

Editor's Introduction:

Putting the “Open” in *Open Words*

IN A SCENE FROM THE 1987 MOVIE *PRINCESS BRIDE*, WALLACE SHAWN'S Vizzini and gang, along with their captive, Buttercup (Robin Wright), have just climbed a rope to the top of a sheer cliff. Knowing that the Dread Pirate Roberts (Cary Elwes) is in hot pursuit, they immediately sever the rope and watch it vanish over the edge. The group soon realizes, however, that the Dread Pirate Roberts has not fallen. He clings to rocks below, and for what seems like the ninetieth time in the film, Vizzini declares “In-con-ceivable!” the scene in front of him. It’s at this point that Indigo Montoya, played by Mandy Patinkin, utters to Vizzini what is absolutely my favorite line in the movie: “You keep using that word. I don’t think it means what you think it means.” I don’t know if I have ever really stopped laughing about this line, and I have also found it particularly reliable over the years, especially as a response to words my stepchildren so often use—like “am” (as in “I am cleaning my room”)—that so rarely conform to the reality of their (in)actions.

During the process of gathering the essays that compose this issue of *OW*, I found myself reflecting on Montoya’s response. I considered how the line underscores ways reality continually fails to conform to Vizzini’s ideals, to the worldview he’s constructed for himself based on an overblown confidence in his own intellect. To put it another way, the moment in the film highlights Vizzini’s hypostatized sense of reality as much as it does the Dread Pirate Roberts’ surprising skills and persistence. Borrowing from Horace Kallen, Connie Kendall Theado, whose essay appears in this edition, might label Vizzini’s use of “inconceivable” as “a truth made and not found,” or at least an attempt to make a truth that aligns more conveniently with his own self-image and with how he has divined the world should conceivably behave. The Dread Pirate Roberts, on the other hand, represents a truth found, one that insistently refuses to cooperate with Vizzini’s grand plans. Despite Vizzini’s “dizzying intellect” (he holds Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle to be “morons”), there is more to reality than his definitions can bound and explain.

In a way, the works collected here echo Montoya’s response to Vizzini in their consideration of vocabularies that compose English Studies. In regard to words and phrases like “literacy,” “illiteracy,” “community,” “basic writing,” “ESL,” and “success,” this *OW* issue says to educators: “You keep using those words. We don’t think they always mean what you think they mean.” Collectively, the essays speak to ways mainstream teachers and institutions as well as those committed to developing and maintaining equal access in higher education might find themselves dwelling in a “truth made” (through the words and programs they use

to define their work and their students) to the exclusion of truths yet to be found. To find these truths, to be as open as we can be to the greatest diversity of learners, we need to continually ask if our words mean what we think they do. If we don't engage in this reflection, we may risk functioning as little more than credentialed Vizzinis, hapless foils to the passions and talents that are all around us.

"[E]ven as our definitional boundaries stabilize meaning," Kendall Theado writes in "Left Behind: The High Stakes of (il)Literacy in the 21st Century," those boundaries "nevertheless remain open to the possibility of destabilization and re-stabilization, to the possibility of a shift in meaning." She traces processes through which "literacy" has come to function as an unmarked term that arrests the meanings of and marks as deficient the "illiteracies" of non-elite classes. She indicates how we might trouble the terms "literacy" and "illiteracy" to discern the ideologies at work in the high stakes testing currently shaping our educational landscapes.

What we conceive as the landscapes comprising English as Second Language and Basic Writing instruction are troubled in both Diana Becket's "Graduate ESL Students, Generation 1.5, and the Basic Writing Class" and Lance Cummings's review essay "What's in a Name?" Both pieces call out the circumstances that resist any easy definitions of ESL or BW students. Cummings, for instance, highlights ways Basic Writing has defined itself in terms of open-access colleges in such a way as to eschew the struggles of student writers in more elite schools, like the Public Ivy in which he teaches ESL courses. In the same sense, Becket's essay underscores the ways BW programs often fail to conceive of unique and varying literacies that graduate students, Generation 1.5 students, and international students bring to the BW classrooms in which they have been placed and the strategies they rely on to position themselves as active contributors. Indeed, Becket's essay appears to squirm with complications, as the students in her case studies again and again destabilize the common categories developed to define their relationships to academia.

For Paul Butler, in "Forget about Community: Narrative, Ethnographic Writing, and (Alternative) Discourse," students' relationships with and within academia are too often restricted through writing pedagogies that offer a too narrow sense of the communities in which students participate. His essay confronts notions of discourse and classroom communities and reads them in the context of local communities. As a result, his students construct writing projects that allow them to enter into the perspectives of marginalized community members. For Lisa Mahle-Grisez, in "Reframing the Seductive Narrative of 'Success' in Open Admissions," such a movement into alternate perspectives is stunted by success narratives that open-access schools so often use to attract students. Her readings of marketing techniques expose the degree to which they position students as consumers rather than "writers

of their own narratives.” Mahle-Grisez’s analysis exposes the degree to which definitions of “success” insist on a product-oriented approach to higher education, an approach that effectively dismisses the important processes with which students and teachers must engage to create new knowledge and develop as critical citizens.

Together, these essays ask readers to pause for a moment (and often) and to consider whether the words upon which we build our programs and pedagogies really name what we think they do. The essays underscore the need to ask whether our definitions have come to rest too comfortably on a worldview that excludes truths found in favor of the ones we’ve become accustomed to, those constructed and practiced in the wake of our own intellects. Truth found, in this sense, comprises the diversity of human experiences of students not often considered part of the mainstream, students who like so many Dread Pirate Robertses can only impress us with their skills and courage if we do not dismiss them in our very attempts to name and empower them. If readers can take one thing from this issue, it is not to stop using our words because they might not mean what we think they do, but that we need to use them knowing they might mean more than we think they do in any given situation.

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