We now look to
revisionist critiques to reveal theoretical weaknesses of the
process framework, and some of these critiques even remind us of
what is lost by forsaking our traditional focus on written
products.   Louise Wetherbee Phelps, for instance, has noticed the
difficulty of handling textual issues -- issues of style and
discourse form, for example -- within the process framework (12);
she calls for a more integrative approach, keying this to an
analysis of the static and dynamic means by which readers and
writers jointly produce textual coherence (21).   Kenneth Bruffee
takes a different tack, arguing that social constructionism --
the idea that all knowledge is a social, not an individual,
construct -- offers a fruitful alternative to the way in which we
normally think and talk about what we do as English teachers
(775).   Bruffee's constructionist point of view eventually leads
him to characterize differences between cognitive process and
social constructivist work in composition: the former says that
language has a social context; the latter says that language is a
social construct (785).   Marilyn Cooper makes a similar point,
that cognitive process models of writing seem to project an ideal

image, that of the solitary author, isolated from the social
world (365). She calls for an ecological model that would
describe the various social systems through which writers
interact with other minds, inhabitants of "a landscape that is
always being modified by ongoing human discourse" (372).

Integrative-cum-social-cum-ecological critiques such as
these don't reject process frameworks so much as adjust them to a
prevailing intellectual climate, a Weltanschauung -- no doubt
influenced by post-structuralist skepticism -- inviting us to
reject the absolute to speculate about the contextual, indeed
realize that within the inexhaustible context of particular
discourse situations writers and readers evaluate their ideas,
reject and emend strategies, imagine the forms of their products,
shift their attitudes, and redefine their problems. Contextualist
critiques help to fulfill the rhetorical potential that has
always been immanent within Maxine Hairston's tentative paradigm
description and lend to composition studies a new measure of
theoretical coherence. In this essay I wish to extend these
critiques, first by offering an analysis of the concept of social
convention, and second by using that concept as a heuristic by,
which I mean to show the arbitrary character of the composing
process descriptions often found in recently published rhetoric
textbooks, the source for many students -- and teachers? -- of
what they believe about the writing process.

The use of the term convention may be most familiar to
composition specialists at home in the realms of literary
criticism and language philosophy, realms where conventions have

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long been recognized as important means by which to explain some aspects of the social dimension of language. Literary critic Jonathan Culler, for instance, defines his idea of literary competence "as a set of conventions for reading literary texts" (118), and language philosopher H.P. Grice has depended upon the concept of convention to link utterance and meaning and to serve as a rational basis from which language users calculate implicatures ("Logic and Conversation" 50).[2] Unfortunately, theorists who depend upon the concept of social convention often leave that concept unanalyzed, perhaps because it seems so well understood as to make pointless rigorous definition. But at least one literary critic, Charles Eric Reeves, believes that such is not the case. Reeves decries the use of the term by literary critics who often seem unaware that most construals of convention define them as arbitrary regularities. He asks whether it makes sense to speak of the arbitrary in literature, since "many influential versions of the literary insist on its purposiveness, its total teleological coherence" (799). Reeves' point, it seems to me, generalizes to extra-literary discourse as well, for all discourse may be understood in terms of its function, which also circumscribes formal design.

Reeve's critique is meant to show how conventions are often of dubious use for explaining some aspects of literary discourse hitherto accepted as conventional by many critics -- that is, as long as social "convention" is meant to have broad significance beyond the exclusive domain of literary studies. What is needed, then, is a precise analysis of the term, not only, as Reeves puts

it, "to force a certain conceptual clarity in poetics" (798), but
also to force conceptual clarity in other domains wherein social
conventions play a role, including, perhaps, the domain of
composition. Fortunately, such an analysis can be found in the
work of David Lewis, a language philosopher who has worked out
and according to subsequent critiques emended a carefully
constructed analysis of the term.

In his book Convention: a Philosophical Study and in an
essay entitled "Languages and Language," Lewis draws eclectically
from different fields to formulate his definition of convention,
which is highly technical, ominously formalistic, and perhaps
invaluable --because it provides clear criteria by which to judge
the conventional or non-conventional qualities of social
regularities. Lewis grounds his definition in an analysis of
game logic, specifically coordination problems wherein players
seek to coordinate their actions with each other while ensuring
themselves of the greatest mutual gain. Lewis gives a number of
examples of conventions arguably similar to the solutions to
coordination problems, allowing him to develop a highly abstract
but admirably specific definition. According to Lewis, a
convention is ...

> a regularity R, in action or in action and belief, in a
> population P if and only if, within P, the following
> six conditions hold. (Or at least they almost hold. A
> few exceptions to the "everyone"s can be tolerated.)
> (1) Everyone conforms to R.

(2) Everyone believes that the others conform to R.

(3) This belief that the others conform to R gives

everyone a good and decisive reason to conform to R

himself ....

(4) There is general preference for general conformity

to R rather than slightly-less-than-general conformity.

(5) R is not the only possible regularity meeting the

last two conditions. There is at least one alternative

R' so that the belief that the others conformed to R'

would give everyone...reason to conform to R'.

(6) Finally, the various facts listed in conditions (1)

to (5) are matters of common (or mutual) knowledge.

("Languages and Language" 5-6).

In its formalistic way, this definition nicely highlights an

easily forgotten aspect of conventions, their fundamental

arbitrariness. But I would also emphasize another aspect of

Lewis' definition: that it reveals how conventions are based on

evaluative acts, for his definition implies that alternatives to

conventions are always limited by the situational interests of

the original participants who develop conventions in response to

specific social needs and adhere to them because of their

continuing social utility. Conventions are therefore arbitrary

in that there are always alternatives, but the range of possible

alternatives is demarcated by the interests of participants.

From these two points an important paradox emerges: conventions

are context sensitive because they remain in force only so long

as most everyone within a population deems them valuable. But so
far as their original arbitrary nature remains hidden, masked by
their apparent utility within different situations, conventions
are insensitive to context because exploiting them does not
require users to explore alternatives that may serve as well,
perhaps better, within a particular situation. Conventions,
then, are especially useful because once they gain social
acceptance, they represent traditional regularities which within
their scope obviate the need for ad hoc evaluative decisions by
their users, once users consciously or unconsciously elect to
conform to their constraints. As a result, conventions may not
appear arbitrary at all: social force and the fact that they
represent powerful traditional agreements mask possible
alternatives.

Perhaps a familiar example will serve to make these abstract
explanations a little more concrete. In his Course in General
Linguistics, Saussure reveals the arbitrary nature of the sign.
Speaking of the association of the French signifier soeur (for
Saussure a "sound-image") and the signified concept of "sister,"
he concludes that there is no inner relationship by which to
coordinate the two (67). Many other signifiers could do as well
to signify that concept if only speakers of French would come to
use them. But the utility of the convention -- the association
of soeur with the concept of "sister" -- is so obviously useful
for speakers of French, no one thinks to question its nature and
it becomes easy to accept the sound as a natural and necessary
way to signify the concept.

We can see that within the domains of linguistics, language philosophy, and literary criticism, the concept of convention has hitherto played a substantive role in the explicit formulation of language theory. Not so in the domain of composition theory and pedagogy, where the concept is virtually ignored except insofar as composition theorists borrow from other disciplines. Nonetheless, I believe the concept is useful for composition specialists, because the qualities by which we recognize conventions -- their arbitrariness and their ability to preserve traditional agreements -- can be used heuristically to pose questions about composition theory and pedagogy and may be especially useful for rethinking the teleological basis of some descriptions of the writing process, specifically those descriptions offered to students through the familiar medium of their composition textbooks.

Teachers embracing process approaches to composition pedagogy often rely on these composition textbooks -- by dint of personal ch ice or institutional decree -- to teach students about the idiosyncratic, recursive nature of writing and those strategies of invention and revision by which writing often proceeds. But in a well-known analysis of first generation process textbooks, Mike Rose has pointed out that these writing texts -- despite theoretical sophistication revealing a clear awareness of the elusiveness of writing processes -- surprisingly offered unqualified restrictive statements about the composing process or the written product. Among the ten examples that Rose picks out are such dicta as: "If you can't list at least six

points (for any topic) then select another topic"; "You will need
to make at least two drafts before submitting any paper"; and "Do
not inject a new idea into your concluding paragraph",(66). Rose
calls these dicta "rules." I would point out that they are also
conventions -- the terms, according to Lewis, are not mutually
exclusive (Convention 100-107) -- to the extent that there seems
no motivation for preferring their advice to alternatives and to
the extent they derive their regulative force from expectations
about social conformity.

Of course, such advice is not bad in and of itself:
student writers benefit from such dicta whenever they are
appropriate to the composing situations in which they find
themselves, and this may be most of the time. But whenever
students follow advice merely because it seems conventional, we
can now appreciate they may also neglect to evaluate the full
dynamics of the rhetorical context -- including how to adjust
textual form to their shifting personal intentions, the
expectations of audiences, and the social dynamics underpinning
written discourse -- because conventions serve to perpetuate the
evaluative decisions of others. If this is the case, then how
can we expect students to design cohesive -- if not compelling --
texts whenever the rhetorical situation makes the use of such
conventions inappropriate?

The apparent conventional nature of such dicta is
fortunately a small concern, for the obvious limitations of the
advice are most often recognized by composition teachers who
qualify it constantly. Yet the authority of printed textbooks

coupled with the natural inclination of many students to reduce
the complexity of writing tasks may sometimes outstrip the
ability of teachers to coax students into a more critical
perspective. But so far as we already recognize these problems,
we can plan ways to solve them. Perhaps, as Mike Rose suggests,
by adopting texts for teachers instead of students, texts which
would help teachers learn how to evaluate the particular needs of
students and assign them work appropriate to their individual
needs (73). But for now, many composition students and teachers
depend upon textbooks more or less designed to help students, and
with'n some of these texts -- as well as within the process frame
in which most are theoretically grounded -- lurks another
problem (one not so easily recognized and not so easily
addressed), the conventional descriptions many textbooks offer of
the writing process.

For instance, process texts -- and here I am speaking of
second, even third generation rhetorics -- often strive to
explain in one way or another our tentative understanding of
writing processes. An examination of almost any one of these
textbooks[3] reveals general fidelity to a description of composing
differing little from that which emerged in the work of D. Gordon
Rohman and Albert O. Wlecke: the process begins with explanations
of prewriting (or invention, or in one case "pre-thinking"), then
moves through discussions of writing, revising, and editing.
Many process-oriented books are fine texts, sensitively written
with much to recommend them. Most of them include explanations
of composing designed to complicate the stage descriptions

they adopt for pedagogy, so that students and teachers are
cautioned that research confirms our intuitions that writing is a
recursive process, that the stages (or phases) are
simplifications for analysis, and that invention, writing,
revising, and editing may occur anywhere in the process, at any
level of discourse, and for any number of reasons. As one
textbook explains it,

> The mind is a messy thing; it will leap from note-
> taking to paragraph writing to outlining to rewriting.
> While you're writing page seven, it will be rewriting
> page five and thinking up great lines for page ten or
> for another essay. You must let your brain go about
> its messy business. The writer's rule is take what
> comes, whenever it comes. (author's italics, Rawlins
> 41)

In spite of such explanations, these textbooks by their
nature impose a linear order upon a chaotic process, and to be
fair, many textbook authors are forthright about the problem: the
writer cited above warns his readers that the writing process is
not as neat as the sequence of chapters makes it seem (41). But
the linear nature of textbooks reinforced by the relentless logic
of process (dictating that some order of events is necessary to
achieve over-arching goals) lends such treatments of composing an
intuitive verisimilitude, for how else could writers begin other
than by prewriting, and without having written, how could writers
revise and edit their work? If not wholly satisfactory --

because of their sequential nature -- textbook treatments of
composing, then, do not seem conventional, because they do not
seem wholly arbitrary, especially when they are given support in
the form of case studies of how student writers are motivated to
exploit familiar prewriting, writing, and revising strategies in
order to create successful essays.[4]

But ecological and social critiques of process descriptions
-- especially those directed toward sophisticated, cognitive
models of process -- remind us of the dynamic, social dimension
of language, remind us that we are always surrounded by discourse
communities, that in a sense we are always composing and shifting
discourse goals. Thus the typical textbook description of
composing fails us: not because -- caveats aside -- it inevitably
fails to capture the recursive nature of composing, but because
it sets artificial boundaries to the process -- invention and
revision or editing -- that do seem wholly conventional, thus
arbitrary. For when writers explore topics, contextualist
critics seem to say that writers are also exploring goals,
attitudes, knowledge already and always forming within the
discourse communities they inhabit; likely they will draw upon,
discourse, written or spoken texts, bearing upon their current
goals. These texts, however they are read or remembered, serve
just as well as candidates for revision as do texts that appear
later in the writing process, a point that parallels nicely the
observ   one particularly good textbook, that writers have
often   special strategies for adding to their reserves
of materia   nd keeping themselves well prepared to write

(Hairston, Contemporary Composition 40). In fact, I am
suggesting that ecological or social models of language imply
that the composing process has no necessary boundaries except
those which we assign to it for purposes of analysis or
explanation. Assigning activities such as brainstorming or
clustering to the "beginning" of the writing process (the
"prewriting" phase) do not so much delimit the beginning of the
process as give us a conventional means -- since only tradition
dictates that these activities are inaugural -- by which to
understand one of its parts. On this analysis, invention looks
suspiciously like revision, since prewriting activities not only
"discover" matter for compositions but translate it into some
more usable and more valuable form, an inscribed text. Writing
and editing may be seen as processes that substantially
accomplish the same thing. Reconceiving the writing process
along these lines questions the nature of those textual forms
which writers create throughout their composing and reminds us
that conventional descriptions of composing derive their force
from implicit social agreements that could just as well be
otherwise.

Still, I don't want to suggest we abandon the idea that
there are distinctions among what we call invention, writing, and
revising: we need these distinctions to preserve our
understanding of the differences in the commitments and attitudes
writers develop toward the forms they create, for if nothing else
these distinctions imply differences in the felt sense writers
have about the adequacy of emerging texts, feelings about how

well they fulfill over-arching composing goals. I do want to
suggest, however, we re-examine our attitudes toward these
distinctions and ask how we can best teach our students to
appreciate them.

For one thing, we can see that process descriptions of
composing lead us to recognize invention, writing, and revising
by means of a relatively narrow range of textual indices
conventionally associated with each stage: clusters, Pentads, and
brainstorming lists typically tell of invention; extended series
of initial to final drafts tell of writing, revising, and
editing. But there is nothing inevitable about the appearance of
any one of these texts to the successful process of writing:
within variable limits the inaugural inscription of any single
text -- however small or large -- may represent the culmination
of a complex, idiosyncratic cognitive and social process for
which no other sharable textual indices are drafted. Clusters,
Pentads, brainstorming lists, and so on are merely a few of the
most conventional means by which we recognize the nuances of a
writer's process. Unfortunately, their conventional prominence
may preclude us from recognizing legitimate alternatives and/or
adjuncts, including such unbounded activities like pleasure
reading, physical exercise, and (with apologies to Samual Taylor
Coleridge) dreaming.

If nothing else, then, teachers might reconsider the force
with which they urge students to embrace heuristics or to revise
particular drafts. For while such activities are often valuable
for students, they need not be: the heuristics we teach are only

a small set of possible inventive activities and the requirement
to revise an already good draft may seem redundant to a writer
for whom every sentence has evolved slowly through many painful
lives. In short, asking students to produce the conventional
indices by which we often recognize the successful writing
process -- clusters, Pentads, outlines, drafts, and so on -- will
often be exactly what most students need, though not for every
occasion and certainly not for every student. For requiring
students to proceed in these conventional (read traditional) ways
technically excuses them from the requirement of sizing up the
writing context to some degree on their own, from the requirement
to judge the contextual appropriateness of composing conventions,
and from the requirement to invent more or less idiosyncratic
strategies for writing. I realize, of course, that many (most?)
students will in some manner do all this anyway: student writers
are rarely so naive as to adhere point for point to any
description of successful composing, whether offered by teacher
or textbook. Often the disparity is not so much what students ·
will do, but what teachers require and therefore expect of them.

Exploiting David Lewis' analysis of convention doesn't lead
to wholly new revelations about our traditional textbook
descriptions of composing. I would maintain, however, that
coupled with the insights of contextualist critiques of process
frameworks, it lends a new theoretical coherence to our
understanding of the flaws within these descriptions, for
instance their focus on seemingly inevitable activities within
the composing process and their seemingly inevitable boundaries.

We can now appreciate in a different way that these descriptions are not nearly so daunting as they seem, for despite their intuitive verisimilitude, there is much within these descriptions of writing that could just as well be otherwise, given a will to change. We are lucky that social and ecological critiques of process theory and pedagogy urge a more critical attitude and offer a more fruitful ground from which to question the situational utility of hitherto unexamined conventions, whether of form or procedure. And perhaps pedagogy emerging from social models will encourage students to become more skeptical too, skeptical about embracing composing conventions merely because they have been useful at one time or another. But I hope teaching students to unmask arbitrary dicta will not teach them to reject them out of hand, for many (perhaps most) conventions will always remain valuable to readers and writers no matter what the discourse situation, especially conventions of sincerity, ethical commitment, and taste.

Notes

[1]An earlier version of this essay was delivered at the 1987 4C's in Atlanta, Georgia. The author wishes to thank Judith Rodby and Simone Billings for helpful comments they made on earlier drafts.

[2]In a more recent discussion, Grice argues for a more limited role for the role of convention in fixing what sentences mean. His suggestion is to say that what a word means in a language is in general what is optimal for speakers of that language to do with that word, or what use they are to make of it ("Meaning Revisited" 239).

[3]For the purposes of this essay, I examined ten textbooks that in one way or another embrace process assumptions. I have limited specific citations in my essay only to those textbooks that seemed to me to offer particulary level-headed descriptions of composing, and whatever criticisms I offer are meant to reflect not so much on particular textbooks or their authors but on the inevitable problems of handling the delicate issues of writing processes within the textbook genre. For full citations of the other textbooks I examined, see the list of works consulted below.

[4]For texts that include particularly good case studies of student writers' composing processes, see X.J. Kennedy and Dorothy M. Kennedy, The Bedford Guide for College Writers, and Linda Flower, Problem Solving Strategies for Writing.

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