6 NEW USES FOR DOUBTING

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The doubting game represents such a thirst for certainty that it tends to confuse certainty with truth. This confusion is so widespread that many people equate the two. Yet they are fully distinct. Whether a proposition is certain or whether it is true are very different matters. Your behavior and the results of your inquiries are likely to be very different according to how greatly you insist on certainty.

Peter Elbow

The clarity Austin seeks in philosophy is to be achieved through mapping the fields of consciousness lit by the occasions of a word.

Stanley Cavell

I think it likely that many writing teachers have encountered my first epigraph, taken from the appendix essay of Peter Elbow’s expressivist classic Writing Without Teachers. That essay, entitled “The Doubting and Believing Games: An Analysis of the Intellectual Enterprise,” can be read as a critique of ingrained habits of doubting coupled with speculations about the consequences of those habits. Elbow does not deny that doubting has an important place in intellectual work, but he argues that its success has rendered us myopic, unable to see the value of believing in coming to understand ideas, claims, and persons. “The monopoly of the doubting game,” Elbow writes, “makes people think the doubting muscle—the sensitivity to dissonance—is the only muscle in their heads, and that belief is nothing but the absence of doubt” (Writing Without Teachers 162). The monopoly that concerns Elbow is most pronounced in the scientific community, and although he contends that falsification procedures do not dominate scientific methods to the extent often assumed (150, note #7), the figure of the skeptical empiricist, poised to disprove, looms large in our psychoepistemological landscape. And, because the material provisions of the sciences are so tangible—vaccines, contact lenses, cell phones—these successes inadvertently champion disproving and doubting as approaches to knowing. The provisions of believing are not so clear, at least in material terms, and it is one of the aims of Elbow’s essay to draw out those provisions.

It is unfortunate that the doubting and believing games have not been taken more seriously as seeds of an expressivist epistemology, or even—if such a thing can be imagined—an expressivist angle on ideology construction. In
promoting believing as a source of knowledge, Elbow is engaging skepticism while simultaneously showing how consequential the need for certainty can be: “Your behavior and the results of your inquiries are likely to be very different according to how greatly you insist on certainty” (179). An “ideology,” in Kenneth Burke’s words, “is like a spirit taking up its abode in a body: it makes that body hop around in certain ways” (Language 6). Elbow’s call for more attention to believing cannot help but be a call for a certain ideology: people hop around in certain ways depending on their predisposition to believe or doubt; the need for certainty influences how we behave in the world we think we know, among the persons we think we know. I haven’t enough space here to pursue these rather large ideas, but my discussion hints at them, perhaps assumes them. My more modest aim is to refine Elbow’s doubting and believing games by marking a distinction between doubting as an activity and doubt as a reaction to a claim. Then, while tracing congruities between Elbow’s dialectic and the procedures of ordinary language philosophy, I will demonstrate how reactions of doubt can guide investigations of meaning.

Ordinary language philosophy follows out the implication of Wittgenstein’s dictum that the meaning of a word is its use in the language. In the early 1940s, Wittgenstein shared the reigning assumption of his day that ordinary language was too coarse and imprecise for philosophical discourse. His later work, especially Philosophical Investigations, takes this assumption to task and shows the extent to which philosophical problems are created by special demands being made of ordinary words. Many philosophers came to share Wittgenstein’s assumptions and imitate his methods, including Norman Malcolm, J. L. Austin, Rush Rhees, John Wisdom, and G. E. M. Ansombe. These philosophers treat different problems, but they all share the conviction that philosophical clarity results from returning words to their ordinary uses, their everyday contexts. What’s most distinctive about them, then, is not a set of beliefs but a shared confidence in a method, a particular way of doing philosophy. What is their relevance to the teaching of writing? J. L. Austin, the philosopher I discuss in this essay, refers to ordinary language philosophy as “linguistic phenomenology,” and although that’s quite a mouthful, the phrasing strikes me as an apt description of what goes on in writing communities well trained in believing; in such communities, words and expressions are phenomenologically assessed by inserting the self into the experiences of the person using the word or expression. Elbow and philosophers who proceed from ordinary language locate meaning in communal norms of use, and both authorize individuals to speak as representatives of the their native language. These assumptions help explain why reactions of doubt—resistance to a use of language—can be so useful as indicators of where a sustained investigation of meaning is needed.
Because I speak as a representative of what English speakers do, uses that trouble me stand a decent chance of troubling others, not because we share opinions but because we share linguistic practices that depend on conformity (*Writing Without Teachers* 54–55).

To establish a sense of how doubting and believing work in practice, I begin with a portion of Richard Straub and Ron Lunsford’s *Twelve Readers Reading: Responding to College Student Writing*, in which Elbow is one of the featured respondents to an essay entitled “Street Gangs,” by a student writer referred to as “Rusty.” Included in the narrative is a vague but provocative description of what it felt like to be a member of a gang:

> Being a member had its ups and downs. The worst part was being paranoid about something happening to you. It wasn’t a frightening feeling, but more like a burden. You knew something, somehow, would eventually happen, either to you or the gang. Many times I paid the price for being a part of the Cripps with black eyes or broken noses. I even had my windshield busted once. (102)

In the margin next to this paragraph, Glynda Hull, another respondent to “Street Gangs,” writes; “This is a great way to describe the paranoid feeling.” I suspect that most teachers would share Hull’s interest in the description—a feeling related to fear, it seems, “but more like a burden”—but praising it may be premature since it also raises a number of questions. In distancing the feeling from just plain fear, is Rusty securing *his* meaning (intention) against implications of acuteness, perhaps conceiving of typical fear states as sudden, such as when one reacts to the approach of a speeding car or a snarling dog? Is the word “burden” intended to associate qualities of endurance with the fear, removing it still further from an acute experience? Ultimately, Hull may be right—the feeling is simply a species of paranoia—but there is work involved in finding out.

In his response to the same portion of “Street Gangs,” Elbow is also provoked by the description of burdensome fear, but he has more questions than he does praise. More to my point, it seems as though he lights on the passage for different reasons than Hull—he is not quite able to believe the description Rusty offers so he requests more to go on, more to experience. There is a sense that Elbow has gone the extra mile to try on the feeling for himself, but in the end, he needs more to work with:

> What I noticed first are the places where you talk about your feelings while being in the gang: the oddly, interestingly, low-key “burden” as you put it. I would feel flat out *fear*. Also the feeling of comfort and support and family-quality. Seems important. I would enjoy getting a bit more exploration here: but not just finding more words for it but more *examples*: what does all that look like in events or scenes? (104)
Glynda Hull approaches Rusty’s words from a stylistic angle, while Elbow is engaging the language on an experiential level, calling for more scenes, sensing that more showing stands the best chance of bridging the gap between the feeling Elbow is able to conjure and the feeling Rusty wants to convey. What needs special attention is that Elbow is enacting a method as he works out his response and that what he responds to is prompted by the dissonance he hears in Rusty’s description. Instead of allowing himself to pass over it, however, he engages the believing game, the dialectic of experience—“the more you get ideas and perceptions into the most fully experienced form, the better it works” (171). In his response to Rusty, Elbow is after a richer, more textured background of sights and sounds and events; he is after ideas in their “most fully experienced form.” Writing teachers are in the habit of asking students to “show not tell,” but usually for stylistic reasons, our attention fixed on a final product. Elbow’s work reminds us of the underplayed phenomenological reasons for scenes: readers sometimes need to be shown sights and sounds in order to get a foothold for belief, in order to insert themselves into the situation and assess the writer’s words inside out. It is this process of self-insertion that finds a parallel in J. L. Austin’s philosophical procedures.

As a description of Austin’s philosophical procedures, “linguistic phenomenology” captures the way his methods rely on imagining oneself in a detailed situation and saying certain things in or about that situation. In most cases, Austin pursues distinctions in the language that can prove consequential, but that usually pass us by until we find ourselves in rhetorical straits that inspire close inspection of what we say and mean. It’s only when we weigh our words that they weigh in on us and force an awareness of their meanings. Austin wants to find out what certain words mean, but he wants to find out what they mean when we use them. He cannot, in other words, accomplish his philosophical aims by citing dictionaries because the data he seeks must be gathered by eliciting and comparing what “we” (speakers of English) say when we find ourselves in certain situations. One might say Austin is interested in the pragmatics of language, whereas dictionaries illuminate only semantic questions. Aligning meaning with use, Austin finds the investigation of “what we say when” to be more philosophically fecund than constructing “ideal” languages (e.g., logical notations) precisely because in so many instances the conceptual problems that vex the philosopher are rooted in confusions about what is meant by some ordinary word or expression. The phenomenological aspect of his procedures is evident in his use of detailed scenes he sometimes refers to as “stories.” My favorite is from “A Plea for Excuses”:

You have a donkey, so have I, and they graze in the same field. The day comes when I conceive a dislike for mine. I go to shoot it, draw a bead on it, fire: the brute falls in
its tracks. I inspect the victim, and find to my horror that it is your donkey. I appear on your doorstep with the remains and say—what? ‘I say, old sport, I’m awfully sorry, &c., I’ve shot your donkey by accident? Or ‘by mistake’? Then again, I go to shoot my donkey as before, draw a bead on it, fire—but as I do so, the beast moves, and to my horror yours falls. Again, the scene on the doorstep—what do I say? ‘By mistake’? Or ‘by accident’? (Writing Without Teachers 185)

When I cited this example at a conference, one participant suggested that Austin’s case is unfit for marking the subtle distinctions he intends to display: “In that situation,” the objection went, “who would be parsing their words so deliberately? You just killed someone’s donkey!” This point is not a challenge to Austin’s methods but a clarification of them: if there is significant hesitation about use after placing oneself in the imagined situation—if there are serious doubts as to what one would say in or about that situation—the case simply fails to elicit the kind of data Austin is after. The words and expressions must come forth on their own; they must be evoked, not imposed. In both of Austin’s stories, there is a donkey corpse not far away, and we are at the injured party’s doorstep preparing to offer an excuse. What should be said? What matters in these stories, of course, is not the fact of the dead donkeys but the machinery of action characteristic of the shootings. The resources of the English language, Austin wants to show, dissects this complex machinery with remarkable precision.

When your donkey moves and I shoot it, I’ll explain it as an accident, but when the animals are mismarked, I shoot your donkey by mistake. What is the lesson here? We sometimes mistake one thing for another, but we also experience problems at the level of execution, and these latter cases tend to be called “accidents.” I’m not aiming for your donkey when I shoot it by accident: my preparation is sound, it’s just that your donkey moves into the line of fire. When I shoot it by mistake, the execution goes off without a hitch, but a problem occurs at the planning stage; I shoot the donkey I wanted to shoot while shooting, but I had mistaken yours for mine when I marked them. These are not the kinds of distinctions revealed by dictionaries. My American Heritage tells me a mistake is an “error or blunder,” but this is vague synonymy when contrasted with the results of Austin’s stories. We don’t learn meanings from dictionaries but from interested exchanges with other interested speakers; Austin’s cases recreate and amplify salient aspects of those exchanges. In both stories, I shot your donkey—the bald fact is the same—but they are partitioned when preliminary action sequences are considered: marking the wrong donkey in the one case, your donkey unexpectedly moving in the other.

For Austin, discoveries about what we say and mean require us to “imagine the situation in detail, with a background of story” (183). Again, there are clear
affinities with Elbow’s believing game and what it requires of participants. Elbow writes, “it helps to . . . try to get inside the head of someone who saw things this way. Perhaps even constructing such a person for yourself. Try to have the experience of someone who made this assertion” (149). In insisting that assertions be treated as utterances—words people say and mean in conceivable circumstances—both the philosopher and the writing teacher are assuming that language is most likely to deceive when it is disengaged from the intentions and interests that accompany its uses. When ordinary language philosophers solicit phenomenological data by asking what we say and when we say it, the issue “is one of placing the words and experiences with which philosophers have always begun in alignment with human beings in particular circumstances who can be imagined to be having those experiences and saying and meaning those words” (Cavell, “Avoidance” 270). Elbow’s attention to Rusty’s low-key, not-quite-fear “burden” is provoked by a sense of dissonance. There is a temporary misalignment between the phrasing and Elbow’s imagined experience. His response to “Street Gangs” initiates a dialectic of experience in which Rusty is invited to take the next step.

II.

“Tolerance of paradox,” writes Christopher Burnham, “is a hallmark of expressive rhetoric” (156). This seems true of Elbow: we have to believe, we have to doubt, and we have to learn how to do both of them well if the dialectic is to be productive. There are serious questions that Elbow does not address in his essay about how these potentially contradictory activities are to be balanced, especially in the largely provisional and often unpredictable setting of classroom discussion. When should one believe and when should one doubt? Is there an optimal sequence? If the doubting game is played first, are the results that come from believing thereby contaminated? I can’t answer all of these questions, but this much seems true: if we defuse the dogmatic rejection that can accompany reactions of doubt when we read certain claims and questionable uses of language, it is possible to pinpoint where the doubting and believing games are likely to be productive. Consider an essay by a first year writer on the subject of procrastination; it was offered in a classroom workshop by a student I’ll call Steve. I want to show the extent to which my reactions to certain assertions—my initial predilection to believe or doubt them—dictate my responses to the essay.

The Last Minute

It seems that everyone has some weird or awkward habits but mine is just annoying and very bad for me. My bad habit is that I never finish an assignment when I first get it, rather I wait till the very last minute to do it. That’s right I’m one of those
guys you usually only read about (even in this case). I’m a PROCRASTINATOR. I have no idea why I do it. There have been many times where I have set aside time to do something but still don’t do it.

I originally started this assignment talking about a different little quirk of mine. I then noticed that it was twelve thirty and realized that I had done it again. I wish I had thought of doing this paper on procrastination earlier. I might have actually finished but then again, I doubt it.

The fact that I do wait until the last minute started when I was in grade school. Twelve o’clock at night, the day before it was due and I would decide to finally start that two month science project. It drove my mother crazy. She would rant and rave for days after. She would tell me what God awful thing she would do to me if it were ever to happen again. Then sure enough, when the big project was due, it happened again.

I have come up with a lot of different theories for why I do this and all of them are stupid. My first theory is that I guess subconsciously I think that if I wait long enough, I won’t have to do it anymore. It’s like I told myself, I’ll have it done in a certain amount of time and when that time is up the project will be done. I realize this is stupid but when the last thing you want to do is a report or a paper, you’ll fall into any traps.

Another reason I procrastinate so much is that I am very easily distracted. Especially if I am doing something I would rather not do. For example I just stopped writing for about five minutes to fool around with a lighter next to me then walked out in the hall to see if anyone was out there. Another major distraction of mine is that I sometimes stop in the middle of a thought to turn on the TV or the radio which is nothing but distractions.

The last and major reason for procrastinating is that I simply don’t want to do it. “Why do today what you can put off until tomorrow.” I keep thinking I’ll have more time to get it done. This really hurts when it comes to library books or movie rentals because I usually run up fines. It’s also horrible when I get a bill that I have a week or more to pay and set aside. Then when it comes time for it to be paid I either forget about it or I’ve lost it.

What it all boils down to is stupidity. Why would I spend time sitting around on a normal day when I feel bored out of my mind. When I could do whatever it is that has to be done. Instead I may spend an entire day doing nothing but watching TV and then complain when I can’t go out that night because I still have a paper to do. It drives me crazy and I still do it.

Many teachers, I’m sure, have received essays similar to “The Last Minute.” In some ways it reminds me of the quasi-Zen performance documenting why the writer cannot write, a ruse I get every five semesters or so (e.g., “I didn’t know what to write about, so I roamed the hall of my dorm to get some ideas, but then I noticed that the window of the laundry room was wide open and . . . ”). But there’s more here than a pointless narrative written solely to fill space and
get an assignment done. What struck me while reading “The Last Minute” was how contradictory my responses were and how my level of interest changed so dramatically as I weighed different claims and ideas. After a second reading, I found myself unable to resolve two lingering doubts. The first is trivial—I’m not sure whether procrastination can be considered a “habit”. The second is far more consequential—I doubt Steve would really be willing to count “not wanting to do something” as a legitimate “reason” for putting something off, at least in straits where he really cares about the problem.

Notice that I’m voicing reactions to claims and ideas, not trying to disprove them. I am not, in other words, engaging in the doubting game. I am documenting and explaining reactions of doubt in order to get at their source. My doubts are interested doubts. I want to find out why they arise and where they lead, not declare and maintain them, the danger Elbow notes: “The doubting game . . . reinforces hanging on. Defending something against all attacks rewards the universal tendency to hang on at all costs to what you have” (185). In responding to Steve’s essay, I want to transmute dissonance into questions and cases that will unpack my doubts. Instead of “hanging on to what I have,” I am compelled to ask questions about the uses and meanings I do have and why I might or might not want to defend them. One assertion that provokes these kinds of questions begins the sixth paragraph: “The last and major reason for procrastinating is that I simply don’t want to do it.” It’s not that I doubt this as a major reason; I doubt that it will count as a reason at all in most cases of putting things off. It is crucial to remark, though, that the doubt I have about this claim emerges against the background of things Steve has already led me to believe. Take another look at the far more promising approach he takes to the problem earlier in his essay:

My first theory is that I guess subconsciously I think that if I wait long enough, I won’t have to do it anymore. It’s like I told myself, I’ll have it done in a certain amount of time and when that time is up the project will be done. I realize this is stupid but when the last thing you want to do is a report or a paper, you’ll fall into any traps.

This is not a full-blown theory, but it’s the start of one. Steve identifies deceptive self-talk as part of the problem, and I think he’s right. He acknowledges that when the self-talk is made explicit, it sounds ridiculous, but he goes on to note that when the task that needs doing is “the last thing you want to do,” you may be vulnerable to methods of coercion that would ordinarily fail. The other aspect of procrastination mentioned—distraction—also strikes me as relevant. These two ideas immediately have me believing them. If believing is conceived in Elbovian terms as a “dialectic of experience,” I can say that these
ideas resonate with my experience: I also “tell myself” that things I’m putting off will just somehow get done; when facing an unpleasant chore, I also find myself susceptible to distractions that would never seduce me on other occasions (if I’m sitting through an infomercial I’ve seen before, there’s a good chance I’m avoiding something). These aspects of procrastination are also evident in things I have heard other people say. A former professor confessed that whenever he had to prepare a paper for a conference, he found himself scrubbing his toilets. Chore-like distractions, if I may extend Steve’s idea, mitigate the stress of procrastination more effectively than distractions that are impossible to construe as a chore because they can evoke a sense of accomplishment and congratulatory self-talk that obvious distractions like watching television cannot.

The insights in “The Last Minute” that have me believing are precisely those that have me thinking. The theory of self-talk goads me to assemble my own experiences and investigate them; the lines of thinking inspire me to ask questions of others about their own struggles with procrastinating. Against this background of productive thinking, “The last and major reason for procrastinating is that I simply don’t want to do it” comes across as conspicuously unhelpful. To put it another way, I doubt it. The “reason” evokes dissonance in me, but this dissonance is more indicative of what I do as an English speaker than of who I am as a person or what I believe about procrastination. In order to get at the source of my doubts about Steve’s final “reason,” Austin would insist on creating a few stories in order to get some concrete data as to when and why reasons are accepted or rejected. There is, for example, a familiar species of cases in which an interlocutor takes advantage of the multivocality of “reason” and is self-servingly selective in the kind of reason he offers: if I ask my nephew why he sprayed his sister with the water hose, “to get her wet” is not the kind of reason I want. He’s telling me what he wanted to accomplish—something I already know—but the question goes to motive, not goals. Offering reasons, this simple cases shows, can be a complicated language game.

How about a case that speaks more directly to procrastination: if I were to ask someone why they are putting off some unpleasant but mandatory task like filing their tax return or getting their wisdom teeth pulled, would “I don’t want to do it” suffice as a reason? Probably not. It’s a poor candidate precisely because procrastination typically involves postponing the unpleasant. Upon hearing such a reason, I’d be thinking, “I know you don’t want to have your teeth pulled—who would—I’m assuming you’ve got to have the procedure done and putting it off only makes things harder.” At best, then, Steve’s reason can serve as a reminder that procrastination usually entails putting off the unpleasant, but it certainly lacks the explanatory force of his hunch about
deluded self-talk. If you’re putting off having your teeth pulled because you’ve been telling yourself the condition will disappear on its own, we’re at least on our way to addressing the problem.

These cases help me understand dissonance I merely sensed upon reading “The Last Minute.” I come away convinced that “not wanting to do it” is a poor “reason” for why someone is procrastinating, but also with a heightened sense of the intricacy involved in offering reasons and accepting them. Still, it’s worth considering that my stories are loaded; because “not wanting to do it” did not satisfy me as a reason, my scenarios worked to amplify this dissatisfaction. Elbow and Austin would urge me to find out what it would take to believe the assertion. Can a story be told in which “not wanting to do X” sounds like a “reason” for not doing X instead of a reminder that X is unpleasant? My best effort is a situation where a person’s wants are difficult to comprehend, hence a prominent component of the problem. Someone may put off cashing a winning lottery ticket. In such a case, “I don’t want to do it” may, in fact, preface an illuminating explanation of the procrastination because the looming mystery is why an action most people would run to do is being postponed. In such a situation, the admission that the anticipated desire is absent is an important one. In the contexts Steve mentions, however, it is the unpleasant, not the exciting or immediately rewarding, that is being put off. The function of “not wanting to do it” then, is to redefine, not to explain or account for or analyze—activities writing teachers tend to look for and encourage.

In “After Theory: From Textuality to Attunement with the World,” Kurt Spellmeyer laments that “What gets lost in the semiotic universe is the crucial distinction between ‘codes’ and ‘signs,’ which simply ‘signify,’ and the living words that foster a ‘felt’ resonance between ourselves and the world” (906). Elbow’s believing game, well played, has the capacity to bring about a felt resonance with living words even when it is difficult. By inserting ourselves into the experiences of others, we can hear their words differently and allow initially troublesome claims and expressions to mean something different from what we were able to hear the first time. I have been championing the pedagogical value of “felt dissonance.” When a use of language seems curious or wrong, when a meaning is being sought but not conveyed, a sense of doubt need not unleash efforts to disprove. Instead, doubt can play a phenomenological role; dissonant reactions can help pinpoint words and uses that require finding out “what we say when” by considering cases and stories we are able to believe. Sometimes, dissonance is in the head of the reader, not the words of the writer, and all that’s needed is another reading. Sometimes instances of dissonance turn out to be pedestrian troubles with diction—a use evokes doubt simply because it is incorrect. Sometimes, however, words and expressions that we
doubt need a patient investigation in order to sort out legitimate disagreements from confusions about meaning. “A disagreement as to what we should say is not to be shied off,” writes Austin, “but to be pounced upon: for the explanation of it can hardly fail to be illuminating” (184). For teachers inspired by Elbow, pouncing on disagreements about meanings requires, first and foremost, believing those meanings. If this seems a difficult task, that’s because it often is. If it seems a paradoxical task, that’s because it is representative of the kind of epistemological temperament that marks the expressivist tradition.

NOTES

1. Expressivists, I realize, have been attributed with “the conviction that reality is a personal and private construct” (Berlin, Rhetoric 145), but Elbow is quite clear about the role of community in determining meaning; in fact, learning the language is largely a matter of repeatedly “giving in” to communal norms of meaning and use:

   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. . . . Similarly, when an individual listener hears things in a set of words which the community of speakers do not mean, he also tends to give in to the community and stop hearing those meanings or stop being aware of having those meanings. (Writing Without Teachers 155)

2. Reasons have, as Wittgenstein would say, a grammar. If someone asks me why I am carrying an umbrella on such a sunny day, the reply that “I thought the bus would be late” would probably not stand as a reason, not because of some linguistic preferences on the part of the questioner but because of how “offering reasons” tends to proceed among English speakers. To emphasize this point in a different way, the criteria for whether a reason will count as a reason have nothing to do with intentions. As Hanna Pitkin explains, speakers may use “by mistake” and “by accident” interchangeably, suggesting they may think the phrases are identical in meaning, but the distinctions in the language are retained. They are simply being ignored:

   Even if a great many people ordinarily use “by accident” interchangeably with “by mistake,” the patterns in our linguistic system—in those same people’s linguistic system—continue to distinguish the two terms. To obliterate the distinction one would have also to talk of “traffic mistakes” as readily as “traffic accidents,” to talk of “making an accident” as readily as “having an accident.” The distinction in meaning is there, in the language, whether or not we are educated and attentive enough to make use of it. (15)