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Writing with Elbow

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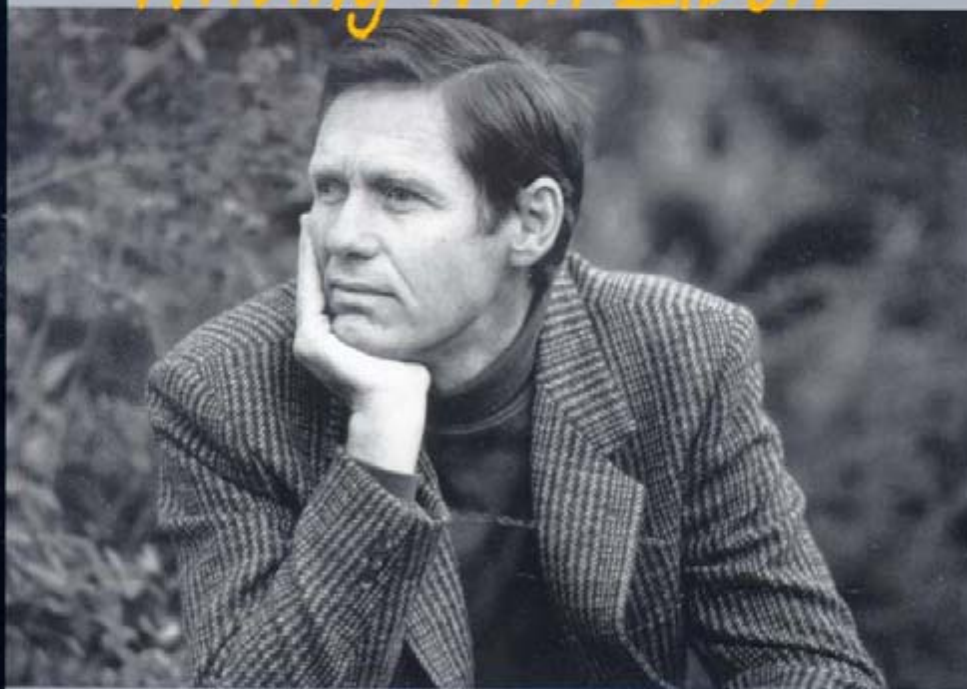
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Writing with Elbow



edited by

Pat Belanoff

Marcia Dickson

Sheryl I. Fontaine

Charles Moran

WRITING WITH ELBOW

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Edited by

PAT BELANOFF
MARCIA DICKSON
SHERYL I. FONTAINE
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FOREWORD

Categorizing Peter Elbow is impossible: he is a medievalist, a teacher, a lecturer, a writer, and, we could even say, a rhetorician; but not one of these designations could serve as a rubric for what those who value his work would want to set forth. But perhaps he can be characterized.

Peter Elbow knows more than most about the composing process because he knows what a composition is and he knows that the process by which it is arrived at is neither merely rule-governed nor merely inspiration-guided. His incomparably useful idea of free-writing—so terrifying to linear thinkers, so comforting to those without fear of chaos—exercises the power of fluency, without which learning to write is not, shall we say, a pleasurable activity. Because he is devoted to actuality—to bringing words to the page, to enlisting the heuristic power of discourse—we could call him a pragmatist, but I think of him also as the heir of those Romantics who believed that making sense, making meaning, is less like filling containers (muffin tins, oil drums) than it is like encouraging a plant to grow. Peter has always been friendly to the teaching of English as a mode of organic gardening.

Peter Elbow's understanding of the composing process is apparently based not on psycholinguistic principles or the learning theories of cognitive psychologists but on a sturdy Jamesian psychology—I'm thinking of *Talks to Teachers*—updated in terms of Vygotsky's conceptions of the social matrix of all learning and teaching. His understanding that writing is dialectical and dialogical (the author of *Embracing Contraries* would not want, as some do, to make them antithetical modes) has been nourished by a literary sensibility: he has from the start seen reading as a dialogue with the author and writing as a dialogue with the author who is one's self and the surrogates who constitute audiences—primary, virtual, real.

For as long as I've known Peter, I have admired his lively pedagogical imagination. His openness to new ideas, new points of departure, new theories would be notable in any case, but it's what he does with them that has made this Romantic Pragmatist (is that a category we could agree on?) such an important guide for a generation of writing teachers. He has been influential because he knows how to transform philosophical and psychological insights

so that they can be acted on, so that they can help us defend ourselves against gangster theories. He knows how to make such ideas accessible to others, encouraging them to go on from there, as he does himself, continually.

Peter Elbow knows what it means to say “Begin with where they are.” He takes that to mean “Begin with where they are as language animals—as human beings who can learn to call upon the powers of language.” That he knows how to teach writers how to do so is a contribution to “English,” as this collection of essays attests.

Ann E. Berthoff

PREFACE
To Our Readers

At one point in the process of editing this collection of essays, we thought we were going to have to create a section devoted entirely to “When I Met Peter” stories. With few exceptions, the essays we received began with an account of the author’s first meeting with Peter—at CCCC, in a classroom, at a conference, in a workshop, or in a book. Whether the meeting was casual or formal, the experience was recounted with humor, affection, and, in some cases, awe. Peter, we concluded, is not a person to go unnoticed, much less a person to ignore. In fact, Peter Elbow may be the only composition theorist we know with what amounts to a core of academic groupies, all wanting to meet him, all wanting to know him. Many people feel they do know Peter, whether they’ve met him or not. The accessibility of his writing creates the illusion that he’s talking directly to his reader, an illusion that pulls most of us into his discussion. Peter is also a member of the teachers’ club, not pretending to understand fully the pedagogy or the practice that he writes about. For Peter, the processes of learning to write and learning to teach never end. He’s not one of those theorists burdened with the need for closure, convinced that there is one true method that will unfailingly produce the perfect article, book, or comment on a student paper. This awareness of the impossibility (and even the potential pitfalls) of creating the apparently perfect theory or practice makes him both credible and endearing to practicing teachers of writing, who struggle to help student writers discover what they think and compose their thoughts for an audience.

Each of the four of us has been a colleague of Peter Elbow’s at one point or another. Each of us has collaborated with him—shared writing, editing, program administration—in an ongoing attempt to understand better the business of composition and of English studies in general. Because collaboration often leads to friendship, we all have spent time with Peter and with each other talking, arguing, traveling to conferences, eating, and hiking. For all of us, in truth, our personal connections to Peter are primary; as a consequence, our

own contributions (which we have called “Intersections”) are quite diverse. We consciously decided not to impose uniformity on ourselves.

And even though we may not always be in agreement with what he says and writes, each of us has learned that Peter and his work make possible a starting place for our own ideas and practices. From that starting place, our paths occasionally curve back to his, frequently curve away, sometimes more parallel, sometimes cross at odd angles. Many times our practices break and run from him altogether, heading for the outer territories, going in an entirely different direction from the one Peter took. But regardless of where we end up, Peter’s ideas provide a place for us to return when we want to debate or discuss or even whine about our journey. It is this potentiality that we hope to suggest by labeling our contributions as “Intersections.”

We know that others have had the same experiences with Peter and his work—even those who have never met him personally. Therefore, our aim in putting together this collection is to demonstrate the diversity of responses to “Elbow and Elbowisms” within the discipline of Composition and Rhetoric. To do so, we have assembled and juxtaposed scholars and teachers who agree wholeheartedly with Peter, who agree only partially with his theory or practice, who find much to criticize in his thinking and practice, and who merely feel a need to explain Peter’s influence upon them and upon the discipline. We’re pleased by the diversity of structure and language this combination of voices generated. This collection includes poems, collages, and multi-voiced pieces, as well as what has come to be known as academic, critical essays. As a result, some pieces fairly bristle with theoretical language; other pieces exemplify highly personal language; and still other pieces mix the personal with the theoretical with nary a trace of discord.

As might be obvious, the diversity of form and style is anything but an accident. From the outset, we decided that a collection focused on the productivity of thinking with and about Peter Elbow’s theory and practice could not be a straight and customary collection of academic pieces. It seemed hardly a valid way to honor the thinking of a theorist who has written so much about the negative aspects of focusing students’ attention solely on academic essays. We even withdrew the manuscript from the first publisher who contacted us because he was willing to accept the formal essays but insisted we cut everything else—especially the pieces that concerned classroom practice. How, we asked, can a collection of responses to Peter Elbow’s work not include writing by teachers about classroom practice?

We hope that this collection shows the multiplicity of ways that Peter Elbow—teacher, mentor, colleague, peer, and friend—has influenced those who have read and listened to his words. Even more importantly, we hope that

this collection will prove an impetus for your own continuing conversations in this field to which Peter has so generously applied his energy and his talents and above all, his open-minded intellectual commitment.

Pat Belanoff
Marcia Dickson
Sheryl I. Fontaine
Charles Moran

A PRECISE MACHINE FOR THINKERS
A Review of Embracing Contraries

KEN MACRORIE

(Reprinted from Impact, Albuquerque Journal Magazine, 1985.)

Ostensibly a collection of articles on teaching and learning, this book is actually a manual on how to be wise. It's the darnedest thing—a self-help book whose central model for thinking requires you to keep turning ideas over and over until they often look good standing on their heads.

In it, Peter Elbow relates how as a student, scholar, and teacher he was led, again and again, to understandings by bringing polar opposites together so they illuminated rather than annihilated each other. For example, for many years he was hung up on writing. He came to believe he just couldn't do the job. Then he realized that school's way of indoctrinating you to *get the words right at the moment of composing* is antithetical to *starting ideas and words flowing* so they call forth other good ideas and words. *Freely composing* and *editing* are opposites. Both are needed but must be performed separately—an obvious truth to professional writers, but not to most English teachers, who themselves have seldom written for publication and even more rarely been paid for their writing.

Elbow's career turned from near failure to success when he began embracing contraries. He wrote a Ph.D. thesis, "Oppositions in Chaucer," that was published by Wesleyan University Press and an influential book called *Writing With Power*. He is now director of the Writing Program at the State University of New York at Stony Brook.

In one chapter, Elbow extends the applications of his Doubting and Believing Game that he introduced in his earlier book *Writing Without Teachers*. He says that universities teach people to adopt the habit of reflexively taking the opposite side of every argument in order to test it. But the Believing Game is also needed. To play it, you must try to believe in another person's argument, see why he or she believes it, and produce evidence and reasoning to support it—before you decide whether or not to accept it. He devised this game for workshops where critics of a piece of writing presented to the group often destroy writers by playing only the Doubting Game. The Believing Game he finds useful here and in scores of other human interactions.

Elbow faces some of the most painful problems in academia. Grading students and evaluating faculty, he came to see that *evaluating people's performance* and *enabling them to perform well* are often contraries that fight against each other. He wondered if there could be a method of making judgments without making judgments—so that the usual roiling incapacitating feelings don't arise. Elbow determined that the way out was for the evaluator to record the “movies of his mind,” jotting down his own responses (what this or that act or word from the other person made him feel) rather than judgments, which are necessarily high jumps of abstraction. From that sort of report, the person being evaluated can see how his performance made the evaluator respond and why. Then the person evaluated feels more enlightened than attacked. Elbow writes a case history of experiencing that kind of evaluation by a colleague and of doing the same himself for another professor.

I suggest you read the first chapter of [*Embracing Contraries*] last. It was written before Elbow got over his writing troubles. After that, he wrote disarmingly; for example: “But it's no good . . . trying to give students only what's true and trying to make them get it right—trying to keep them from mucking it up as they chew on it. Instead of worrying that they muddy one thing as they make it part of themselves (and perhaps not letting them go on to learn the second thing till they get the first thing right), we need to get them to make more things part of themselves—particularly contrary things.”

Those words epitomize [*Embracing Contraries*]. It demonstrates that good writing and thinking are accessible to all people, if they will only let their brains do their natural thing and then later contrarily disengage and see where they can be more or less general or specific, more or less logical or emotional, or whatever. Elbow makes thinking playful and testing it rigorous. He seems to have invented a precisely tooled, gleaming little machine for turning out insights.

VISION

A Poem For Peter

He can see with both eyes, he says,
though one goes east, the other west.
Sometimes, he closes one,
narrowing the field, to see

what we see.
What is out there,
on the peripheries,
at the edge of our vision?

Does he see, with the horse's bi-lateral vision,
paddock in one eye, prairie in the other,
bridle and wind,
fence and freedom?

Or, with the dragonfly's prismatic kaleidoscope
of sky, water, predator, prey, cloud, reflection,
rainripple, sundazzle?
Can he see

cruelty in one eye, mercy in the other,
shackle in one eye, key in the other,
brick and wrecking ball,
stone and kite?

When he offers his vision to us,
we try it on, go dizzy from the breadth,
and the missing center,
where we so comfortably live.

Lucile Burt

CLUSTER I

Contextualizing and Categorizing

INTERSECTION

PAT BELANOFF

Our aim in grouping these four essays together is not to have the final say on the categorization or labeling of Peter Elbow. Our aim, in fact, is much the opposite. We think that these essays demonstrate that any theorist or practitioner can be viewed from multiple spots and that each viewing angle produces a valid reading. No more than any other theorist, no more than any piece of discourse, can Elbow be finally fit into some slot comfortably. There's always leakage; there's always a new way of seeing. The very difficulty of thinking about Peter's thinking and how to characterize it is exactly what has provided fertile ground for many of us. And the final truth about why Peter is so difficult to pin down as one thing or another is that he never sits still long enough for any one of us to draw firm conclusions.

One thing, in fact, I discovered when Peter and I started working together at Stony Brook is that Peter has trouble pinning himself down. Two personal stories in this regard. After he and I had decided to collaborate on a textbook, we opted to exchange rough drafts of workshops. Shock was my reaction to reading the first draft he gave me. It rambled, it leaped, it luxuriated in complex and often illogical metaphors, it broke off in the middle of sentences and thoughts, it was alternately breathtaking and horrific. How, I thought, did Peter ever produce the clarity and incisiveness of thought for which I admired his writing? He, of course, could not resist breaking up my long, formal, academic sentences with their excess of nominalizations and prepositional phrases. As we all know, he finally does pin himself down through practicing his own advice. But, he is also quite likely to unpin what he has pinned down when he starts on his next round of drafts.

The second story. I had already collaboratively (with Betsy Rorschach and Mia Oberlink) written a grammar book in which my coauthors and I had worked hard to explain the rationale behind a multitude of grammar dos and don'ts. When, however, Peter and I got to writing our little grammar sections for the textbook, he was tactful, but definite, about my prior work. "We don't need to explain," said he. "Just tell them this is how it is!"

Through these and other experiences I began to understand that one must be wary of categorizing Peter Elbow. He has this seemingly innate tendency to

slip into the other end of one of his binaries whenever one seeks to characterize him. But, of course, thinking necessitates both categorizing and contextualizing, and Peter has certainly been the “categorizee” of many taxonomies: Fulkerson and Berlin come immediately to mind. Taxonomy is, we know, a two-edged sword: we need to classify in order to get through the business of the day; but, as we know from peoples’ response to skin color, classification can become prelude to misunderstanding, marginalization, and worse. Once a given taxonomy is constructed, it tends to stifle thinking. For example, Peter has most famously been labeled as an expressivist and then dismissed as apolitical, romantic, solipsistic, a servant of established power. It is this taxonomic move that each of the writers in this section attempts to understand and, in different ways, to undo. Ultimately, we must make such moves in our thinking in order to forestall the stifling potential of categorization.

Richard Boyd opens the section by relooking at the events of the sixties and how Peter grew in and out of them. Like others, Boyd connects Elbow to the liberalizing trends of this decade, but unlike others before him Boyd recognizes that Elbow developed his practices as tools for enabling young men to have an impact on the society around them. Far from being the romantic solitary some would characterize him as, Elbow is fully immersed in the social and political turmoils of the 1960s and is passionately engaged in finding a way to make an individual’s writing bring about results in the “real” world. One of the strong reasons for Peter’s being labeled an expressivist is that he developed his theories about freewriting, private writing, messy writing, and so forth out of his own struggles to write in graduate school. But Boyd unearths a history that places Elbow’s approaches to improving written discourse against a background of absolute teacher authority. *Writing Without Teachers*, when examined against that history, becomes a radical social document. “Elbow’s description of a ‘teacherless writing class,’ in which students no longer have need of an institutionally sanctioned instructor giving advice or explaining theories of ‘good and bad writing’ strikes boldly at a fundamental cornerstone of those notions of university faculty as authoritative experts deserving grateful ‘deference’ from their ‘immature’ students” (35).

Peter’s being characterized as an expressivist enables Tom Newkirk to revalue what has been devalued by those who use this label pejoratively. Specifically, Newkirk focuses on how the “sentimental” becomes an undifferentiated quality that (whether effective or ineffective) gets relegated out of the classroom, particularly out of the college classroom, because it presumes to arouse emotions in individual readers. As academics, most of us are conditioned to be emotionless in our critical approaches. We’re not supposed to be passionate about what we teach; we’re not supposed to laugh, cry, get angry at what we read. Above all,

we're not supposed to think it's great, wonderful, inspiring. I remember the first time in a classroom that I confessed to my students that a particular poem made me cry because it was so hauntingly beautiful. One of the students told me after class that she had never heard an English professor say that. Frankly, I picked my literary field of Old English language and literature because I *loved* translating the language: I want my students to know that.

Such a dismissal of all sentimental discourse can (and has) alienated us from the public—but even worse—from our own students. “[T]he culture of English Studies,” Newkirk states, “creates its own sense of elitism and professionalism by treating as a defective ‘other’ the popular discourses—particularly sentimental discourse—in the wider culture. As a result we have opened up a gap between the way we and this wider culture perceive discursive power—and by extension, the way we and our students perceive discursive power” (52–53). What Newkirk doesn’t mention, but that I see in our culture, is that, even though we are now beginning to admit “popular” works into our curriculum, we do so to subject them to the same scrutiny we exercise on the so-called canonical texts of our profession. Sentiment has nothing to do with our study of these texts; we still cannot cry, laugh, or get angry because of their content. In fact, we subject these reactions by the public to further ideological analysis. We don’t allow ourselves to feel the emotion, only to study it dispassionately.

Elizabeth Flynn confronts the negative implications of characterizing Elbow as an expressivist by considering the development of his thinking in conjunction with major developments in the field of English Studies: modernism, antimodernism, and postmodernism. “Relating Elbow’s work to these three different perspectives, all of which have epistemological, pedagogical, and political implications, is a challenge since Elbow himself carefully avoids labels and since his work is complex and often defies easy classification. “I,” says Flynn, “nevertheless take the risk of doing so in order to make evident that his work is neither politically moderate nor an unchanging manifestation of expressivism” (61).

Newkirk essentially says it’s all right to be sentimental, romantic, passionate, belief-oriented; Flynn may or may not agree, but she would go on to say that Peter is all of these and more. Grounding her conclusions in many of the same ways Boyd grounds his, she sees Elbow as a radical: his work “has its roots in the Romantic Movement, and can be usefully compared to feminist expressivist composition. And given that he moves, especially in his later work, toward an acceptance of both subjective and objective epistemologies, his work becomes increasingly postmodern in orientation. Rather than espousing beliefs that are hopelessly out of date, Elbow’s earlier work is radical, and his later work parallels the autobiographical and postmodern turns within composition studies, feminist studies, and the humanities as a whole” (77).

And, finally, Ed White and Shane Borrowman's dialogue lays out a process of creating and uncreating an icon, of placing Elbow into a category and then unplacing him from that category. They begin their construction/deconstruction by recognizing the tendency of many in the discipline to see Peter as an iconic representation of expressivism and then to attach to him every quality they see as embodied in expressivism. Who and what Peter is can get lost in this process. In the ensuing dialogue, the two authors of this piece examine how and why they allowed Peter to slip into being an icon and present the thinking that led each of them to move later to a different place. In the process of recording their thinking, they demonstrate quite literally how thinking can be enriched by standing back and reflecting on how and why one has reached a particular judgment. Their words demonstrate that taxonomizing, contextualizing, and the subsequent inventing of icons can provide powerful stimuli for all of us to reconsider and reflect on our own stances. As Borrowman recognizes in his concluding words, "The icons are terribly oversimplified but are useful as both a mnemonic device and a place to begin discussion, and probably cannot be discarded for those reasons" (93). This essay thus recognizes the binary: icons are necessary, but icons must be starting points for our thinking, not ending points.

All four of these essays encourage us both to reexamine Elbow and to move beyond that reexamination on the basis of the roads opened up by Elbow and his explicators. In the process of these reexaminations, the authors of these pieces demonstrate how crucial contextualization and categorization are to our thinking; but they demonstrate just as strongly that the context we select for our examination and the category into which we place what we are examining are not neutral choices at all, but choices that provide a lens for viewing, a lens that colors what we see.

1 WRITING WITHOUT TEACHERS, WRITING AGAINST THE PAST?

RICHARD BOYD

I began to work in the field of composition studies at a time when it seemed that the label of “expressivist” was something to be avoided rather than embraced. During the late 1980s, it often appeared to me that texts like *Writing Without Teachers* (1973) and *Writing with Power* (1981) would eventually be read only as relics of a bygone era or forever regarded as politically suspect for their uncritical endorsement of the unencumbered self. I must confess that the term evoked for me images of an out-of-fashion romanticism that had been revealed by critics like James Berlin and James Catano to be irretrievably “co-opted by the very capitalist forces it opposes” (Berlin, “Rhetoric and Ideology” 487). While my firsthand experiences of Peter Elbow’s graciousness and generosity should have prompted caution about such harsh conclusions, Berlin’s argument seemed to me a powerful one, and I happily placed myself within that “social-epistemic” camp of writing teachers dedicated to progressive values and *genuinely* liberatory education.

Of course, those who style themselves as critical intellectuals are wise to at some point interrogate their own most favored axioms, and the past years have taught me that my judgment about the professional and political meaning of Elbow’s early work might very well be one of those conclusions most in need of reassessment. Sherrie L. Gradin’s revisionist study of what she terms the “social expressivist” school (which claims Elbow as a leading figure) has shown us that we need not accept without question Berlin’s account of an “expressionistic” rhetoric so focused on the individual that it cuts short any possibility of collective action against “corporate-sponsored thought” and instead often works “to reinforce the entrepreneurial virtues capitalism most values” (486–87). Even more significantly for my own thinking, the historicist orientation I try to foreground in my own scholarship has taught me to be wary of any easy conclusions or quick assumptions about the cultural work performed by any text. As regards Peter Elbow’s early work and the complex cultural and institutional histories from which it emerged, such a caveat concerning the danger of overly hasty determinations seems especially pertinent. This essay will therefore seek to consider the place of some of Peter Elbow’s initial publications within their own specific cultural moment and also within the relatively much longer history of

teaching composition in a university setting; for I believe that such an investigation can contribute much to our understanding of Elbow's place in our discipline's ongoing debate over the nature and function of teaching writing.

In some ways many of the basic questions in such an inquiry have already been established by those critical commentators who have called Elbow to task for promulgating a "myth of the self-made man" (Catano 421) that works to encourage in students a blindness to historical realities and to the ideological positioning inherent within the call to writing as self-discovery and self-expression (Berlin, "Rhetoric and Ideology" 484). As James Catano remarks, the notion of a private self championed by Elbow and other expressivists "implies that a true self is available to the select individual who achieves the necessary economic power or the truly expressive voice" and that such a "mythic" representation primarily functions to "mask the disturbing presence of corporate power" in the lives of student writers in search of their true voices (421). While Elbow's pedagogy seems to promise students an escape from those institutional powers that would restrict individual freedom, it finally offers them nothing that would support a critical analysis of how those powers constrain them nor the means to develop modes of collective action against the powers that be. In such a reading, Elbow reduces all to a question of self-expression and one's "willingness to pursue [one's] private vision" (Berlin, "Rhetoric and Ideology" 487), to the goal of freeing the private self of institutional restraint. A sense of history, and especially a sense of "the boundaries of origins (sex, race, class) and institutions," are the fundamental realities absent from the approach to writing instruction endorsed by Elbow in his important early writings (Catano 422).

But if these are the crucial questions to ask of Elbow's work (and I believe that they are), then I would ask an additional one: what has become of that imperative to historicize every text and every teaching practice, an omission in Elbow's early writings, which critics regard as such a shortcoming in his pedagogy, yet one which they themselves seem to disregard in their evaluations of his work? It appears to me that many of the most influential attacks on the expressivist camp lack the very component that they accuse Elbow of denying to his students. James Catano, for example, writes as if that figure of the "self-made man," supposedly present in Elbow's early work, *only* has affinities to notions of late nineteenth-century rugged individualism and to mythic creations like Horatio Alger. Reading these critiques provides one with an incomplete sense of how Elbow's ideas emerged out of the particular cultural and political events of the 1960s. What is unfortunate about this state of affairs is that there is so little need for it; Elbow himself has given us enough information about the origins and evolution of his thinking to be able to construct a rather different rendition of the historical record.

I begin therefore with “A Method for Teaching Writing,” written in 1968 for *College English*. In this essay Elbow reveals that an important part of his thinking about what it means to help students toward a notion of writing that foregrounds “the self revealed in words” (119) emerged out of his experiences as a draft counselor supporting conscientious objectors in their efforts to convince draft boards of their sincere opposition to serving in the military (120–21). The quest to find one’s “true” self through writing had little or nothing to do with embracing the myth of the “self-made man;” rather, it had everything to do with developing a method of generating a persuasive text that carried the most significant of personal *and* political consequences. For Elbow, to discover one’s convictions about an issue (including the morality of war) is to overturn what schools have taught students about articulating only what may make sense to others and is instead to allow the experience of how “belief is what you call on when action is required and knowledge and evidence do not provide certainty” (121). Thus, his understanding of writing cannot be divorced from the social and the political, no matter how susceptible his rhetoric of individuality may seem to the attacks of critics.

Such a conclusion is even more obvious when one turns to his essay on draft resistance (referenced in the *College English* piece), which was published by *The Christian Century* and aimed at encouraging young draft-age men to pursue the option of conscientious objector status. Within the manifestly activist agenda of this essay are all the familiar urgings to “work out and articulate what [one’s] ‘inner’ or ‘ultimate’ beliefs are” (“Who” 989). Yet here the message of translating the goals of writing-as-discovery into concrete political action is unmistakable, for clearly such a theme drives the entire essay. As Elbow explains, the necessity to develop the means to convince draft boards of one’s conscientious objections to military service is crucial in the cultural climate of 1968 because only by learning to express one’s beliefs can an individual become fully aware of those convictions in himself. Furthermore, this process is not meant to encourage quietism or solipsism, but rather to serve as “a beginning, an opening out into new modes of action and involvement” (992). Moving in a direction that sounds much more like Berlin’s “social-epistemic” rhetoric than the critic’s version of the expressionistic camp, Elbow’s essay goes on to assert:

[w]hen you make genuinely available to a person a vehicle [the means for writing the application for conscientious objector status] for saying No—a language, a medium, or genre for actually standing up to his government—he is *then* able to feel the possibility of appropriating it; but operationally *he is then no longer the same person*. Once he is aware of himself in this new posture, new things can begin to happen to him; he is now open to feeling *other* circumstances in which he would say No. (992)

In contrast to Berlin's assertion that for the expressivists' "solitary activity is always promising, group activity always dangerous" (*Rhetoric* 145), Elbow is also very clear in this essay that this kind of self-transformation must look outside the self to the wider resistance community and hear the call for collective action. Indeed, one of the primary reasons to pursue conscientious objector status is that it can inspire others to do the same; it can create a sense of community among resisters that will support all in the efforts to say "No" to the government ("Who" 922).¹ The individual self is, despite all the emphasis on self-reflection and "inner" convictions, finally rendered as deeply social and inextricably bound to the requirements of political responsibility. As the concluding words of the essay make clear, it is through the task of self-exploration that draft-age men will be "set free to feel more deeply, to think more cogently, and above all, to act more courageously" ("Who" 993).

I believe that such a context provides a most interesting gloss on the opening words of *Writing Without Teachers* wherein Elbow declares that "Many people are now trying to become less helpless, both personally and politically, trying to claim more control over their own lives" (vii).² The book itself does not *seem* to have much to say about the political half of Elbow's two realms of experience (I will have much more to say on this question momentarily), so it is not surprising that critics have focused on Elbow's apparent enshrinement of the unfettered individual. Yet, to recognize that several of the key ideas about writing and writing pedagogy found in *Writing Without Teachers* took shape within the political struggle of the draft resistance movement and that for Elbow the exploration of the self had been carefully represented as a political gesture of great import surely must cause us to reconsider some of our evaluations of the political and ideological meaning of Elbow's philosophy of composition. When we ignore the very real historical contexts of his early work, we fail to understand what the privileging of the self meant in those contexts out of which they originally emerged. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a radical insistence on the self recalled theoreticians of the New Left much more than they harkened back to stories of the unfettered "self-made man" (Catano 421). In point of fact, it was the New Left that was chiefly responsible for what Lawrence Lader terms the "mystique of individualism" animating progressive political movements of the era (179). Opposing what it saw as the institutionalized rigidity of the Old Left, the New Left and specifically groups like SDS embraced "the primacy of personal experience" and nonhierarchical, decision making processes (Lader 179; Gitlin 157). While a critic might argue that Elbow and SDS were flawed in their adoption of an individualism that was ultimately middle-class in its origins (Lader 174), such a case can be made only if one reads Elbow's work within the highly charged political context in which it appeared. To ignore this background is to

fall victim to the very same blindness to history that many have laid at the doorstep of expressivists like Peter Elbow.

As a writing instructor rather far removed from the struggles of the 1960s, I recognize that efforts to define the precise political meaning of Elbow's early work may seem somewhat tangential to our daily activities in the contemporary writing classroom. I find it therefore especially significant that Elbow's critics have offered considerable commentary on the impact of an expressivist "ideology" (to use Berlin's terminology ["Rhetoric and Ideology" 477]) on the organization of the classroom and on the teacher-student dynamic in particular. At first glance, such notable innovations as using student writings as the primary texts of the course and the transfer of primary responsibility for learning from teacher to students (Murray 118) would seem to be rather obvious steps forward from the rigid teaching methods and focus on error that defined the current-traditional era. Berlin acknowledges that certain proponents of expressionistic rhetoric during the 1960s overtly aligned their teaching practices to support the goals of "alter[ing] political consciousness through challenging official versions of reality." But Berlin assigns Elbow (and Murray and Coles and Macrorie) to the "moderate wing" of the camp that opposed such overt politicalization of the classroom and instead sought to render all power as "vested in the individual" ("Rhetoric and Ideology" 485). He characterizes their efforts to develop teaching strategies that would support a student's discovery of his or her own authentic voice away and apart from the dehumanizing effects of institutions as offering students little more than a "private vision"—one that leads only to a resistance that "is always construed in individual terms" and hence does little to destabilize the institutions (including school itself) that have generated such self-alienation in the first place (487). The expressivist classroom, just like the expressivist politics of self, succumbs to an unacknowledged and ultimately fatal tie to the very capitalist ideology it would claim to resist. As Catano most provocatively argues, "a writing pedagogy that privileges 'true individuality' . . . may actually reassert the power of the academy and the student's subordinate role within it by unintentionally obscuring the social framework that surrounds all classroom activity" (422).

Catano's words are difficult words, for they go to the very heart of the teaching enterprise and ask the most challenging of questions about the ethical meaning of the teacher's function in the classroom. Claims of a "student-centered classroom" are no more than hollow affirmations if they cannot answer the charge that such a pedagogy ultimately conceals more than it reveals, reproduces more of the dominant institutional structure than it undermines. One might even argue that expressivist pedagogy is more inimical to an emancipatory agenda than the current-traditional rhetoric it seeks to overthrow,

since the former works to mislead students into believing their exercises in self-expression constitute authentic acts of empowerment and liberation from institutional constraint.³ Such stark questions cannot be ignored, particularly if one takes seriously (as I believe all of us must) Jane Tompkins's reminder that "what we do in the classroom is our politics. No matter what we may say about Third World this or feminist that, our actions and interactions with our students week-in week-out prove what we are for and what we are against in the long run" (660). If our politics reside most deeply in the teacher-student dynamics we enact in our writing classrooms, then what might an examination of Peter Elbow's links to the traditions of composition instruction tell us about this most critical of issues? It is to just such an investigation that this essay now turns, for I believe that critical accounts of Elbow's work have again misrepresented the meaning of his pedagogy by not giving sufficient attention to the relation of his "teacherless" writing class to the history of composition instruction in this country.

In the early 1960s, only a few years before Elbow began to develop his theories of teaching writing, Clark Kerr, Chancellor of the University of California, Berkeley, described the university in America as "the focal point for national growth, . . . [a place] at the center of the knowledge process" (cited in Anderson 96). Such sentiments seem equally popular today—a not particularly surprising state of affairs since the university has long been figured in this culture as the primary site for the production and dissemination of knowledge. Beginning roughly around the end of the Civil War (a date that coincides, interestingly enough, with the development of composition as a central component in the undergraduate curriculum), the university came to displace the more traditional and highly localized learned society as the generally acknowledged source of knowledge within the culture (Oleson and Voss vii). More to the point, given my concern with the ways classroom practices enact political agendas, one notes the contemporaneous phenomenon of the rise of the college professor as an object of national attention and respect. This figure, who epitomized the specialist in this age of specialization, superseded the multifaceted independent scholar of antebellum days as the primary repository of knowledge in the culture. College faculty were, for the first time, represented as experts invested by the general populace with the cultural authority to function as the essential producers of knowledge *and* as expert arbiters deserving of great deference in matters of common concern. They were, as the social historian Neil Harris remarks, coming to occupy positions as "national jurymen whose control of the learning process granted them special status" (438) as authoritative spokespersons on any number of matters. Richard Meade Bache was thus not alone when, in his 1868 grammar handbook, *Vulgarisms and*

Other Errors of Speech, he informed his non-academic readership that in matters of language usage, the college and its representatives should be looked to by the general public with grateful “deference” (ix). This era witnessed a profound shift in cultural notions of “legitimacy” and of who possessed the right to speak authoritatively on the question of what constituted real knowledge. Increasingly, it became the “expert” who was said to hold an essential mastery of the field and thus had the prerogative to render conclusive judgments about everything from English grammar to economic policy (Harris 434).

This evolution in the role of university faculty in American culture is important in large part because “in the decades between 1860 and 1920, the organization of knowledge in America was transformed, and institutionalized patterns were established that persist to this day” (Oleson and Voss vii). For those of us in composition, who have our disciplinary roots in precisely this part of American history and who teach classes that originated at a time coincident with the university’s ever closer orientation to the needs of the newly emergent professional class and the business community it served (Berlin *Writing* 60; Ohmann 73), the lessons seem especially difficult to ignore. For if, as Marguerite Helmers suggests, we have collectively tended to construct students as fundamentally “those who lack” and faculty as experts endowed with the capacity “to initiate change” in these deficient writers, then such a disposition seems to stretch back a very long way in our disciplinary history and is linked to broader trends in the culture at large (2, 22).⁴

It is thus critical to any consideration of the politics of Elbow’s pedagogy to understand that a trope of mastery has been associated with the university writing instructor from almost the beginning of the profession in the late Victorian era. Many of the most widely read textbooks and popular essays that helped define the new field of composition described its teachers not simply as instructors but as expert authorities on the linguistic knowledge they sought to communicate to students. For example, Arlo Bates, Professor of English at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a leading voice in the new, “practical” approach to composition, included in his *Talks on Writing English, Second Series* (1901) strong assertions that the writing instructor should be viewed as an “absolute master” of his subject and that there existed a fundamental distinction between the “mastery of thought” embodied by the teacher and the naive, untrained mind of the student (167, 169). Bates explained that to teachers, and not to students, were given the “good gifts and graces . . . to explain, to justify, to make clear relations, and to impart the whole [subject] matter,” and “[w]hoever has taught understands how completely different is the attitude of the teacher from that of the pupil” (167). Similarly, Adams Sherman Hill, Professor at Harvard College and the driving force behind the new English A writing course

that would be widely imitated across the nation during the late Victorian era, often represented himself as the embodiment of masterly expertise, as a marker of authority who exemplified the ideal of rhetorical fluency. Albert Kitzhaber comments that in Hill's famous textbook, *The Principles of Rhetoric* (1878, 1895), the Harvard professor handed down judgments about questions of stylistic etiquette and word usage as if from on high, proclaiming his linguistic rulings "*ex cathedra* . . . in such a way as to suggest that there was only one rational answer, and here it was" (62). The most visible representation of the composition instructor during the current-traditional era was as a figure of authority and authoritative judgments (Brereton 18–19), presiding over a classroom of what Charles T. Copeland and H. M. Rideout would describe in their 1901 text, *Freshman English and Theme-Correcting in Harvard College*, as "immature" students, who should be regarded as "beginners" and "novices" (30, 45, 46). This kind of strictly hierarchical teacher-student dynamic has maintained itself for a very long time now, and if Marguerite Helmers is correct, it seems to have been integral to our sense of our pedagogical mission for almost as long as the discipline has existed on university campuses.

It is precisely this state of affairs that makes a text like *Writing Without Teachers* so significant, even if the magnitude of its import remains somewhat obscured even thirty years after the fact. For to insert Elbow's book into that long tradition of the cultivation of teacherly expertise and authority is to grasp immediately how its construction or deconstruction of the writing instructor struggles against the discipline's past and in fact initiates the kind of political project that critics have decried as absent from Elbow's work. Elbow's description of a "teacherless writing class," (76) in which students no longer have need of an institutionally sanctioned instructor giving advice or explaining theories of "good and bad writing" (77) strikes boldly at a fundamental cornerstone of those notions of university faculty as authoritative experts deserving grateful "deference" from their "immature" students. When instructors no longer are called upon to provide a conclusive synthesis of how a revision should proceed (112) and when the goal of composing in accordance with the teacher's model of "good writing" is described as a notion counterproductive to "real" growth in student writers (109), we encounter a figure of the teacher radically different from the one that emerged from the pens of Arlo Bates and A. S. Hill and that seems to have maintained itself in significant ways even until today.

To underscore this change, Elbow uses *Writing Without Teachers* to subvert perhaps the two most dominant elements in the current-traditional instructor's repertoire of authority: the insistence on mechanical correctness and the awarding of grades. Current-traditional rhetoric had been substantially shaped by an emphasis on sentence-level correctness that was regarded as essential to

the evaluation of student writing (Connors, “Mechanical Correctness”); Elbow overturns such assumptions about as completely as one could. Rather than insisting on grammatical precision as the special purview of the masterful instructor who would carefully “correct” student essays filled with “error,” Elbow offers instead the advice that each writer should decide for him or herself the necessity of learning grammar, basing such a decision not on the words of an instructor but on the reactions of various readers (137). He goes on to undermine the “*ex cathedra*” pronouncements of figures like A. S. Hill by informing us that grammatical correctness has been highlighted in writing instruction because it is the only part of writing “that *can* be straightforwardly taught” by an expert to a class of presumed novices (138). And should this kind of assault be insufficient to strip that cloak of mastery from the figure of the writing teacher, Elbow also reveals that grading, the traditional centerpiece of the writing instructor’s performance as “gatekeeper” (Berlin, *Writing* 72), is nothing more than a highly *subjective* process that reveals the teacher to be simply another reader, and a flawed one at that (127, 129). Contra the old rhetoric, Elbow explains that there is no agreement as to what constitutes “good writing” and that teachers cannot claim some special access to it that would justify their insistence that students follow their pronouncements about what writing should look like (133). According to Elbow, composition teachers are commonly guilty of misleading students by offering feedback that is based in reactions that are not revealed to the student and on theories of writing that are not true (133–134). Each writer must instead become confident in “deciding *for yourself* whether your words are any good” (105).

What makes Elbow’s deconstruction of the writing instructor so interesting is the degree to which it so insistently overturns that long-standing representation of the masterful teacher. His aim seems to go well beyond any “moderate,” to use Berlin’s adjective, re-vision of the teacher’s role in the writing course. For whereas Arlo Bates had elevated the teacher to the preeminent position in the classroom by declaring that “[w]hoever has taught understands how completely different is the attitude of the teacher from that of the pupil” (167), Elbow states that his class can work only if his actions as teacher “*follow all the same procedures as everyone else*. . . . I can only set up something like a teacherless class in my own class if I adopt more the role of the learner and less the role of a teacher” (ix). In fact, Elbow’s refusal of the mantle of expertise stands at the very center of his project, for he begins *Writing Without Teachers* with the claim that the text’s authority resides solely in its author’s struggles as a writer: “The authority I call upon in writing a book about writing is my own long-standing difficulty in writing” (viii). Thus, while Elbow does resemble Bates and Hill and other current-traditional predecessors in his localizing

within the self the authority to speak about writing, he profoundly differs from them in his grounding of this authority not in the teacher's mastery and expertise but in his weakness and even failure. I believe that it is for this reason and this reason only that Elbow's repeated insistence that his readers decide for themselves the validity of his methods can be more than simply hollow rhetoric. When he tells his readers, "I am only asking you to *try on* this way of looking at the writing process to see if it helps your writing. That's the only valid way you can judge it" (16), he is also telling them that one of the most prominent and persistent tropes defining the role of the writing instructor scarcely has a place in his new classroom. And without a masterful instructor presiding over all, the possibilities for a genuinely student-centered classroom seem considerably more substantial.

This reading of Elbow's early work in the context of composition's current-traditional past—and especially in relation to the discipline's persistent affiliation of the writing instructor with a mantle of expertise—can help us to grasp more completely the implications of the what Sherrie L. Gradin terms the expressivists's links to the "revolutionary spirit of the 1960s" (17). Gradin bases her characterization of Elbow and other expressivists on their work as "champions for educational change" and their "dismantl[ing]" of the dominant writing pedagogies of the period (17). Certainly Elbow's critique of the trope of the masterful instructor performed a critical function in this revision of the current-traditional classroom. Yet, I think that we can also see within this new version of the writing teacher the genesis of a more overt political meaning to Elbow's pedagogy that is even more significant than the alleged affiliations between his ideology of unfettered individualism and a complacent middle-class culture. His assault on the figure of the expert teacher not only seeks to overturn the status quo within the teaching of writing but also calls into question a dominant equation of expertise and cultural authority that had been in place for well over one hundred years.

The politics of *Writing Without Teachers* must surely be understood in relation to Jane Tompkins's words about the classroom stage on which we most tangibly enact our ideological agendas. Yet this stage must be seen in its full relation to the social organization of knowledge in American culture. As theorists like Jim Merod have argued, "intellectual authority derives from the state to begin with," and the reification of that expert authority in institutions like colleges mystifies the process by which knowledge is constructed and erodes the belief that nonexpert individuals can take responsibility for their own political decision making (101, 104). Thus, when Elbow proposes his "teacherless writing class," he is doing more than offering a new approach to gaining proficiency in writing; he is simultaneously resisting long-standing cultural assumptions about what the sociologist Magali Sarfatti Larsen terms a "monopolized expertise" in this culture, which

has persisted since the late Victorian era (37) in large part because it closely supports conditions of class stratification and “corporate-sponsored thought” condemned (rightly, I think) by critics of Elbow (Berlin, “Rhetoric and Ideology” 486). We miss vital components of the politics of a “teacherless writing class” if we fail to recognize how working against the traditionally rigid hierarchy between teacher and student also serves to contest the presumption that only experts have the right to speak (and be heard) about their domains of knowledge (Larson 37). It is precisely because Elbow’s text does not invoke “the usual authoritarian pedagogy, [where] the teacher, as the representative of expertise, is the master of certitude” that one can point to it as an exemplary challenge to that “monopoly over discourse” claimed by teachers and other institutionally designated experts (Larsen 54, 35). And this is such a critical *political* gesture because it directly challenges “the authority of instruction,” a power that, as Evan Watkins reminds us, has enormous sociopolitical consequences:

The classroom is, of course, part of a universe whose position in the social life of the United States is a crucial one for a country whose world dominance begins to be exercised less through direct ‘imperialism’ than by the propagation of ‘how to do things,’ that is, by its role as instructor. (364)

For Watkins, and, I would argue, for Elbow as well, the teacher-student relationship enacted in the classroom is a decisive moment in the education of students. The teacher-student dynamic is the “situation where students learn the sociopolitical power of instruction as a central and organizing activity in the shaping of adult relationships, and thus it is not an exaggeration to say that the meaning of ‘dominant’ and ‘subordinate’ come to them as a relation of instructor and instructed” (Watkins 364). One could scarcely imagine a more serious political meaning for Elbow’s “teacherless writing class,” nor could one point to many other pedagogical approaches more deserving of approbation for their “explicit critique of economic, political, and social arrangements” (Berlin, “Rhetoric and Ideology” 490).⁵ I believe Watkins’s words also provide an especially useful commentary on the following passage from *Writing Without Teachers*, a bit of text that seems extraordinarily rich in its suggestion of the political meaning of the book: “Although you cannot entirely change the world or transform people at a stroke, this class makes it perfectly obvious that you *can* change instantaneously the way eight or ten people act toward you for a couple of hours a week” (114). The writing classroom as social and political laboratory, indeed.

One final, and somewhat more personal, comment concerning the politics of Elbow’s early pedagogy needs mention. As noted above, most criticism of Elbow’s expressivist ideology has come from the left, from those, myself included, who did not think his critique of the dominant ideology was sufficiently pointed to be

considered legitimately transformative. Yet on the all-important matter of the politics one enacts in one's own classroom, and specifically on how one seeks to define the teacher-student dynamic in one's classroom, it is Elbow who would seem to have the more radical pedagogy. I believe that Elbow's version of the "teacherless writing class" has much to show those of us who figure ourselves as critical teachers and intellectuals, for it is upon this issue of the teacher's authority that so very many of us fail to enact our own ideological agendas. Mary Rose O'Reilly once lamented the all too typical scene of the democratic writing instructor *forcing* his or her students to sit in circles (rather than the traditional rows) as part of their lessons in becoming democratic citizens themselves. Can a classroom agenda be "democratic" if it is the instructor who determines the agenda and defines what constitutes appropriate (i.e., democratic) behaviors by students? Certainly the important work of Paul Bove on the "genealogy of critical humanism" has shown us that claiming the mantle of expertise is both a familiar and deeply problematic gesture for most critical intellectuals and teachers. The dilemma resides in the fact that "even the most revisionist, adversarial, and oppositional humanistic intellectuals—no matter what their avowed ideologies—operate within a network of discourses, institutions, and desires that . . . always reproduce themselves in essentially antidemocratic forms and practices" (1–2). Such a paradoxical situation occurs because when the critical intellectual assumes the prerogative to speak for the oppressed or define what is genuinely democratic, the "figure of the masterful or leading intellectual is repeatedly reinscribed" (2). When we presume to designate for our students what constitutes critical consciousness (and many of us, including myself, who fashion ourselves as transformative teachers do just that), we are most susceptible to the charge of doing little more than giving students more instruction in the fundamental meaning in this culture of instructor and instructed, expert and deferential novice (Bove 225).⁶ The trope of the expert seems ubiquitous in composition pedagogy, on the right *and* on the left, and to miss the ways Elbow's early work directly confronts the power of this figure is to misread significantly the political meaning and implications of his writings.

To be sure, the preceding account of Elbow's relation to the politics and history of our discipline does not do justice to the complexity of a thinker capable of producing a book entitled *Embracing Contraries* (1986). Elbow's early work is filled with paradox, ambiguity, and echoes of composition's Victorian past; witness, for example, the repeated deployment of imagery that conjoins power and violence in ways more reminiscent of the current-traditional emphasis on "masculine" strength in writing than what one typically would expect to find in the draft resistance movement.⁷ Even as regards the sociopolitical function of the self in these texts, the case remains difficult, for the affiliations of Elbow's

pedagogy with what Berlin terms “the entrepreneurial virtues capitalism most values” (“Rhetoric and Ideology” 487) remain; these too are part of Elbow’s links to his cultural and disciplinary past. Thus, my aim has not been to overturn those critical accounts of Berlin and Catano so much as it has been to historicize Elbow in order that we might better understand something of his complex relation to the past and to the present. I hope such an approach allows us to read Berlin’s conclusion that in Elbow “the personal *is* the political” in a manner that does justice to the intense and very overt *political* struggles in Elbow’s early work, struggles that go well beyond any simple equation of “self-expression” inevitably “lead[ing] to a better social order” (*Rhetoric* 155).

However, I would not go so far as to claim that a better grasp of the historical context of *Writing Without Teachers* allows us to explicate fully all the enigmatic gestures found in the text. Such a project seems well beyond the purview of this brief essay. So I would conclude by returning us to the preface of *Writing Without Teachers*. In these initial remarks to his readers, Elbow informs us that “I particularly want this book to help students not enrolled in a writing class and people out of school altogether” (vii). Perhaps these are the most important, yet enigmatic, words in the entire text, given the institutionalizing of Elbow’s pedagogy in textbooks and writing programs, a state of affairs that has unquestionably muted many of the more radical elements in his work. To establish a “teacherless writing class” in a university setting, where the expert continues to reign supreme and where grades and placement examinations play an ever more significant role in the professional lives of writing instructors, seems perhaps the most paradoxical of all gestures. Might not have Elbow been intimating this from the very beginning of *Writing Without Teachers*, and might he not still be articulating for us a most powerful political lesson about the real meaning of teaching writing *without* teachers?

NOTES

1. Such a position is consistent with the opinion of the historian Charles DeBenedetti, who remarks that “[r]adical pacifists [of the 1960s] concluded that draft resistance involved more than an individual act of conscience or even a collective moral witness” (166).
2. Berlin also cites this sentence, though he challenges Elbow’s remark by asserting that the power Elbow describes in his book “is not political in any overt sense” (*Rhetoric* 154). It is, according to Berlin, a power conceived entirely in the personal terms of gaining control over one’s life through a mastery of language.
3. This is essentially Berlin’s judgment concerning the politics of *Writing Without Teachers* (“Rhetoric and Ideology” 485).

4. Robert Connors argues that “[m]ore than any other college subject, composition has been shaped by perceived social and cultural needs,” for it “grew out of and interacted with concurrent cultural trends, as American college and university teaching were shaped by pressures that were economic, political, and theoretical” (*Composition* 112, 4).
5. Of course, Berlin is using these words to describe the social-epistemic camp, which he sees as carrying forward a critique that had remained merely “implicit” in expressionistic rhetoric (“Rhetoric and Ideology” 490).
6. Bove here follows the critique of the critical intellectual initiated by Foucault.
7. Compare, for example, William Mathews’s praise offered in 1876 for the rhetorical power of “a Webster or a Calhoun,” whose “words fell upon his adversary, battering down the entrenchments of sophistry like shot from heavy ordnance” (14), with Elbow’s description of an effective voice in writing that “is the force that will make a reader listen to you, the energy that drives the meanings through his thick skull” (*Writing* 6). See also Catano for an effective critique of Elbow’s tendency to deploy patriarchal and violent imagery in his early works.

2 SENTIMENTAL JOURNEYS *Anti-Romanticism and Academic Identity*

THOMAS NEWKIRK

My doctoral advisor, the late James Kinneavy, once said that his original ideas were those for which he had forgotten the source. I think of this uncomfortable piece of wisdom when I recall, vividly and with some mortification, the time I picked Peter Elbow up at the Boston airport around 1980. It was the first time I'd met Peter, and on the way up to Durham, he characteristically got me talking about my teaching. I explained to him about how my students seemed blocked by their prior academic training, how they had an overly formalized sense of what writing should be, how activities like, well, "free-writing" and small supportive writing groups, worked quite well. Peter, to his credit, responded with his "oh really's." It seemed like news to him. Then, about the time I got to Newburyport, I recalled where I got those ideas.

So I'll begin with the admission that this chapter can be viewed as a gloss on his great essay on the believing and doubting game. Elbow works to create space for belief in much the same way William James did in his essays on pragmatism. Writing almost exactly a century before *Writing Without Teachers* was published, James made the case for faith as an active and necessary component of knowing. Faith provided a form of energetic direction necessary to break out of the "sophistical net" (36) of dogmatic positivism:

For again and again success depends on energy of act; energy again depends on faith that we shall not fail; and that faith in turn on the faith that we are right—which faith thus verifies itself. (27)

Elbow, it seems to me, joins James in challenging the "fastidious vetoes" (36) of those bound up in ultrarational systems. James challenged the positivists who questioned any form of assent to unproven "truths." For Elbow the target is an academic culture that overvalues skepticism and critique—where the ultimate term of rebuke is to be called "naive." Like James he argued for the pragmatic potential of belief, the ways in which belief discloses possibilities that remain forever hidden by the "Doubting Game." To believe in the significance and meaningfulness of an object of study (say, sentimentality) allows for understandings that skepticism would foreclose. Belief, in this way, is self-reinforcing.

His essay seems even more relevant—and radical—as we move into the new millennium. Skepticism has been elevated to such a First Principle that any deviation from social constructionism earns the rebuke of “essentialism.” Since all knowledge, we are reminded, is socially constructed, doubting or deconstructing our belief systems becomes the primary intellectual enterprise. Critique becomes the only means we have of escaping the barely visible shaping forces around us. And, to put the matter frankly, those who advocate unconditional belief systems (sometimes encoded in moral commonplaces) strike us as dogmatic, unreflecting, and embarrassing. This elevation of skepticism to a First Principle creates the sort of imbalance that Elbow would always criticize. To use one of his most memorable phrases, belief should have “half the bed.” Elbow’s willingness to stand up for belief and his willingness to challenge academic bias are, I feel, among the great acts of courage and imagination in our field.

His famous essay is doubly useful in an investigation of sentimentality, first because sentimentality entails belief, affirmation, wholeheartedness—all of which are frequently, sometimes instinctively, met by skepticism on the part of academics. Indeed, a major function of academic training may be to inculcate that sense of skepticism, what a colleague has called “messianic agnosticism.” And secondly, believing is a central method of inquiry; it requires a form of imagination to step outside what Herbert Gans calls our “taste culture” (11) and sense, provisionally and experimentally, the meaningfulness of sentimental discourse for those not acculturated to our standards.

While I may use a collective “we” to designate the orthodox reaction of academics to sentimental discourse, I hope readers will feel free to withdraw from that “we” at any point. But my guess is that even those who have resisted the implicit strictures concerning inappropriate emotionalism have felt the power of these norms. One of my female colleagues once spoke of the effort it took to monitor every overt reaction—to be careful not to sigh, blush, laugh too loudly, or, worst of all, cry. Without this monitoring she felt she would be perceived as overly emotional, even motherly, and not be taken seriously as an intellectual. But, I will argue that even academics cannot stay within the lines and that the attempt to do so results in psychic disconnection and denial.

I’ll explore this topic through a series of stories. The first has to do with a cup that was passed out to participants at an “Editors’ Summit” at Heinemann Books a couple of years ago. The company had undergone a difficult period of editorial turnover and author dissatisfaction, and Mike Gibbons, the company president, had finally put in place his new set of editors. As a part-time editor, I was invited and consequently got a cup. It is from *Successories of Illinois*, and it features a photo of an eight rowing on a river; the message reads:

TEAMWORK

Teamwork is the ability to work together
 Toward a common vision. The ability
 To direct individual accomplishment
 Toward organizational objectives.
 It is the fuel that allows common
 People to achieve uncommon results.

In fact, we did talk a lot about common goals and ways of using the talent in that room. And, let me add, the talent was impressive, certainly the intellectual match of my colleagues at the University of New Hampshire. This was a company with books by Nancie Atwell, Shelly Harwayne, and Linda Rief in the works, one that had published Moffett, Britton, Macrorie, Graves. The very need I feel to vouch for the intelligence of this group begins to demonstrate this tendency to associate the discourse of exhortation with intellectual weakness.

At any rate we all had these cups. At first I felt an embarrassment; I wondered if I would even take it home. (Then realizing how cheap I am, that *all* of our cups were freebies with some slogan on them, I knew I would take it home.) Then I began to become interested in my own embarrassment. I fantasized what would happen if my new department chair, who needed teamwork as desperately as Heinemann did, passed out such a cup. It would be, at least in my department, unthinkable, except, perhaps, as an ironic joke. Other departments may be different—you may be sipping from such a cup as you read this. But somehow I doubt it.

The reason for this rejection would be the sheer conventional clichéd nature of the message, “common people attaining uncommon results.” Yet there are clichés, conventionalities in the writing that we accept—and these don’t seem to bother us nearly as much. Surely “problematical” is a cliché by now. And “undertheorized” seems on its way to becoming one. How many times have we read about “the Banking concept of education” or “expressivism”? Academic writing is quite tolerant of some clichés. The teamwork mug is troublesome, not because it is clichéd, but because it has the wrong clichés.

The issue, it seems to me, is more profound than a matter of preference. I would argue that those of us in the field of English have constructed our identities upon a rejection of sentimental discourse. It is the “other.” Our sense of elitism, the cultural capital we possess, rests upon a capacity to see through sentimentalism. In this regard we distance ourselves from popular culture in which sentimentality is a real force. We possess a large lexicon of pejoratives for this discourse—mawkish, manipulative, corny, trite, gushy, tearjerker, simplistic, mushy, romantic, touchy-feely, soft, naive, and, to go back several

decades, womanish. For as Jane Tompkins has shown, the assault on sentimental writing in the early part of this century led to the virtual elimination of women writers from the canon.

So when David Bartholomae, in his pivotal essay “Inventing the University,” accuses expressivists, like Elbow, of promoting “sentimental realism,” he knows that he can count on the demolition work that came before. He is throwing down a gauntlet he is sure no one will pick up. After all these years, after Freud demolished the pieties of the Victorian family, after Eliot made his case for the objective correlative, after the warnings of I.A. Richards about “stock responses” and other emotions that are not artfully or appropriately invoked by literature, after the long appropriation of sentimentality by capitalism (think of the long-distance commercials or the way sentimentalism has screwed up the coverage of the Olympics), who in his right mind would pick up this challenge?

Yet because this rejection is such an automatic reaction of the intellectual caste we belong to, I believe there can be value in exploring this bias—But with a couple of provisos. I want to use the term *sentimental* or *sentimentalism* as a neutral term; that is, in the same way we use the term *fiction* or *academic discourse*. There can be effective sentimental discourse—and there can be ineffective sentimental discourse. A book like *Tuesdays with Morrie* may be emotionally successful, even for some hardened academics. Terms like *mawkish* and *sappy* designate ineffective, formulaic sentimental discourse.

And I will define this discourse as that which seeks to activate compassion, to extend sympathy, to create conviction, to inspire courage—in effect to work against moral and emotional sluggishness. It is wholehearted, sincere, intentionally uncomplicated. It is the language of conviction. It has strong roots in oral speech and speechmaking. It depends on a small number of conventional narrative tropes (e.g., that of overcoming diversity through extraordinary effort), which despite their familiarity can be effectively employed. To put the issue another way, this discourse sets itself against irony, doubt, displacement of emotion, ambivalence, critique, unreliable narration, and, to some degree, originality.

Historically, the term *sentimental* has undergone an inversion in connotation; it was a term of praise in the 18th and first half of the 19th centuries, at which point it began to be used pejoratively to indicate insincerity and unstable and undisciplined emotional (even anti-intellectual) responsiveness. More recently, literary scholars such as Jane Tompkins, Fred Kaplan, and Laura Korobkin, attracted by the moral power of the great sentimental writers, have begun to use *sentimentality* nonpejoratively. Kaplan points out that sentimentality might be viewed as a reaction against the pessimistic, deterministic biological and social theories that took hold in the 19th century. Sentimental writers claimed that, while human natures are “mixed,” we all possess innate moral sentiments, which,

when appealed to in books like *Dombey and Son* or *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, can move us to moral action.

To be sure, sentimental discourse can easily be co-opted by the conservative right because of its focus on individual effort and its seeming blindness to the ways in which systematic governmental and economic policy can close off options. This disconnection between individual morality and public policy was most evident in the career of Ronald Reagan, who kept a checkbook in his desk to write checks to individuals in need—while at the same time slashing their government benefits.

Yet having said this, I want to stress my thesis that we academics pay a huge price for this “othering” of sentimentality. We can lose touch with the way discourse operates in the wider culture and, most tellingly, fail to recognize how it operates in our own lives once we leave our offices and listen to the radio or attend the graduations of our children. Our allegiance to the Doubting Game can leave us alienated not only from popular culture, but from our own emotional responsiveness.

SENTIMENTALITY AND THE LANGUAGE OF POWER

Kurt Vonnegut once said that he was so relieved to go to college. In high school it was social cliques, assistant principals, pep rallies, and cheerleaders. In college he could talk about ideas and philosophy, about books. Then in the real world he found it was high school all over again. This may be a somewhat negative way of making my point that there is a mismatch between the way discourse is taught and valued in the university and the way it operates in the wider culture. While those of us who work in English departments have a heritage of anti-sentimentalism, that heritage is not shared by the wider public. We can proclaim this a postmodern age—yet the movie *Titanic* has grossed over a billion dollars.

I was reminded of this disparity at a recent NCTE conference. I was on the “research strand” of the conference, normally a powerful warning label. For some reason we had been scheduled for one of the big ballrooms. The presenters gathered near the front of the ballroom, and when the session was about to start, we were only slightly outnumbered by the audience. We set ourselves up in a corner of the room, but each of us who spoke had to confront literally a thousand empty chairs.

In the discussion that followed our talks one of the speakers challenged me that we should not be teaching personal writing. Instead, we should be teaching the conventions of the “language of power.” I remember looking out over those empty seats and wondering if we really knew what the language of power was. If we ourselves possessed that key, why had all but twenty NCTE registrants chosen to skip our session?

And I knew that in some other ballroom, one that would be filled, Donald Graves would be speaking. And those who heard him would be moved, inspired to try new things, in large part because of his mastery of sentimental discourse. We used to kid Don about how after each of his speeches, woman after woman would come up to him, literally touch him—his forearm, his elbow, two hands surrounding his one—and say how it seemed he was speaking directly to her. One after the other. Don spoke (and speaks) to their frustration, to their loneliness in school systems, to their belief in children, in literacy, in the reasons they got into teaching in the first place. They leave ready to persevere, even to transform themselves as teachers. This is sentimentality (at its best)—and this is power.

THE WRITING CLASS AS CONTACT ZONE

In the past few years I served on doctoral admissions committees and found that easily the most high-risk document in the application files was the personal statement, always a tricky (to use Elbow's favorite term) presentation of self. Some applicants began with a short literacy narrative, something that showed their love of reading, sometimes using the romantic trope—reading in bed, with a flashlight, escaping into the world of the book. I'm sure the intent here is to demonstrate their passion for literature, something that to my mind was not irrelevant to the application. Yet invariably the committee found these openings not just ineffective, but offensive. In fact, there was a visceral reaction to them—"saccharine," "sappy." There was a feeling of affront, of impropriety, a signal that the writer did not know an important social rule, did not know, in fact, that she was invoking a tradition that this very scholarly enterprise was set up to oppose.

While it may be reasonable to expect doctoral candidates to understand the antiromanticism so central to academic identity (though I would dispute that), it is questionable to confront young writers with this visceral bias. As a case in point I want to draw on an excerpt from David Bartholomae and Tony Petrosky's influential book, *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts*. The first assignment in the basic writing sequence asked students to write about a transforming experience and to reflect on the change he or she underwent. Here is one of the papers they received:

When I went to South Catholic I became friends with my Spanish teacher, his name was Brother Lawrence Dempsey. He was a great teacher and also assistant Coach to the wrestling team. One day he invited me down to the weight-training room, he showed me a few of his machines and how to use them. Since he was just starting to lift weights I wanted to start too. That October he wanted me to go out for the wrestling team. I was scared to death a pudgy kid like me.

He had such spirit and drive that I stuck with it. He always boosted me by saying "fire up." I really got into weights after the season and running. I became more

confident. As fast as it went the next year came I was down a weight class and ready to go. I beat 5 kids for the position and went first string varsity the rest of my junior year. At the end of the year we all got word that brother Larry was going to Jersey City. I was very disappointed because I know I'd miss him. I was losing confidence and almost gave up the sport. I then had to decide what to do. I was determined now more than before but this time make it on my own the next year I became team captain.

If you work hard and follow rules things will get better and better. (33–34)

This paper, according to Bartholomae and Petrosky, is a “*Boy’s Life* narrative,” in which the writer does not have the “muscularity of mind” to work against the ready-made commonplaces of adult authority. They conclude:

To the student who wrote the paper above, we can only say, “No, that’s not it,” and then do what we can to characterize what it is that he has done that we can’t accept. (34)

Now it seems to me that there is more we *can* say. We can learn more about the coach; we can learn more about how he was able to go on when the coach left; we can learn more about what he means by following the rules. We can show a form of human curiosity to a student who is telling us his version of how his life has changed.

Two things strike me about the response “No, that’s not it” and “What it is that . . . we can’t accept.” I think there is a sense of social impropriety: this language of exhortation is categorically inappropriate, a telltale sign of an unmuscular mind. And there is a lack of ethnographic interest on the part of the authors. The ethnographer *asks* why the writer chose to use this language. Is it possible that the student’s concluding statement was not a passive acceptance of adult language, but rather the affirmation of a code of belief that has paid off for him—and anyone who knows anything about wrestling must appreciate this transformation? Why in the world would he want to fight against truisms, against a code of effort, that has turned him into who he is? And how in the world could he know that this is what we want of him?

I would suggest that the teacher of this student is in what Mary Louise Pratt (1996) has famously termed a “contact zone.” A confrontation occurs when a marginalized discourse (that of exhortation) intrudes into an academic setting with its dominant antiromantic ethos. As I read Pratt, our first responsibility is reflexivity, the obligation of those in power to “turn back” and reflect on their own biases. We need to recognize that in this zone there is a power imbalance toward the side of the teacher; consequently, those possessing power need to step imaginatively outside a set of habitual preferences to appreciate the significance of the marginalized discourse form. This act of empathy is nonexistent

in the response to the Brother Lawrence paper. For example, the teacher could work within what seems the intent of the paper—to show the influence of Brother Lawrence—and help the writer “earn” the final claim. I think we can also expand the repertoire to show other means of self-presentation that may complicate this ethic of self-development, though that must be a slow and diplomatic process. And I think it must be one that recognizes the developmental function of these narratives of transformation-through-disciplined-effort in the lives of eighteen-year-olds.

ROMANTICISM AND THE DIVIDED PSYCHE OF ENGLISH STUDIES

To this point I have tried to suggest, if not thoroughly argue, that the culture of English Studies creates its own sense of elitism and professionalism by treating as a defective “other” the popular discourses—particularly sentimental discourse—in the wider culture. As a result we have opened up a gap between the way we and this wider culture perceive discursive power—and by extension, the way we and our students perceive discursive power. This form of self-identification also places a strain on those within the English Studies culture, for we too live in that wider culture that we define ourselves against. The result, I often think, is that we fail to connect (to borrow E.M. Forster’s term) the intellectual positions we take to the conduct of our lives. Marxists check their TIAA-CREF statements. We motivate ourselves with the same commonplaces we dismiss in the classroom as unreflective. Those who argue for the death of authorship sign their essays and negotiate for better royalty deals. Bob Connors’s favorite example occurred when Victor Vitanza, the ultimate post-modernist in composition studies, once claimed in frustration that a questioner had misunderstood his work—even though his philosophic position denied the possibility of such a determinate meaning.

The contradiction concerning sentimentalism usually takes a particular grammatical form, with a “but” at the hinge of the reaction.

“I usually find country music sappy, but I felt sad to see a clip of Tammy Wynette singing ‘Stand by Your Man.’”

“*Titanic* has the standard sentimental plot, but it’s worth seeing.”

This “but” construction provides two forms of justification. It can be used to signify that while the speaker has been powerfully affected, the reaction was artistically invoked (and not a response to a sentimental appeal). Or, the speaker can admit “leakage,” the appeal was in fact sentimental, but the response was only a momentary lapse.

We can see the first form of the construction in a letter that appeared in the *New Yorker* in response to several photographs from the war in Kosovo, including those of several Kosovo Albanians executed by Serb militia:

I am not a sentimentalist. And, being at the early end of Generation X, I am a member of a generation that has seen it all and is cynical about the media—news footage especially. But Gilles Peress's pictures do not lie. Perhaps, as Philip Gourevich writes in the accompanying text, it is because “none of the people in these pictures appear to notice the camera” that the photographs begin to cut through our culture of voyeuristic montage. (Smith 8)

While the writer wants to claim an emotional reaction to these powerful pictures, he can do so only with a fairly long preamble (and one wonders if the letter would have been published if it had been a more straightforward reaction). The writer must distance himself from the manipulative, “voyeuristic” mass media that is available to everyone; rather he is reacting to the art of a *New Yorker* photograph. In other words, the writer can distinguish between the sentimental, manipulative forms of mass media (and wouldn't fall for that kind of appeal) and the aesthetically appropriate response to these photographs. In fact, as Bourdieu would predict, he begins by attributing the power of the photographs not to the manifest subject matter (e.g., executed human beings) but to a formal quality—the focus of the subjects being photographed. The letter writer, then, is capable of emotional self-surveillance, of being sure that his emotional response was artfully evoked.

My second example is leakage pure and simple. It occurs in Nick Hornby's wonderful novel *High Fidelity*. The main character, Rob, is a music junkie who runs a barely profitable record shop that specializes in nonmainstream music. In fact, his identity is so geared to a particular taste in contemporary music that he will quit seeing a woman if he finds a Simon and Garfunkel album in her collection. As the book begins he is trying to recover from the breakup with his girlfriend Laura. In the section I will quote he is attending the concert of an American folksinger Marie LaSalle:

There are many songs that I've been trying to avoid since Laura went, but the song Marie LaSalle opens with, the song that makes me cry, is not one of them. The song that makes me cry has never made me cry before; in fact, the song that makes me cry used to make me puke. When it was a hit, I was in college, and Charlie and I used to roll our eyes and stick our fingers down our throats when somebody—invariably a geography student, or a girl training to be a primary school teacher (and I don't see how I can be accused of being snobbish if all you're doing is stating the plain and simple truth)—put it on the jukebox in the bar. The song that makes me cry is Marie LaSalle's version of Peter Frampton's “Baby I Love Your Way.”

Imagine standing there with Barry and Dick, in his Lemonheads T-shirt, and listening to a cover version of a Peter Frampton song, and blubbering. Peter Frampton! “Show Me the Way”! That perm. That stupid bag thing he used to blow into, which made his guitar sound like Donald Duck! *Frampton Comes Alive*, top of the American

charts for something like seven hundred and twenty years, and bought, presumably, by every brain-dead, coke-addled airhead in L.A. I understand that I was in dire need of symptoms to help me understand that I had been traumatized by recent events, but did they have to be this extreme? Couldn't God have settled for something mildly awful—an old Diana Ross hit, or an Elton John original? (61)

When Marie finishes the song she says, significantly, “I know I'm not supposed to like that song, but I do.”

SENTIMENTALITY AND THE LANGUAGE OF CONSOLATION

In almost every bookstore, there is a section variably called “Self-Help” or “Healing,” or “Inspiration.” While not overtly religious, many of the books in these sections serve their readers in the same way that religious tracts, pastoral counsel, and aids to religious reflection once served church members. In my experience, few forms of writing are less congenial to the academic than the books in these sections (even some of Elbow's books take on the flavor of self-help—and may seem academically suspect for that reason). These books seem profoundly conservative, unanalytic, homiletic, resting on established commonplaces; consequently they seem an affront to rationalism, an acquiescence to moral authority, a seeming denial of the capacity of language to create meaning through original expression. These books seem “soft,” entirely too unmuscular.

Yet, to the person in need of consolation, the academic insistence on critique and rationality provides little comfort. The commonplace (*our* commonplace) that “meaning” is nothing more than a transitory human construction denies the foundational yearning that sends people to this section of the bookstore. This conflict was dramatized for me in Susan Zimmerman's book, *Grief Dancers: A Journey into the Depths of the Soul*. The book describes the slow discovery that her second child, Kat, suffered from a little known, but profound disability called Rett's Syndrome. The child develops normally until about age one; then mental development stops, though the body continues to grow. The child loses control of her hands, which gesture spastically; she never can become toilet trained, her spine begins to curve; there is constant teeth grinding, spitting of food, and poor circulation in the extremities. I met Kat when she was about thirteen. Her wheelchair was located at the center of a large plastic floor covering that was spattered with her food. Zimmerman, a Yale-educated lawyer, described the extensive steps she and her husband took to gain a diagnosis and to secure treatment, even to the desperate point of nonmedical quackery.

In the conclusion to her book, Zimmerman admits that she came to the limits of rationality and had to move to acceptance of her situation and face the challenge of loving a daughter who could never love her back:

With Kat, I wanted to move on, to find answers and be gone. She stopped me. Like a sharp rock solidly wedged in a stream bed, always there as the river flows over it, she taught me about inescapable sorrow. She showed me that there are some things I can do and some things I can't. There are some things we choose in life and some things that choose us.

Quietly, she presented me with the ultimate test. Her deafening question rang in my ears year after year. Sometimes I tried to ignore it, to act as if it and she weren't there. But it always was, and she waited patiently for me to respond to it: did I have it in me to love without dreams—to love simply for the sake of love with no look to the future, no promises given, nothing expected in return? (241)

I maintain that this form of expressiveness is profoundly distasteful to the academic. The analogy between the natural world (the rock in the stream) and the human condition seems romantic and dated. Expressions like “soul,” “inescapable sorrow,” “to love without dreams” seem to evoke another century and sensibility. We resist the homiletic style, the way she seems to rest on the commonplace—“There are some things we choose in life, and there are some things that choose us.” Isn't this the kind of “wrap-up” we want students to avoid. But in fairness, we also need to ask, “What language do we use when we reach bottom, when the nightmare becomes real?” Do we create “new meaning” or do we seek out commonplaces from the very folk tradition that we so easily denigrate? Discourse of this type recognizes the limits of originality and ingenuity. Paradoxically, Zimmerman is driven to write to make sense of her grief, but the consolation comes in a rejection of rationality. At the end of the book, she returns to a starkly simple formulation of her dilemma: could she love this child who could never love her, never even know her. The wonder, she concludes, is that the challenge was always there and she had failed to see it. What the situation required was not intellectual complexity (which drew her away from the real situation) but a form of moral fortitude—“Do I have it in me?”

A LANGUAGE FOR LIVING AND DYING

Last summer, I was visiting my parents, both in their eighties. In fact, my mother was born only a few months after the Titanic sank, a month before Woodrow Wilson was elected President. She is, as she says, getting her affairs in order. She and my father recently bought their cemetery plot, and on this visit she asked me to go and see it with her, a trip I had been dreading. In fact, it was not the heart wrenching moment I imagined. We looked at the stones around her plot (“Look, the Weyrichs—would that be Sam's parents? He was on our track team.”) And for an illuminating instant I had a sense of the memorial function of cemeteries.

Later that day, we were sitting at the kitchen table and somehow the conversation turned to poetry (my Mom had taught high school English for years). “No one, of course, reads William Cullen Bryant these days,” she said. Then my mother, who now has trouble remembering the movie she saw last week, recited, without faltering, the last stanza of “Thanatopsis,” which she had memorized as a young schoolgirl:

So live, that when thy summons comes to join
The innumerable caravan, which moves
To the mysterious realm, where each shall take
His chamber in the silent halls of death,
Thou go not, like a quarry slave at night,
Scourged to his dungeon, but sustained and soothed
By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave,
Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch
About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.

Then she said almost fiercely, “I know the poem is trite, but it speaks to me—about living and dying.”

I am not trying to claim that Bryant should be added to the canon or that we, at the beginning of this century, can read him the way my mother read him at the beginning of the last. But I do want to make a claim for what Jane Tompkins calls the cultural work, even the moral work, such language performs. Attention must be paid to any form of language so powerful that it can reconcile someone to the loss of life itself.

In cases like this, one seems to come to the limits of the believing game because we are confronted with belief itself, unconditional by its very nature. Powerful because it *is* unconditional. A few weeks ago I visited a high school friend, whose wife had just finished a grueling program in Christian counseling at the local Brethren college. I asked her if her certificate would allow her to work in a non-Christian setting, a school or a private practice. “Yes,” she said, “but that’s not how I want to work. If I’m working with someone, I want to tell them that they’re not alone. That they have help in God. And we’ll get down on our knees and pray. That’s the strength of Christian counseling—you’re not alone. To give up the religious part doesn’t make sense to me. It’s the basis of what I do.”

Another high school friend agreed, “Like when my father was dying of cancer. It was so hard, but I can’t imagine how people can go through that alone, without the church or belief.” I listened, as if across a great divide, envious of an assurance that I don’t feel and unable to feel what it must be like to have that assurance.

The believing game, for all its power, is still an intellectual stance, a vantage point, and a partner to doubt. While the believing game can help us become more open to belief, it differs fundamentally from belief itself, particularly religious belief, which is far more than a stance and hardly the coequal partner of doubt. Religious belief is the antithesis of doubt, the surmounting of doubt. Consequently, the believing game still keeps the knower on the outside of belief, since the belief Elbow calls for is provisional and strategic, rather than foundational. The same could be said for James, who always seems outside the house of faith, peeking in.

I propose that one great challenge for composition teachers is to continue to struggle with the polarities, what Elbow calls the contraries, of doubt and belief. How do we reconcile our need to be skeptical—in a culture that markets images and desires—with our equal need for locating a ground of belief, what Tillich called a “ground of being”? This, I think, is one difficult and noble assignment Elbow has passed on to us.

3 ELBOW'S RADICAL AND POSTMODERN POLITICS

ELIZABETH A. FLYNN

The work of expressivist (sometimes referred to as *expressionist*) compositionists in general and Peter Elbow in particular has been criticized for its attention to the personal dimensions of writing and to the individual rather than to social or political dimensions of reality, often by critics with a Marxist or Marxist feminist orientation. James Berlin in "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class," for instance, finds that, for Elbow, power resides within the individual. And although Berlin admits that Elbow's pedagogy includes a denunciation of economic, political, and social pressures to conform, Berlin sees that the form of resistance implied by Elbow's world view is limited because it is always construed in individual terms (486–87). Collective action, a strategy that Berlin supports given his Marxist orientation, poses a threat to individual integrity in Elbow's work, according to Berlin (487). Lester Faigley, citing Berlin, speaks of Elbow as belonging to the "moderate wing" of expressivists because he defines power in terms of the individual (58). Susan Jarrett in "Feminism and Composition: The Case for Conflict," also drawing on Berlin's analysis of Elbow, asserts that the emphasis on the individual in expressive pedagogy such as that of Peter Elbow and others has "cooptive potential." She says, "The complexities of social differentiation and inequity in late-twentieth-century capitalist society are thrown into the shadows by the bright spotlight focused on the individual" (109). Jarrett also sees Elbow's perspective as a form of naive expressivism that associates teaching with maternal nurturing, associations that fail to make any reference to "the psychological complexities around the conjunction of mothering and teaching" (112). Elbow and other expressivists, according to Jarrett, also fail to recognize that our culture regards mothers with "deep ambivalence" (113).¹

Although Elbow's work is often associated with pedagogies that ignore social difference and social inequities, I argue here that his work is actually considerably more politically progressive than it might at first seem. His earlier work is in many ways more radical than moderate, and his later work moves in the direction of postmodernism. I suggest that his earlier work is radical in that it critiques modernist Enlightenment epistemologies and it challenges structures that are deeply embedded in our culture. This work can be usefully situated

within the contexts of nineteenth-century Romanticism and twentieth-century feminist expressivist composition and contrasted with nineteenth- and twentieth-century manifestations of Marxism, a perspective that accepts rather than challenges modernist Enlightenment thought. In his early work, Elbow repudiates modernist academic structures, methods, and discourse and calls for a reduction in the authority of teachers. I also argue, however, that Elbow is careful, especially in his later work, to acknowledge that modernist structures and approaches can coexist with radical ones, and hence his perspective in some ways moves in the direction of postmodernism. Surely representations of him as a naive idealist or as one unconcerned about diversity or inclusivity are inaccurate.² To demonstrate that Elbow's earlier work is politically radical, I will discuss it within the contexts of early nineteenth-century Romanticism and expressivist feminist composition and contrast it with late nineteenth-century Marxism. To demonstrate that his later work moves in the direction of postmodernism, I will situate it within the context of Bakhtinian postformalism and postmodern feminism.

First, though, I will contrast the three perspectives that inform my argument: (1) modernism, especially modernist Marxism as a late nineteenth-century inheritor of the Enlightenment as well as a perspective that still informs work in the present; (2) antimodernism, including early nineteenth-century Romanticism and late twentieth-century feminist expressivist composition; (3) late twentieth-century postmodernism, including postmodern feminism, as a critique of modernism rather than an opponent of it.³

Relating Elbow's work to these three different perspectives, all of which have epistemological, pedagogical, and political implications, is a challenge since Elbow himself carefully avoids labels and since his work is complex and often defies easy classification. I nevertheless take the risk of doing so in order to make evident that his work is neither politically moderate nor an unchanging manifestation of expressivism. I also demonstrate that Elbow does not always focus exclusively on individuals. Situating Elbow's work in relation to political and intellectual traditions such as the Enlightenment, romanticism, Marxism, and postmodernism is crucial at this moment in the development of the field of rhetoric and composition because the histories of the field are too often insular, disciplinary, and unconnected to larger political and intellectual movements within other fields.

MODERN, ANTIMODERN, POSTMODERN

Modernism derives from the Enlightenment with its commitments to empiricism and rationalism. A key figure in the development of Enlightenment thought is Descartes, who associates human essence with disembodied thought.

For Descartes, the search for truth begins with skepticism and is accomplished through cultivation of the mind. The Enlightenment also gave rise to the scientific revolution and the scientific method, with its belief in the objectivity and value neutrality of the observer. As numerous contemporary thinkers have pointed out, however, the Enlightenment is also associated with such reprehensible developments as colonialism, racism, and imperialism and with the development of repressive social and pedagogical structures and institutions. Michel Foucault makes clear in *Discipline and Punish*, for instance, that the Enlightenment resulted in the development of penal structures and academic disciplines and disciplinary structures that are punitive, coercive, and elitist.

It is common to associate late nineteenth-century Marxism and its twentieth-century manifestations with Enlightenment modernism. John Trimbur in "Agency and the Death of the Author: A Partial Defense of Modernism," for example, speaks of "Marxism's modernist metanarrative" (289). Working against the widespread perception among postmodernists that the Enlightenment was politically reactionary, his essay suggests that there are aspects of the Enlightenment, namely the French Revolution, that were valuable. He associates the Revolution with "the emergence of the masses as subjects of their own history" (294). Trimbur considers the work of Marx himself to be modernist, as well as the work of twentieth-century Marxists such as Walter Benjamin, Berthold Brecht, and others (296).

Like Trimbur, I see Marxism as deriving from eighteenth-century modernist Enlightenment commitments to scientific inquiry and to rationality and thus as a late nineteenth-century manifestation of modernism. For Marxists, inequity is a structural problem caused by an economic system that oppresses the proletariat and favors those who control the means of production. In a pedagogical context, teachers become intellectuals committed to changing the social and economic order through a process of making students aware of inequities and sending them forth to make changes beyond the classroom. Marx's extensive writings form the basis for modern social scientific research, and Marx makes clear in his work that he values objective scientific methods and rationality. Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* speak of the inquiry as a study of people in "their actual, empirically perceptible process of development under definite conditions" (119). They are optimistic about the possibility for progress and improvement and link that progress to scientific and technological advancement. "It is only possible to achieve real liberation in the real world by employing real means, that slavery cannot be abolished without the steam-engine and the mule and spinning-jenny, serfdom cannot be abolished without improved agriculture" (133).

Marxist and Marxist feminist pedagogies of the kind advocated by Berlin, Faigley, and Jarrett aim to make students aware of social inequities and

encourage them to become participants in social transformation. These pedagogies aim to teach students methods of social critique, including critique of the university with its inevitable commitments to capitalism and its inevitable support of hierarchical structures. Change will be accomplished by redeploying the methods and procedures advocated by the modern university for progressive political ends. The transformative strategy of Marxist pedagogue Paulo Freire, for instance, is to teach middle-class, well-educated, and highly literate social activists how to enable the rural poor of South America to become literate. In a Marxist pedagogy, the teacher plays a crucial role because it is the teacher who is an intellectual and critic, responsible for enlightening uninformed and uncritical students.

Romanticism is antimodern in that it reacted against Enlightenment thought by challenging the authority of scientific knowledge and the Enlightenment belief that technological development is necessarily beneficial and progressive. The Romantic Movement resisted scientific and technological advancement with its concomitant commitments to objectivity and rationality, and called for a return to nature and to contemplation as a way of healing individual depression and social alienation. The Romantic poets dwell upon themes of dejection, melancholy, isolation from nature and from others, industrialization, urbanization, and overpopulation and see a return to a simpler past as a way of dealing with a present and future dominated by uncontrolled scientific and technological advancement. Common settings for Romantic poems are often medieval castles and remote islands, and common characters are rustics, shepherds, and individuals educated through communion with nature rather than through formal educational systems and structures.

Romanticism does have a politics, but it differs from that of traditions influenced by Enlightenment thought. Wordsworth and other Romantics saw promise in revolutionary movements like the French Revolution with its (failed) attempt to replace monarchy with democracy. But instead of welcoming scientific and technological development as the instrument of change, the Romantic Movement opposed it, seeing such development as the cause of individual and social problems and advocating withdrawal, resistance, and the return to a simpler economy and lifestyle. For Romantics, social institutions impede progress and growth. The child is the father of the man because the child is closer to nature, less tainted by the alienating effects of education and work.⁴

Feminist expressivist composition is a late twentieth-century manifestation of antimodernism. Feminist expressivist compositionists see modernist educational institutions, with their emphasis on evaluation and objective assessment, as impeding the development of writers. Feminist expressivist compositionists emphasize, instead, that good writing is the expression of a relatively

autonomous self. For them, writers will develop best in encouraging environments that emphasize the process of writing and rewriting over criticism of the final product. Feminist expressivist compositionists, including Wendy Goulston, Mary A. Quinn, Rebecca Faery, and Cinthia Gannett, advocate listening to the student writer and encouraging student writers to shape and reshape their work until it is understandable to a reader. They often recommend pedagogical strategies such as journals, freewriting, and preliminary writing activities that foster free association and digression. Their work has been influenced by feminists Nancy Chodorow, Mary Belenky (coauthor of *Women's Ways of Knowing*), Carol Gilligan, and Sara Ruddick, scholars who identify and valorize women's different developmental, intellectual, and ethical perspectives and who advocate collaborative learning and the creation of nurturing environments where connection rather than competition is emphasized. If modern perspectives are androcentric, emphasizing detachment, objectivity, and judgment, antimodern ones are gynocentric, emphasizing engagement, subjectivity, and nurturing.

While antimodernism opposes modernism directly, postmodernism critiques modernism without directly opposing it. It looks for alternatives to Enlightenment commitments to objectivity, detachment, and the scientific method, without resorting to antimodern subjectivity and opposition to science. A good example is Bakhtinian dialogism. Bakhtin is careful to distinguish his position from a Romantic one. He is not advocating individualistic expression. Rather, he describes speakers as engaging in dialogue in complex intertextual situations with other speakers and writers, past and present. These dialogues are multivoiced, heteroglossic, and hence dialogic. For Bakhtin, such dialogue disrupts static, univocal authoritative discourse and thereby serves a democratizing function. Within a pedagogical context, postmodernists attempt to find alternatives to traditional academic discourse, sometimes recommending the creation of hybrid forms that interweave objective and subjective elements. Another strategy is to introduce students to traditional academic discourse while pointing out its limitations, namely its disembodiedness and its situatedness, despite its attempt to appear value neutral and objective.

One manifestation of a shift toward a postmodern perspective within the humanities is what is often referred to as the autobiographical-turn characteristic of discourse in a variety of fields, a turn that is often postmodern feminist in orientation. Suzanne Fleischman in "Gender, the Personal, and the Voice of Scholarship: A Viewpoint," for example, describes the widespread attempt in a variety of fields such as law, art history, media studies, anthropology, sociology, women's studies, literature, and even the hard sciences, to restore to

scholarship the person of the scholar. She observes, as have numerous others, that scholarly writing arose out of the context of rationalism and empiricism and aims at objectivity, transparency, and authority (977). It is believed to be a transparent transmitter of natural facts. Fleischman finds that the term *scientific voice* is synonymous with *scholarly voice* (978). According to Fleischman, academic writing is characterized by (1) salient use of the passive voice; (2) heavy use of nominalizations; (3) use of the preposition *in* rather than *by* for citing authorities; (4) use of authors' initials in place of first names (979-81). She provides numerous examples of attempts to disrupt traditional academic discourse by inserting the personal into it in a variety of ways. She observes that some disciplines, especially the social sciences, history, and cultural studies, lend themselves to personalized writing, but that it is in literary studies that the "autobiographical turn" has had the greatest impact. Here personalized writing takes the form of personal writing, autobiographical writing, performative writing, or narrative criticism (996). According to Fleischman, personalized writing alters the founding metaphor for writing from the lecture to the conversation (983). Some work by postmodern feminist compositionists deals explicitly with ways of having students incorporate personal narrative into their writing. Lillian Bridwell-Bowles in "Discourse and Diversity: Experimental Writing Within the Academy," influenced by Kristeva and other French feminists, explores ways in which teachers can invite students to imagine new forms of discourse, new kinds of academic essays. According to Bridwell-Bowles, these new forms include "a more personal voice, an expanded use of metaphor, a less rigid methodological framework." Such a writing process allows for a combination of hypothesizing and reporting data and the expression of multiple truths (44).

Each perspective—modernist, antimodernist, and postmodernist—has a different politics (and a different epistemology and a different rhetoric). Modernism gave rise to the creation of democratic institutions, the scientific method, and traditional academic discourse, as well as to the development of oppressive institutions and structures such as racism, colonialism, and imperialism. Antimodernism, in contrast, reacts against modernist disembodiedness, skepticism, and objectivism by emphasizing spirituality, psychic renewal, and subjective creation and observation. Postmodernism does not oppose modernism but recognizes its considerable limitations and attempts to find alternatives to its structures, institutions, and genres. I argue, then, that it is useful to situate Elbow's work and his political orientation within the contexts of both antimodernism and postmodernism. Doing so illuminates his political and intellectual orientations and clarifies important traditions within the field of rhetoric and composition.

ELBOW'S RADICAL EXPRESSIVISM

Elbow's earlier work is antimodern and hence radical in that it directly challenges deeply entrenched ways of thinking, rooted in Enlightenment epistemologies. In describing what he calls "the doubting game" and "the believing game" as opposing perspectives and privileging the latter, he calls for a pedagogy that attempts to minimize the oppressive authority of teachers and encourage the development of cooperative, collective, and relational ways of thinking and being. If a modern pedagogical perspective is committed to objectivist detachment, skepticism, and faith in scientific development and technological progress, an antimodern one is rooted in subjective expression, believing, and emotional commitment. If modernists, including Marxists, see that change is best accomplished through a transformation of existing structures, antimodernists like the early Elbow call for resisting the alienating effects of traditional structures, including educational ones, by attempting to work outside them or at least attempting to mitigate their damaging effects.

The title of *Writing Without Teachers* makes evident Elbow's radical expressivist conviction that learning is best accomplished outside of modernist educational structures and without the aid of teachers. Students need to learn how to write independent of their teachers, who may inhibit them by giving them intimidating models and constraining rules. What students need to learn to do, at least initially, is to write freely, on their own. They need to be able to make mistakes, take risks, generate imperfect text. Elbow explains in the preface to the book that he is writing primarily for individuals attempting to learn to write outside a classroom context (viii). If his methods are used within a classroom context, he explains, the teacher's authority must be reduced, if not eliminated entirely. Elbow minimizes his own authority by writing along with his students and, in a sense, becoming a student. "I can only set up something like the teacherless class in my own class if I adopt more the role of a learner and less the role of a teacher." Elbow explains, further, that good writing teachers are exceedingly rare. Students, he says, do not need teachers in order to learn (ix).

Although Elbow, in his early work, does tend to focus on the individual as opposed to the social dimensions of writing, there are foreshadowings of his turn toward postmodern social perspectives on writing as early as *Writing Without Teachers* (1973). The book was published well before social construction was in vogue in the field of composition studies; he nevertheless describes a meaning-making process that is communal. He sees that meaning is constantly "curbed" by the speech community of the speaker (154). He recognizes, however, that there is never only one speech community but many overlapping ones (155).

Meaning in ordinary language consists of delicate, flexible transactions among people in overlapping speech communities—peculiar transactions governed by unspoken agreements to abide by unspecified, constantly changing rules as to what meaning to build into what words and phrases. (156)

Words, then, though capable of extreme precision among capable players, “nevertheless float and drift all the time” (156). He speaks appreciatively of the work of Thomas Kuhn and sees perception and thinking as acts of construction (172).

The antimodern philosophical and political foundation of the views that inform Elbow's radical perspective is clearest in the essay appended to *Writing without Teachers*, “The Doubting Game and the Believing Game—An Analysis of the Intellectual Enterprise.” Elbow ultimately affirms that the doubting game, which he associates with Enlightenment thought, and the believing game, which is described as opposing Enlightenment thought, are, though entirely different, both necessary and interdependent. His position is a radical one, however, in that he is primarily concerned with pointing out limitations of the doubting game and strengths of the believing game. He feels that the doubting game has dominated our culture for centuries, and so efforts must be made to reinstate the believing game and to diminish the authority of the doubting game. His ideal seems to be a balance between the two, something he thinks we have not achieved at the present.

In pointing out the limitations of the doubting game, Elbow is actually pointing out the limitations of Enlightenment rationality and empiricism, given that he makes a direct connection between the doubting game and a Cartesian world view. For him, Descartes is the ultimate doubter. He says of Descartes, “He felt the way to proceed to the truth was to doubt everything. This spirit has remained the central tradition in western civilization's notion of the rational process” (150). According to Elbow, the scientific method depends on falsification and on dividing things into classes (165). It is a dialectic of propositions. It attacks the problem of the self-interest of the perceiver by attempting to “weed out the self” (171). The goals are to make thinking mechanistic and impersonal, and to achieve objectivity (172). Its counterpart in literary studies is the New Criticism, in which meaning is located entirely in the text and a work of art is characterized by coherence among elements (159).

The believing game, in contrast, deals not with universals but with the particular, the unique (165). It is the opposite of the doubting game in that its method is to affirm, believe, not to argue (165). In literary criticism, this amounts to making better readings available rather than discrediting bad readings (166). If the doubting game is a dialectic of propositions, the believing

game is a dialectic of experience (171). It proceeds by indirection, by believing in all assertions presented (148). It is not adversarial in that there is an attempt to consider and believe in all perspectives one at a time rather than to compare and rank them. The believer looks not for errors but for truths and then commits herself to them, tries to see things from the perspective of the proponent of the truth. The self is not extricated as it is in the doubting game but is inserted, projected. An assertion is not analyzed logically but extended through metaphor, analogy, and associations (149).

Elbow's doubting game, associated as it is with modernist science, technology, rationality, empiricism, and with Enlightenment ideals and procedures, involves an acceptance of the dominant values within our culture. The believing game, in contrast, with its opposition to Enlightenment ideals, is radical and resistant. Although Elbow does not emphasize the gendered nature of the two games, the doubting game seems to have a masculine valence, the believing game a feminine one. The extent to which the two perspectives are dichotomous and oppositional becomes clear in Elbow's list of their characteristics (178–79):

Doubting Game

extrication, disengagement
 detachment, perspective
 rejecting or fending off what is new
 closing, clenching
 literal
 rigid
 stubborn, hanging on
 impulse for security
 centered, unmoving self
 learning to be sharper, finer, more
 piercing, harder, tougher
 aggressive: meeting threat by
 beating it down
 deflating
 competitive
 solitary or adversary activity
 talking, noise, arguing

Believing Game

involvement
 projection, commitment
 willingness to explore what is new
 opening, loosening
 metaphorical
 flexible
 yielding
 impulse for risk
 floating self
 learning to be larger, more encompassing,
 softer, more absorbent
 nonaggressive: meeting threat by bending,
 incorporating; nonviolent
 supporting
 cooperative
 working in a group
 listening, silence, agreeing

Elbow is clearly promoting the terms on the right and making evident the limitations of the terms on the left. The terms on the left are negative in tone; those on the right are considerably more positive. Society will be improved, Elbow suggests, if it embraces antimodern communal and collective values that result in cooperation, listening, agreeing, and nonaggression, qualities that are associated with women's ways of knowing by the *Women's Ways of Knowing*

collective, Chodorow, Gilligan, and others. In addition to learning to disengage and detach—modernist activities promoted by the scientific method—we need to learn to become involved and committed. In addition to learning to develop literal approaches to language and closed interpretations, as in a modernist pedagogy, we need to learn to appreciate metaphorical language and open-ended interpretations. In addition to developing modernist conceptions of the self that are centered, we need to learn antimodernist processes of decentering. Elbow makes clear that he is not calling for an elimination of the modernist doubting characteristics. Both believing and doubting are important and necessary. What he ultimately affirms is coexistence of the two, and such coexistence anticipates his later movement in the direction of postmodern epistemologies and politics.

Elbow's characterization of the believing game as the opposite of the doubting game as discussed above reveals his Romantic propensities, as does his use of metaphors that suggest natural growth and organic processes. He speaks in *Writing Without Teachers* of "growing your meaning" (21) or trying to "help words grow" (23) or treating words "as though they are potentially able to grow" (24). He compares writing to riding a horse, "which is constantly changing beneath you," or to Proteus, "changing while you hang on to him" (25). He says, "It is characteristic of living organisms, cell creatures, to unfold according to a set of stages that must come in order" (43). Writing, for Elbow, is a natural process that necessitates careful nurturing. It will be unsuccessful if it is forced or coerced. There are no rules that can be followed and no procedure that will be the same for everyone. The successful writing class is a "culture to be preserved. Yogurt" (139).

Elbow's antimodern radical political views are often implied rather than directly stated in *Writing Without Teachers*. In *What is English?* a description of the 1987 English Coalition Conference, they are also often implied, given that he is frequently describing the opinions of other participants at the conference. In many ways, however, the book is a reflection of his own pedagogical and political perspectives, perspectives that are evolving and that sometimes differ in emphasis from his earlier work. In *What is English?* Elbow more often brings up political issues, no doubt because they were on the official agenda and in the air. He speaks, for instance, of language-oriented teaching and learning as aimed at making students better citizens (32). He also attends to issues regarding linguistic differences and focuses on the issue of tracking, which he clearly sees, as do other conference attendees, as elitist and counterproductive. "As experienced teachers in tracked and nontracked situations, conference participants asserted that the same educational approach is right for both the best and the worst students: a learned-focused, interactive approach" (35).⁵

What is English? provides Elbow an opportunity to discuss the similarities and differences between his own pedagogical and political perspective and that of colleagues who have a Marxist or cultural orientation. Elbow describes an exchange between himself and Gary Waller, in which Waller suggested that Elbow wasn't doing enough justice to the constraints and limits on human beings; he saw Elbow as implying naively that we write, whereas Waller emphasizes that we are written. Elbow responds, characteristically, that he prefers to define the student as a subject rather than an object (19). Later in the book, he reflects on differences between his own position and that of Waller and Kathleen McCormick. He sees McCormick as emphasizing that "our interpretations are a product of our situatedness—our class, gender, interests, culture, and so forth; we don't write, we are written on." Elbow works out a compromise. We are at once free and bound. He attempts to find language that does justice to both sides of the contradiction (83).

Antimodern expressivists such as Elbow are not Romantic poets; they are working in a different era and a different context. It is useful nevertheless to point out their commonalities with the Romantic Movement and with the perspectives of individual Romantic poets. Expressivists are committed to democratic principles and to social and political equality, but their vision of why inequality exists differs from that of Marxists, as do their solutions to the problem. For expressivists such as Elbow, the educational institution within which the teacher works is a repressive structure, with its uncritical acceptance of the promise of scientific and technological progress, its concomitant commitment to industrialization and urbanization, and the inevitable alienation that results from such acceptance and commitment. From an expressivist perspective, teachers are the representatives of the modernist educational system and thus reinforce its values and socialization processes. Students will be better off if the authority of teachers is limited. For an expressivist, the educational structure works against the development of writing abilities because it is alienating and intimidating. The expressivist sometimes suggests that the best thing a teacher can do, given the debilitating nature of the modern university, is to absent herself, allow students to find their inner voices, their own emotional and spiritual depths. Students will accomplish this through reflection, contemplation, removal from the pressures and considerable constraints of modern educational structures and processes. Marxists, in contrast, tend to emphasize the importance of the teacher since the teacher is the enlightened intellectual who can awaken students to the realities of political and social inequities. Marxists tend to see the transformative potential of teachers and educational institutions, whereas radicals like Elbow tend not to.

As I have suggested, contrary to a widespread view within the field of composition studies, the work of Peter Elbow is neither politically moderate nor

entirely individualistic. Rather, it is in many ways radical and can usefully be compared to the ideals of the Romantic Movement and of expressivist feminist compositionists and can also be contrasted with Marxist political perspectives. In privileging the believing game over the doubting game, Elbow challenges pervasive modernist Enlightenment thinking and structures and calls for anti-modern approaches that emphasize relationality and connectedness. His early work evolves and matures, however, in response to reactions of individuals to these early perspectives, as well as to his experience as a scholar and teacher, and a changing climate within the field as a whole that focuses directly and explicitly on the political dimensions of writing.

ELBOW AND POSTMODERNISM

As Elbow's work matures, it moves in the direction of a politics that has more of a postmodern cast, a perspective that is anticipated in Elbow's discussion of the importance of both the doubting and the believing games in *Writing Without Teachers* and in his attention to the social, as well as the individual, nature of writing. A good example of his evolving perspective is the introduction to his 1994 collection, *Landmark Essays on Voice and Writing*, entitled "About Voice and Writing." Unlike *Writing Without Teachers* and *Writing With Power*, the essay makes use of traditional academic style and is clearly aimed at other academics. He also provides a more fully developed explanation of how his perspective relates to other intellectual traditions than he did in *Writing Without Teachers*. He does not label what he calls "discourse as voiced utterance" expressivist or "discourse as semiotic text" objectivist (xii). Nor does he associate the two perspectives with the doubting or the believing game. Clearly, though, "discourse as voiced utterance" can be associated with the believing game and with subjectivist epistemologies; "discourse as text or semiosis" with the doubting game and with objectivist epistemologies. He also makes even clearer here than he does in his discussion of the doubting and the believing games that both perspectives are important and necessary. He is not calling for the elimination of objectivist perspectives.

In the objectivist perspective, which he associates in *Writing Without Teachers* with Enlightenment thought and which he now associates with the New Criticism and with structuralism and semiotics, discourse is seen as text, and language is disembodied (xii). Through this lens, people, the historical drama, the body, the actual person is removed. Elbow fully admits that it can be useful to look at natural language as pure disembodied meaning. He acknowledges that the New Critics made us better readers. He finds that semiotics, sign theory, and structuralism in linguistics and literary criticism also showed us how to see impersonal patterns in literature or other forms of discourse (xiii).

The textuality metaphor, he says, highlights the visual and spatial features of language and emphasizes language as an abstract, universal system (xiv). It calls attention to the commonalities between one person's discourse and that of others and of the culture (xiv).

But Elbow's primary aim, of course, is to demonstrate that the other lens, the one that emphasizes that discourse is always historically situated and always comes from persons and is addressed to others, is also extremely useful (xiii). And here he departs from his earlier position in *Writing Without Teachers* by associating his preferred perspective with the work of Russian post formalist Mikhail Bakhtin. From the "discourse as voiced utterance" perspective, sound and hearing are emphasized over vision, and linguistic meaning is seen as moving historically through time rather than existing simultaneously in space. Seeing discourse as voiced utterance calls attention to the differences from one person to another (xiv). There is a problem, he thinks, if discourse is always referred to as "text" and never as "voice" (xiii). He invokes Bakhtin, who he says describes discourse in terms of "voices" and "speakers" and "listeners." He leaves no doubt that he is primarily concerned with celebrating the "discourse-as-voice lens" but he also makes clear that he is not trying to eliminate the "discourse-as-text lens." (xiv). "About Voice and Writing" makes evident Elbow's movement in the direction of a postmodern epistemology and politics. In the essay, it becomes clear that the doubting game is related to intellectual traditions such as semiotics and structuralism. It also becomes clear that the believing game is related to Bakhtinian post-formalism.

CONCLUSION

Elbow's work has been misunderstood because its intellectual, cultural, and political underpinnings have not been sufficiently elaborated. He has been characterized as being concerned only with the individual divorced from social and political context and hence as politically moderate. It is certainly true that his politics are not Marxist or Marxist feminist in orientation. He does not share the political framework that informs the work of James Berlin, Lester Faigley, and Susan Jarrett. His work is nevertheless informed by a progressive and often a radical political perspective that is antimodern, has its roots in the Romantic Movement, and can be usefully compared to feminist expressivist composition. And given that he moves, especially in his later work, toward an acceptance of both subjective and objective epistemologies, his work becomes increasingly postmodern in orientation. Rather than espousing beliefs that are hopelessly out of date, Elbow's earlier work is radical, and his later work parallels the autobiographical and postmodern turns within composition studies, feminist studies, and the humanities as a whole.

NOTES

1. Miriam Brody in *Manly Writing*, in contrast, associates Elbow's work with male aggression rather than female nurturing. She argues that Elbow associates doubt with femininity and belief with masculinity, privileging the latter, and finds that Elbow valued "masculine control and force of meaning" in writing (183). Brody concludes her discussion of Elbow by associating him with "phallic writing" and with initiating the writer into "the power of the fun" (187). It would seem that Elbow cannot win. He is criticized for associating teaching with female nurturing and for associating writing with male aggression.
2. Elbow is not a naive idealist, but he does see himself as a visionary, as his title "Writing Assessment in the 21st Century: A Utopian View" makes clear.
3. I provide fuller explanations of these perspectives in "Rescuing Postmodernism" and in *Feminism Beyond Modernism*.
4. There is by no means consensus within the scholarly community about the nature of the politics of the Romantic Movement or about its relationship to Marxism. Forest Pyle in *The Ideology of Imagination* makes a connection between Marxist concern for the contradiction between matter and spirit and this contradiction as addressed and thematized by the Romantic imagination (11). John Williams in *Wordsworth: Romantic Poetry and Revolution Politics*, in contrast, establishes a connection between Wordsworth's politics and eighteenth-century political protest, finding that "his reiterated appeal through nature to a transcendent, unifying moral authority governing political action . . . suggest the absorption of political principles rehearsed and fiercely debated in the shadow of the Glorious Revolution" (8). I find more compelling, however, Carl Woodring's characterization of the Romantics in *Politics in English Romantic Poetry* as emphasizing "private emotion, the individual, the particular, the local; organic growth, organic unity, imagination, symbol, and myth" (326). Nicholas Roe in *The Politics of Nature* speaks of the disillusionment that resulted from the failure of the French Revolution and the extent to which this turned the Romantics toward a politics of nature, a politics that emphasized the private experiences of friendship and love (153).
5. Elbow makes clear his opposition to tracking in "Writing Assessment in the 21st Century: A Utopian View."

4 ELBOW AS ICON

EDWARD M. WHITE
SHANE BORROWMAN

This dialogue is between an emeritus faculty member with long acquaintance with Peter Elbow and his work (White) and a graduate student (Borrowman) completing his doctorate, in a field shaped in part by Elbow's work. The old and the new, so to speak.

White: Fred was a big blustery graduate student, without wisdom or knowledge, but knowing in all the wrong ways. For instance, he knew the names of professional books and regularly brought them up in class discussion but had never read any of them “personally.” All show and no substance. Our program in California is, like most English M.A. programs, dominated by a canny group of women, most of them teachers, mature, supportive, and kind. But Fred, with his overbearing manner, was too much for them, and they kept trying to puncture his posturing with a small series of practical jokes.

So I was not surprised when Fred burst into my office late one afternoon with astonishing news. “Did you know,” he said breathlessly, “there is no Peter Elbow?”

I had learned, as had his fellow graduate students, that Fred had absolutely no sense of humor.

“Well, that *is* a surprise,” I replied. I told him that I had known someone named Peter Elbow ever since we had briefly crossed paths as graduate students at Harvard. Who could that have been? I wondered aloud, and who could have written all those books and articles signed by him? And I had just finished editing two collections of essays, each including one by Elbow. “Seems a little hard to believe,” I concluded.

Fred was not put off in the least by my narrative. “Don’t you see,” he went on, under full throttle, “whenever someone wants to write about expressive writing, they just use that name. It’s just a convenience, not a person.”

Fred was so proud of his insider information that I had to admire him. He knew what “Elbow” meant even if he was clueless about who Elbow really is.

“Tell you what,” I said, “suppose I e-mail the person I think is Peter Elbow and ask him if he exists? Maybe he can clear up this little mystery.”

Fred was dubious, but I sent a quick post on the spot to Peter, asking him if he were real or not. Seemed the least I could do.

Peter's response was, as always, quick. After an amused glance at the gullibility and nervous competitiveness of graduate students, he allowed that he probably did exist. "And if I didn't," he went on, "they'd have to invent me." He had something there. For "Peter Elbow" has indeed become more—and other and sometimes much less—than the pleasant man we have come to know, the charming human being with so much to say about writing and English in general. He has become a locus for an approach to writing instruction and writing assessment, an icon of sorts, almost indispensable to our discussions of pedagogy. When we point and click on the "Elbow" icon, just what do we get?

Borrowman: As an undergraduate, I was an English major in a program with a very clear sense of its own purpose: preparing future teachers for work at the primary and secondary levels of education. I took my fair share of literature courses, but because of the clear-sightedness of those who guided the program, professors such as Drs. Dana Elder and Larry Beason, I came to composition very early in my education. Strangely enough, I don't seem to have met Peter Elbow's work directly.

Like most long-time graduate students, I have amassed a mountain of books on my field, all of which have followed me from house to house, state to state, bachelorhood to marriage. Because of my lengthy history with these texts I can, with a fair degree of certainty, pinpoint the textual moment at which I first encountered "Peter Elbow."

In their article "A Variation on Peer Critiquing: Peer Editing as the Integration of Language Skills," Sandra Sellers Hanson and Leonard Vogt write that "During the social changes of the 1960s, students had wanted more autonomy over their educations, and books like Peter Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers . . . showed they were able to evaluate each other's writing*. Under careful guidance, students became their own teachers, *often giving teachers a second or third draft for a first reading and evaluation*" (emphasis mine, 575). It's clear that this passage caught my inexperienced eye when I first read it. The two italicized phrases, the first circled in red ink and the second highlighted in green on my much-marked copy, represent my introduction to "Elbow" the icon.

From Hanson and Vogt I learned that Elbow was a product of the turbulent 1960s. He was also a proponent of peer critiquing and writing as revision, two developments in teaching writing that I had rarely encountered as a student and was unsure how to employ as a new teacher. Since I was uncertain, at a time in my career when I didn't feel comfortable with experimentation, I found Elbow to be a convenient representative of those fears and uncertainties. For me, everything that seemed strange or "touchy-feely," to use the term I employed then, could be clipped to my fuzzy image of Elbow; he represented

those things about writing that I had never experienced—and would never truly understand until I began teaching writing for a living years later. Although my understanding of Elbow's ideas has expanded with my own academic growth and experience, I find that I still use him as a locus for argumentation rather than thinking of him as a person.

Early in 2000, *WPA* published my article "The Trinity of Portfolio Placement: Validity, Reliability, and Curriculum Reform." I was proud of this work. Still am. But as I look at the essay now, I notice that I was using "Elbow" instead of engaging Elbow. Instead of addressing his theories about writing assessment in all of their rich complexity, I relegated them to the status of weak partner in the binary of my argument. I made Elbow into a straw man. A single example serves to represent the "Elbow" I used:

Elbow's contention is that any attempt to force agreement among readers invalidates the reading, and thus the scoring, process by making the reading of the student's work an unnatural one. What Elbow fails to recognize, though, is that an unreliable assessment system, one which produces inconsistent scores for a single piece of writing, invalidates itself by being so unreliable. (11)

This is, I think, an accurate summary of the argument Elbow makes in the foreword to *Portfolios: Process and Product*. What my reading of Elbow leaves out is the depth. Rather than acknowledging and exploring Elbow's concerns about reliability and unnatural readings of student writing, I set him up to knock down. However, in other places in my argument, I set him up to prop myself up, especially when discussing validity and the "inherently personal" nature of portfolios. Both rhetorical moves represent an invocation of the "Elbow" icon.

White: During the same year that Fred learned the secret about "Peter Elbow," I was working with a group of graduate student interns, first-time teachers eager to learn our craft. Responding to student writing was the topic of the day, and we were going through the interesting variety of responding models published in Straub and Lunsford's *Twelve Readers Reading*. Elbow's model is particularly interesting, since he makes almost no marks on student papers; instead he writes response essays to his students, sometimes longer than the original.

"What puzzles me here," observed Raymond, a retired accountant with a sharp and orderly mind, "is what the student is supposed to *do*. How do these comments help students write better?"

Since none of us could answer that question, I posted it to Peter. A few days later, I received his troubled reply. "This has bothered me for a long time," he said. I could tell that he was wrestling with the apparent contradiction between

his job as a teacher (to respond, advise, coach, grade) and his view of writing as an intensely personal discovery activity. His conclusion was unequivocal: “I don’t actually ask my students to write better. I just want them to write differently.”

Raymond snorted, a bit disrespectfully. “Does his dean know about that?” he asked. “It *is* a required course, isn’t it?”

I was torn. Everyone in the room was nodding in agreement with Raymond: if we weren’t helping students to write better, we were frauds. I myself had been making that argument throughout the term. What on earth could Peter mean by interrogating that easy agreement? “Maybe,” I said tentatively, “we had better stop and define what we mean by *better*.”

Nobody’s mind was really changed by the discussion that followed, but we all were humbled by how complicated the issue had become. One definition of “better” that emerged quickly had to do with a more successful accomplishment of the assignment. When the task is clearly set out, we can help students complete that task, in accordance with the criteria we have established—and that accounts for a great deal of the work, probably most of the work, in composition courses. But Elbow proposes that the more important work of writing has to do with discovery, indeed with self-discovery. And he argues that teacher interference with that process is more likely to hurt than to help, since we tend to substitute our goals for the students’ goals.

“That is all very well,” Raymond said after a while, “but we should respond even to discovery papers by telling our students where they communicate successfully with us and where they don’t.” We looked closely at Peter’s entries in *Twelve Readers Reading* and wound up convinced that Peter does in fact do that—yet always refuses to generalize from his own reaction to the abstract concept of “better.” That, he maintains everywhere in his writing, is the writer’s task, not the teacher’s.

Peter and I have disagreed about this matter for several decades, though we are much closer in our practice than either of us readily admits. In 1999, at an NCTE conference in Florida, that disagreement was nicely focused. We had been invited to give a joint keynote address, which turned out to be an enjoyable exercise, I think, for both of us. But I maintained that assessment of writing was central to the job of a writing teacher, while Peter argued that responding was central while assessment was peripheral. During the question period we were asked to expand on that difference.

I argued that assessment is central to the teaching of writing, since revision is central to writing. Without assessment—that is, without the student writer gaining the ability to assess what is strong and what is not in a draft—we get tinkering but no revision. One major difference between expert and novice writers, I declared, is that the experts know how to assess their work and hence

make it better. The novices, innocent of assessment, tend to think (like an earlier Creator) that whatever they create must be very good. (Dare we suggest that evolution is the revision process?) So novices might edit, if pushed by their teachers, but they don't really revise until they learn how to read their own work with an assessor's eye. Peter, however, consistent as always, held to the position that the writer must discover where the writing is going and not be subject to the outsider, however well-intentioned the teacher may be. I replied that if we followed his approach, obviously worse writing might be considered to be better; furthermore, the students want us to help them write better, by academic standards, and have much less interest in self-discovery than we do. Aren't we really obliged to give our students the help they want and need?

And that is where the issue remained, at the Florida conference and now. Peter writes about assessment, often with great insight. "Do it better; do it less," he repeats, and who can dispute the good sense of that? That is, he is happy with responding but deeply distressed at evaluating. At heart, he dislikes the whole business. Many years ago I heard him tell a large audience that the only reason a teacher should ever put a grade on a piece of writing is to keep his or her job. He has moved some from that iconic position, but his heart remains at Evergreen State College, with written comments, lots of them, but no grades. No wonder he dislikes holistic scoring so much, with readers agreeing to agree on quality levels, for the sake of reliable scoring, rather than using merely personal reactions. For Peter, personal reactions (and personal writing) are at the heart of the teaching of writing, and his insistence on this has been one of his principal contributions to the pedagogical dialogue. His arguments are not taken seriously by the assessment community, which, after all, must try for consistent, fair, and reliable scoring so that assessment results can be meaningful. But everywhere teachers are faced with the conflict between the necessarily reductive nature of most assessment and the infinite variations of human ability, Peter's arguments are acclaimed as a rebellion of the individual against the incessant sorting and evaluating that besets American education. I'm glad that Peter is around to make that argument and to make it so well. Otherwise, I might have to try it myself.

Borrowman: I taught my first composition courses in a program that was assessment-heavy. Physically, it was not too far from Evergreen; philosophically, the two could not have been more opposed. When students came to the university for orientation during the summer before their first year, they were herded into a crowded auditorium and given a multiple-choice test of grammar and usage. Along with their SAT or ACT score, this test of edited American English determined their placement into first-year composition. On the first day of class, students were given a fill-in-the-blank grammar test. Students who did exceptionally

well or badly were bumped up or down the composition sequence based upon the results of this “grammar diagnostic,” as we unimaginatively yet accurately named it. For students placed into the second—and final—composition course, their formal, programmatic assessment ended. For those students in English 101, the assessment was only beginning.

At midterm, students spent three class days writing an argumentative essay to a common prompt; these essays were scored in four areas (focus, organization, development and support, and mechanics) on a six-point scale by someone other than the students’ own classroom instructor. The results of the midterm were not binding, however. They simply served as confirmation of writing ability or a warning about the upcoming final exam. Over the final three days of class, students were again required to write an argumentative essay to a common prompt. These essays were scored by two outside instructors—or three, in the case of significant disagreement. Students who failed this final exam failed the course. All of this assessment, including the sudden-death final exam, was in addition to the three to five major writing assignments, daily journal writing, and weekly two-page essay writing that were required of students. All of this writing, including the daily journal, was assessed.

I taught composition in this program for three years. Looking back, one thing immediately becomes apparent: there was a hell of a lot of assessment going on. In this assessment-rich environment, I would expect to see little of Peter Elbow. However, he is present—although his presence is more figurative, that of an icon rather than an actual person.

In English 101 at this time, I used *Writing to Write: Process, Collaboration, Communication*, a very fine first-year composition rhetoric. On a literal level, Elbow makes only a single appearance in this book, in a section on “The Role of the Writer in an Editorial Relationship”:

When reading or hearing advice from an editor, the writer should overcome the temptation to make excuses. Peter Elbow, another expert on teaching writing, made this observation years ago. It is natural to respond to an editor with comments like, “What I meant to say was . . .” or “I wrote this Sunday at midnight, so what do you expect?” These kinds of responses are not helpful. The writer should listen to the editor and perhaps note down some of the editor’s comments, but he or she should not be defensive or argumentative. (Elder 115)

Here Elbow appears, as most figures do in textbooks written for first-year students, as an expert whose opinion bolsters the sound advice given in the text.

Ethos boost for the author aside, the invocation of “Elbow” is completely in line with arguments Elbow himself makes. In *Writing With Power*, in a chapter about revision, Elbow offers this ideal scenario:

You start by producing a draft. . . . It probably has serious problems of structure and consistency. But it must be readable. You get two friends to read it and then you sit down with them. You are more interested in their thoughts on the whole matter than their criticism of your writing. . . . The conversation with them helps you see the whole thing in better perspective, gives you new ideas, and helps you make up your own mind what you think. (140)

Although he does not emphasize the need to listen without being defensive in the same way Dana Elder, the author of *Writing to Write*, does, clearly the two are in agreement. We could probably say the same thing—Elbow’s influence is everywhere—about most modern composition textbooks.

This agreement is even more apparent in a section titled “Subjective Bullshit” from *Writing Without Teachers*. Elbow writes, while discussing feedback in the teacherless class, “You must put your own responses out on the table, you must offer up your own reactions as pure data—not defend or justify or even discuss them—just reveal them and let the other person *use* them for his own private purposes” (140). Elbow’s influence permeates *Writing to Write*, from the practical, down-to-business tone, to the metaphor of writing and cooking. As Elder states, “*Writing Without Teachers* was the first comp pedagogy book I ever read, and it remains a favorite. Elbow . . . allowed access to process model, audience, and expressive writing to my generation of graduate students. *Writing to Write* shares underlying assumptions about pre-writing as discovery and building fluency with Elbow’s early work.” Yet the book was used (required, in fact) in a program that was obsessed with assessment—an example of what Elbow calls the “cultural hunger for ranking and evaluation” (“Writing Assessment” 85).

The paradoxical situation in which I first taught composition—influenced by Elbow yet burdened with almost continuous assessment of student writing—is probably not unique. The goal of the composition program—or of *Writing to Write*, anyway—was to produce strong academic writers, capable of constructively editing their own work and collaborating effectively with others. Yet the major assessment in English 101, the sudden-death final exam, directly contradicted this goal. Students were made to write to a common prompt in a limited time (fifty minutes per day for three consecutive days). To ensure that no cheating took place—and no collaboration, either—students were required to give their draft to the instructor at the end of each class period. This is a version of the nightmare scenario Elbow describes in *Portfolios: Process and Product*:

I can’t resist . . . pointing out that the “actual writing” that [most writing exams] call for is almost invariably done in response to a question that the student has never seen before; that there is no time for mulling the topic over beforehand, reading

about it, discussing it with others, or writing exploratory drafts; that there is no time for feedback on drafts; and worst of all, that there is no time for substantive rethinking and revising. In short, not only do most writing assessments give us an unsatisfactory picture of the student's skill, the picture they give us is of the student using a skill that most of us would not really call *writing*. (xiii–xiv)

For three years, I lived this situation, requiring my students to write continuously for ten weeks and evaluating nearly everything they produced. Yet when the end of the quarter came, my assessment of the students' writing was largely moot. Outside evaluators—all of whom were teaching other sections of composition—decided whether or not my students wrote well enough to pass my class, just as I made that decision for their students.

This assessment situation was traumatic for both the students and the instructors. It was possible, and it happened with some regularity, for students to do well in their coursework and then fail the final—thereby failing the entire class if a successful appeal could not be mounted. To keep this from happening, I (like most instructors) taught to the test; my students learned how to write quick and reasonably clean essays that were focused, organized, developed, and mechanically sound. They learned to adopt a pseudo-academic tone to convince their audience of the validity of their claims, claims carefully supported by quotations from outside experts and properly cited in MLA format. The writing they produced was as unnatural as the constant need to evaluate it. But it was better writing, according to the standards the program set and assessed.

In the fall semester of 1998, I taught advanced composition for the first time. The syllabi I inherited from my immediate predecessors varied in focus and emphasis, but all of them agreed on a single point: *Writing With Power* had to be one of the students' textbooks. I read the book, liked its focus on revision and developing voice, and required my students to read just about the entire text over the course of the semester.

The students—all juniors or seniors, mostly English majors—liked “Elbow” immediately. His advice about writing was practical, immediately useful, and given in a tone that was not patronizing to these largely inexperienced writers. Reading Elbow's work, the students felt that they could see the person behind the words, the author behind the curtain, the complex human being rather than the icon. At the same time they were reading *Writing With Power*, the students were reading from John Warnock's anthology of creative nonfiction, *Representing Reality*. Around midterm, John came to the class. He discussed his reasons for writing *Representing Reality*. He talked about his own writing processes and the difficulty inherent in putting words on paper. None of my

students had ever met the author of one of their textbooks, and the experience affected them profoundly. They wanted to talk to Elbow.

As associate editor of *Rhetoric Review*, I had corresponded with Elbow on numerous occasions. When I asked if he would mind responding to some questions from my students about *Writing With Power*, he readily agreed. My students read through their journals and thumbed through their books, deciding what to ask. They worked in groups to craft their questions. Several students combined the groups' questions, and the short list came to me. I e-mailed it to Elbow.

"In your book you mention how 'constant revision' of papers is a good thing. When is it good to stop revising? Is it possible to over-revise a paper?" my students asked. Elbow's response was direct and thorough:

Yes, it's possible to overrevise. It was extreme and unrealistic of me to imply that we should always and interminably revise. Definitely we sometimes produce sections of writing that are not far from how we want it eventually. And it also depends on the piece. I won't revise these answers I'm writing; the writing is informal and I don't mind letting my non-careful writing show. It's a matter of tact. Perhaps the biggest thing is to let time go by; that helps you decide if something is "cooked" or done.

This answer represented a revolutionary thought: A writer could be wrong, could go too far. The advice Elbow had given about constant revision—which scared the students with its open-endedness and uncertainty—was now open to question. Published words had had an unbeatable ethos built into them simply by virtue of being published, and Elbow's answer to their question deflated this false sense of authority they accorded printed material.

Embedded in Elbow's answer was a second idea that pushed my students to reconceive of academic writing: the writer is the one who decides when a text is done, when it has cooked enough. Other readers give feedback, but the writer makes the decisions. If writers decide when to stop revising, as Elbow said they should, my students wondered where teachers fit into the process. Their reasoning was very pragmatic: Revision produces better writing, and better writing gets a higher grade; if the teacher decides the grade, then the teacher's feedback must be considered while revising. This conundrum led to long discussions about teachers, grade point averages, and the academic writing environment.

The section of *Writing With Power* that intrigued my students most and prompted several questions was "Writing for Teachers." The scene Elbow describes of a "teacher engaged in being an audience" especially caught their attention (218). They had never really considered the logistics of reading, responding to, and grading student papers. Yet Elbow's advice confused them.

Would teachers really be willing to negotiate assignments in the ways he suggests? Might this advice be more appropriate for a high school student than for one in college? “I meant [this advice] for both high school and college students,” Elbow wrote. “I wasn’t trying to make some complex analysis—or think of the differences. Maybe it sounds like high school because I’m treating the teacher as so ‘human,’ fallible, prone to preconceptions (and college teachers are so often portrayed as lofty and rational).” The students grasped this argument immediately, chagrined to see that the very stereotypes Elbow describes—high school teachers as somehow being soft and college teachers as being rigid and controlling—were at work in the questions they had asked. The final lines of Elbow’s answer summarize the unintended lesson the students learned that semester: “I’m trying to make the point that all teachers are extremely human. It helps to know that.”

It would be a lie for me to say that Elbow’s statement affected only the students. Peter Elbow had been one of my teachers for years—from my introduction to his ideas in various composition pedagogy and theory courses to my use of *Writing to Write* to my use of *Writing With Power*—yet he had always been “Peter Elbow.” For my students he was, until his e-mail, a distant author, represented only by the textbook they had been required to read. For me he was the representation of an area within my field, a name on conference programs and in journals, and an argument against which to balance my own ideas about writing and assessment.

White, concluding: In recent years, Peter’s path and mine seem to be intersecting with increasing frequency. In 1993, we debated portfolios at a conference in Ohio, an experience that led to what I think remains the most interesting book on the subject: *New Directions in Portfolio Assessment* (Laurel Black et al.). At the 1994 WPA conference on Composition in the Twenty-First Century (now a book—Bloom, Daiker, and White), we debated issues in writing assessment. Tom Thompson’s 1995 article in *Assessing Writing* compared our personalities, as profiled by the Myers-Briggs inventory. And in 1999, as I have said, we joined to give the keynote speech for an NCTE conference in Florida. These have been friendly but spirited exchanges.

The essay by Thompson focused on an issue I have been skirting here: the personality factor in assessment and, by extension, in teaching. Thompson gave the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) to both of us and secured our permission to make those tender findings public. His purpose was to uncover the way personality traits underlay scholarly perspectives. Unlike some devotees of Myers-Briggs, he is both sensitive and cautious in his use of the findings: “Although many factors other than personality preferences certainly influence

behavior, an understanding of those preferences can help explain certain behavioral tendencies” (193). His summary of our ratings on the Type Indicator scale, however, gives a strong clue to why Peter and I differ as much as we do:

These different interests—in internal versus external assessment, and in trying to create new assessment measures versus trying to improve the design and use of existing ones—are consistent with different personality preferences. So, too, are the differences in philosophy implied by Elbow’s and White’s other works. Elbow’s score on the MBTI indicates preferences for introversion, intuition, feeling, and perceiving; White’s score indicates preferences for extroversion, intuition, feeling, and judging.

Where Peter registers introversion, I show extroversion; where Peter favors perceiving, I prefer judging. Too simple, I suppose, and too general perhaps. But perhaps not. Wear a mask long enough, George Orwell says in “Shooting an Elephant,” and your face grows to fit it. After all these years, we may indeed have grown into our icons.

Borrowman, concluding: Throughout my formal education in rhetoric and composition, I have learned to think in terms of reductive icons: “Elbow” represents a set of theories concerning the process of discovery in writing. “White” represents theories about the formal programmatic and institutional assessment of writing. The two are opposed to each other, not because their ideas actually exist in opposition—even though their personalities might—but because it is easier to remember them that way. The icons are terribly oversimplified but are useful as both mnemonic devices and as places to begin discussion, and they probably cannot be discarded for those reasons.

While this chapter represents a description of the practice of icon-building, it also represents a snapshot of the strangeness of that practice. I have coauthored a chapter with an icon, in which we consider another icon as an icon. I juxtapose the work of “Elder” with Elbow’s within my analysis. “Evergreen” serves as the sole representative of an entire system of education. I am represented within the text by only my last name, “Borrowman,” and I even quote myself—a gesture toward personal icon-building?

As this article describes the practice of icon-building, it also reveals the strangeness of that practice. Ed and I have been friends for years, so my memories of “White” are indistinct. Dana has been a friend and mentor for nearly a decade, so now “Elder” exists only on paper. And then there’s “Elbow.” I have read much of his work. I am familiar with—and am now a contributor to—the secondary scholarship that trails along behind him. I have heard him speak at conferences, and we have exchanged e-mails. Twelve years after my introduction to “Elbow,” I find myself writing about Peter.

CLUSTER II
Exploring Contraries

INTERSECTION

CHARLES MORAN

Deep in Peter Elbow's thought and work is the belief that we—writers, thinkers, teachers—need to be able to hold in our minds, simultaneously and without conflict, two ideas that are in radical opposition to one another. This is such an extraordinary belief that it is often—perhaps almost always—misunderstood. We have been so conditioned to believe that we should be seeking the Aristotelian golden mean between the extremes that we in a sense marginalize the extreme positions, seeing them not for what they are, but as a necessary frame for the middle ground, a precondition to compromise, settlement, reconciliation. As a result, we are practically incapable of seeing as Peter does and, more particularly, of understanding his work in the light of this belief.

It is tempting to try to connect this element of Elbow's work with another: his disposition to fight for what he perceives to be the underdog, the view that is likely to be silenced by a dominant, more politically-powerful, received truth. Elbow has said and written again and again that he is not wanting his students to do nothing but personal, autobiographical writing, but that he wants us to make room for some of this writing in our courses. He wants his half of the bed. Here he aligns himself with James Britton, Nancy Martin, and the Schools Council project: as Britton, Martin and their team found, in the upper grades of British schools, students were practically never asked to write expressively, to write from what Britton termed the stance of the "spectator". Arthur Applebee's 1981 study found the same to be true in American secondary schools. Elbow has argued as he has because of what he sees as a curricular imbalance: we spend too much of our time preparing student writers for the academic workplace; we spend too little of our time encouraging student writers to make sense of their lives through their writing. In the good writing curriculum, we would do both, and some of each in its most extreme form: absolute freewriting, and absolutely perfect documentation in a researched essay.

Yet this role that Elbow so often takes, the advocate of the silenced, the marginalized, is at odds with his larger aim: to help us move away from advocacy, away from the oppositional, and toward the active and generous belief in the position of the other. His is not the peaceable kingdom, where the lion lies down with the lamb, but a world closer to that envisioned by William Blake,

one in which contraries are necessary if there is to be movement of any kind. The dissonance is to be cherished, to be internalized, to be sustained, reflected on, understood. Winning and losing is not what it is about at all. And neither is tolerance, or reconciliation. War is not an option—think of Elbow’s work with conscientious objectors here—because war is a process that eliminates, silences one side. How, then, can Elbow participate in a conventional academic debate, as in the Bartholomae-Elbow exchanges? He could win this debate only by silencing the other side. It is fitting that the Bartholomae-Elbow debate is kept alive in composition theory readers as a debate, as an argument that will not be won or lost, as a dialogue that calls us to reflection.

What I have learned from working with Peter is how easily I acknowledge the contraries and then move toward the center, toward the compromise. Instead of including, for instance, both ungraded and graded writing in my writing class, I will “sort of” grade everything. So my intended use of both low-stakes and high-stakes writing becomes all middle-stakes; and I and my students lose the virtues of the extremes: we are never entirely free from evaluation, and we are never really, seriously evaluating. Easier for me, but still slippery, is my simultaneous hold on the radically opposed teacher-roles of “coach” and “evaluator.” I need Peter to remind me that when I shift roles I am not betraying myself, or my students. And I note in passing how rhetorical, how dramatic this approach to teaching is: multiple and conflicting roles to be played by the teacher and, therefore, by students as well. When I feel that I am, in my essence, my essential self, a coach and that in grading students I violate that self, Peter’s advice to me denies the essence or redefines it: I am many things, some in absolute conflict with others, and I should cherish, nourish, exploit, continually examine these oppositions that are, in all senses of the word, essential. Given that I often feel that I am a natural coach, Peter would ask me to look hard at what I do and see that I am also, naturally, the opposite of coach: the grader, evaluator, the stickler for standards. It is true—there is something in me that really hates bad writing! And this multiplicity is not just OK; it is just what it should be. I am, naturally, both coach and evaluator. The trick is to keep both roles as clean as I can: be the pure coach when that seems appropriate, be the pure evaluator when that seems right, and not slide toward the middle ground.

My struggle to enact Peter’s theory in the classroom is mirrored by the authors in this section, as they struggle to come to terms with the complexity of his thought. Cy Knoblauch and Lil Brannon take on what seems to be Elbow’s attack on those who call themselves followers of Paulo Freire but do not follow his teachings. Elbow’s 1973 essay, “The Pedagogy of the Bamboozled,” reprinted in *Embracing Contraries* (1986), is a complex, many-voiced argu-

ment against what Elbow sees as the duplicity of those who declare themselves critical teachers but do not come clean about the power relations that exist in their classrooms and in the institutions in which they teach. Knoblauch and Brannon argue that in this piece Elbow does not embrace contraries, does not balance doubt and belief, but unfairly tips the scales against critical pedagogy, making it seem too fraught with contradictions—not as applied by Freire, but as applied by teachers of middle-class students in America’s suburban schools. Knoblauch and Brannon admit to finding themselves to a degree baffled by the complexity of Elbow’s argument—is his tongue in his cheek? And if so, when? Is this an attack—or a game? Yet if critical pedagogy is to have its half of the bed, Elbow must be taken seriously and his arguments answered. They offer, therefore, a detailed response to his arguments and a passionate defense of critical pedagogy, which they see as a “Pedagogy *for* the Bamboozled,” a force for change in a society, an economy, and a culture that is entirely too sure of its own success.

Thomas O’Donnell takes Elbow’s work with doubt and belief and pushes it further, “marking a distinction between doubting as an activity and doubt as a reaction to a claim.” He finds a connection between Elbow’s way of reading students’ writing and the work of the ordinary language philosophers, in particular J. L. Austin. For these philosophers, the meaning of a word lies in its use by ordinary speakers in real-life situations. For instance, to discover the different meanings of accident and mistake, we need to imagine ourselves into situations where we would use first the one and then the other of these two terms. O’Donnell sees Elbow’s reading of student writing as an attempt to live inside—to imagine—the world created by the student’s language—an acting out of the believing game, a taking on of the other. When, as Elbow reads, he encounters difficulty in this attempt to imagine, he is made to doubt, and this doubt becomes the center of a comment to the writing—not a comment that seeks to disprove, but one that explores a moment of dissonance and asks the writer to go back and re-think, revise.

M. Elizabeth Sargent looks at Elbow’s essay “The Doubting Game and the Believing Game,” published as an “appendix essay” to *Writing Without Teachers* (1973), as one of our field’s foundational documents and therefore long past due a careful rereading. She finds that throughout his career Elbow has misread or misrepresented Polanyi, to whose work he has often acknowledged an intellectual debt. Sargent argues that Polanyi would not present believing as a “game,” nor would he see the tacit dimension as a kind of “magic,” as Elbow on occasion calls it, a faculty opposed to the rational. For Polanyi, Sargent tells us, “believing can never be as detached or as reversible as Elbow’s formulation of it as a ‘game’ or ‘method’ suggests.” Elbow’s practice as

a teacher, she believes, lies closer to the heart of Polanyi than does his theory, particularly that articulated in “The Doubting Game and the Believing Game.” For Elbow, as for Polanyi, she argues, belief is primary, a necessary first move: a belief that you will have something to say (freewriting) and a belief that a student writer has something to say (attentiveness). Elbow’s critics, Sargent concludes, sense Elbow’s implicit advocacy of the need to believe, and they simply can’t accept this fundamental premise because it threatens their present practice and the structures that support it.

George Kalamaras leaves western civilization to understand Elbow, finding an analogue for Elbow’s theory in traditions of meditation in Eastern thought. Kalamaras has come to understand Elbow through his own deep experience of Eastern meditative tradition, where “embracing contraries yields a consciousness nonattached to either pole of an apparent contradiction, but, rather, a deepening attentiveness to their reciprocal interaction.” No western dualism this, but a deepening *attentiveness*: contradiction is complement, not conflict. So, from this perspective, as Bartholomae and Berlin doubt aspects of Elbow’s work, they enact his belief that two heads are better than one. What is generally understood as debate thus becomes “cooking,” a process that draws on multiple ingredients to produce a dish superior in taste to that of any of its components. Kalamaras traces his own journey from his first readings of Elbow as a dualistic thinker to his subsequent re-reading of Elbow in the light of his own experience of the meditative traditions of the East. In an instantiation of yin-yang, the reciprocal interaction of contraries, Kalamaras finds that his re-reading of Elbow’s work has, in its turn, “deepened my understanding of the dynamic interplay within Eastern meditative practices.”

The flaw in Elbow’s theory, as Sargent sees it, is that he has not completely reconciled in his own mind his deep, instinctive faith in the primacy of belief, what he and Polanyi call the “fiduciary transaction,” and his position that believing and doubting are contraries that must be equally embraced. Her construction of Elbow gets at the opponent that Knoblauch and Brannon feel behind the mask, the rhetor whose arguments must be struck down if critical pedagogy is to flourish. Sargent’s construction of Elbow resonates, too, with O’Donnell’s need to limit and sharpen our understanding of Elbow’s own practice of the doubting game. Beside these versions of Elbow stands George Kalamaras’s Elbow, who, like the Elbow of Lucile Burt’s poem (opening this volume), is thinking beyond the envelope, seeing doubt and belief, like yin and yang, as inseparable elements in an organic whole.

5 PEDAGOGY FOR THE BAMBOOZLED

C. H. KNOBLAUCH

LIL BRANNON

***Bamboozle:** to deceive by trickery, hoax, cozen, impose upon; to mystify, perplex, confound.*

O.E.D.

“Put up or shut up” seems a fair, if abrupt, rendering of Peter Elbow’s point in “The Pedagogy of the Bamboozled,” which first appeared as an article in *Soundings* nearly 30 years ago and was subsequently included in *Embracing Contraries* in 1986. Elbow’s blunt challenge to teachers enamored of Paulo Freire’s arguments for critical pedagogy was essentially this: either they should “really” practice what Freire recommends in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, or they should stop talking as though they practiced it and stop “bamboozling” both themselves and their students. Real practice, Elbow insists, entails faithful adherence to four principles abstracted from Freire’s text: (1) the teacher must work as a “collaborating ally” of students, not as their “supervisor”; (2) the subject of study must be students’ own lives, their perceptions of their experience, rendered as problems for critical reflection; (3) the goal of instruction must be to change, not just the individual student, but the world itself, “objective, external reality”; and (4) the teaching and learning processes must be primarily “rational and cognitive” rather than “affective” (“Bamboozled” 87–88). However plausible a Freirean pedagogy might be among Brazilian peasants, or even among Jonathan Kozol’s adult learners in the church basements of inner-city Boston, Elbow argues that critical teaching is unrealistic for ordinary American schools, which are not “cruel or oppressive” and which already encourage “thinking, problem-posing, doubting, rationality, critical thinking, and genuine discussion” (92). Specifically, critical teaching is unrealistic for teachers like himself, “hired by an educational *institution* to teach mostly non-adult, middle-class students” (87). Perhaps anticipating a flood of tiresome leftist prose when Freire’s arguments hit the academic scene in the early 1970s or perhaps simply concerned about the potential for fakery in classrooms, which have enough fakery already, Elbow essentially dares teachers to enact Freire for real, while forcefully expressing a view that they can’t or won’t—and maybe shouldn’t. Given the rhetorical complexities of such a position, it is not clear whether or when his tongue is in his cheek.

A new millennium has since dawned, under the same sun, of course, that illuminated the old one, and some predictable turns of history have followed the migration of Freire's arguments from Third World literacy projects to the alien setting of U.S. education. One such turn has been a robust academic publication industry grown up around the concept of critical pedagogy, an industry never more than contingently related to the actual classroom fortunes of Freirean or other "radical" teaching practices. How cynically one views the proliferation of scholarship in the absence of pragmatic follow-through depends on how one understands the relationship between theorizing and the supposedly grittier business of doing the world's work. A second predictable turn is, let's face it, the substantial failure to actualize Freire's "principles," certainly as Elbow articulates them, in the uncongenial culture of American schools. The institutional realities that, for Elbow, make critical pedagogy impractical remain solidly in place. Teachers work mostly as "supervisors," authorities, grade-givers, not as "collaborating allies," no matter how circled the desks or how animated the class discussion. The object of study remains a state-sponsored curriculum, getting more prescriptive every year, and not the concrete experience of students. Teachers continue, like most folks, to measure out their lives in coffee spoons, unmotivated by revolutionary pretensions or at least sensible enough not to confront institutional power if that's what "changing the world" would require. Classroom practices are as rational, cognitive, and unaffective as anyone could possibly devise, but they remain dedicated to the problem-*solving* ideal of an advanced technological society well satisfied with its collective ethos and material prosperity (however unequally distributed), not to the problem-*posing* ideal of a society conscious of its status as a perpetual work in progress. Elbow's pragmatic doubts about the adaptability of Freirean practice turn out to have been prescient, even if unremarkably so. Arguably too, his in-your-face challenge to teachers has laid bare anew the academy's capacity for self-bamboozlement, since scholars interested in pedagogy continue to speak energetically about something that is not actually happening. If Elbow's intent, thirty years ago, was to expose phony textual radicalism and ersatz political engagement, then the passage of time appears to have validated his skepticism.

Still, it has always seemed to us that skewering radical chic was something of a side issue in "Pedagogy of the Bamboozled," certainly in the context of *Embracing Contraries*, where Elbow's larger purpose is to query the sufficiency of any teaching practice and "embrace" the competing values that different practices represent. His pursuit of this end makes it reasonable to situate critical pedagogy within a constellation of such values, but we are struck by the pointed critique of Freirean pretensions in an argument ostensibly seeking to balance

opposites. Elbow wishes, after all, to hold “critical teachers” to a remarkably stern standard if they are to avoid bamboozlement—higher, for example, than any standard he invokes for prospective followers of Socrates, who is named as the “*locus classicus*” of an alternative to Freirean pedagogy and whose method he labels the “emulation or participation model of teaching” or, still more congenially, the “falling-in-love model” (96). However appealing the recollected image of Socrates’s riverside dalliance with Phaedrus, we can’t quite forget the philosophic-gadfly intensity, the hemlock-drinking incorruptibility of Socrates’s practice, or ignore the likelihood that (pseudo-)Socratic teaching might have its own potential to bamboozle—let’s say by claiming that it seeks the truth relentlessly wherever truth may lie when it is “really” just posing a series of canned, self-answering questions, predetermined to support a teacher’s biases. Since Elbow (fortunately!) does not commit would-be Socratics to an all-or-nothing discipleship, his insistence on such a commitment from would-be Freireans, which then makes the prediction of failure a self-fulfilling prophecy, seems unsporting at the least. “It is not feasible,” Elbow insists, “for most institutional teachers to follow the model laid down by Freire”; therefore, we should “examine scrupulously the nature of our teaching” and “if it doesn’t fit all four principles we can stop pretending, through words or implications, that we are engaged in an education to help people be free” (94). But surely no model or theory, not Socrates’s, not even Elbow’s, could survive such a test. That is, even “embracing contraries” is a philosophical ideal different in kind from the casual eclecticism of classroom life. It entails an artful negotiation of alternative possibilities—“doubting” and “believing,” for example—in an integrated educational practice (see “Embracing Contraries in the Teaching Process,” *Embracing Contraries* 142–59). Teachers will fail in the application because theories are simpler than life, propositions that neither fully comprehend the world nor adequately plot a course through it. Ironically, given Elbow’s intent, the tactical flaw in representing Freirean theory as mere bamboozlement unless applied with requisite faithfulness is that such a move also eliminates the theory as a meaningful “contrary” to embrace. The logic of the argument from strict practicality is that Freire must be abandoned if teachers are to avoid deception, not that his practice is always modified in the context of other values.

As teachers who have appreciated Peter Elbow’s hard-nosed assaults on bamboozlement in education, we want to accept his challenge, still echoing across the rising sea of scholarship, to articulate the possibility of an American critical pedagogy. We’re hardly the first to attempt an adaptation of Freire’s now familiar assumptions, but other theoretical justifications have steered clear of Elbow’s inconveniently explicit terms. It’s important to begin, however, just where Elbow chooses not to begin, by recalling that critical pedagogy

is an idea, not just a method—or better, a “practice,” not an algorithm. For Freire, “practice” entails a dialectical relationship between action and reflection, each informing, each modifying, the other—an idea in action. Elbow is content to measure Freire’s idea by doubting its practicality; we prefer to establish the value of the idea as stimulus for addressing the difficulty of implementation. Critical pedagogy is an idea that strives to reconceive the aims and responsibilities, no less than the “methods,” of education. Broadly speaking, the “idea” is to incorporate traditional areas of knowledge, including language arts, within a framework of cultural critique in order to promote, through “dialogue,” a community of “knowing subjects,” as Freire calls them, who apply what they know to the practical challenges of social change. The teacher regards the analysis and transformation of existing social relations as the central activity of democratic culture and views critical reflectiveness, therefore, as the most important competence of an educated citizenry. Over thirty years, of course, the idea of critical pedagogy has grown beyond Freire’s formulations, incorporating materialist, feminist, postmodern, and other conceptual perspectives. Discordant voices have joined in lively conflict, from Dewey to the Frankfurt Marxists, from liberation theology to the Birmingham school of cultural criticism. The work of Ira Shor contrasts with that of bell hooks, Henry Giroux’s with that of Michael Apple, Jennifer Gore’s with that of Donald Morton. But although the voices are (dis)arrayed across what Gore has called “fragmented discourses” (6), we agree with her that they share, amidst differences, a certain “commonality of claims” (7–9). The importance of critical pedagogy as an idea, and arguably the point of convergence among competing theoretical vantage points, lies neither in explicit designs for cultural change (a utopian perspective often critiqued in the literature) nor in specific methodological recommendations, but in its posing of problems that are not formulated in traditional American educational philosophies: its critique of social life, its imagining of social change, its distinctive situating of education within culture, and—if we may turn Elbow’s argument around—its sustained investigation of the various forces, forms, and techniques of bamboozlement, in education and elsewhere. Far from causing or encouraging bamboozlement, as Elbow fears it does, the art of posing critical problems, we would argue, enables the very dialogical encounters that can identify deception, misrepresentation, trickery, or mystification and open them to inspection. Critical pedagogy is, in short, the antidote to bamboozlement.

The theoretical effort to pose problems is not a retreat into empty intellectualism, an escape from practicality; it is the starting point for practice—reflection and action—since cultural critique is what reveals both the need and the opportunity for transformation. This critique may focus on forms of injustice—racial,

class, or gender bias, corporate greed amidst worker layoffs, unfair housing practices. It may focus on relations between educational and other social realities—literacy levels in the inner city, unequal subsidies for urban and suburban schools, the relationship between income and academic success. Or it may interrogate realities within schools—the exploitation of teachers, the power arrangements in classrooms, the workings of the hidden curriculum. Always, the critique presumes that the issues explored have relevance for pedagogy and belong with the disciplined knowledges that teachers and learners should wish to acquire. Some theorists, Ira Shor notably (*Empowering Education, Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*), have accepted the added challenge of a practitioner’s viewpoint, even suggesting the work of Monday morning; but when they do, they remember Freire’s advice to Donaldo Macedo in *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*: “I refuse to give so-called how-to recipes. . . . Educators must investigate . . . conditions in their own contexts. . . . In essence, educators must work hard so that learners assume the role of knowing subjects and can live this experience as subjects. Educators and learners do not have to do the exact same things I did in order to experience being a subject. That is because the cultural, historical, social, economic, and political differences [will] play a role in the definition of the tense relationship between the educator and the learner” (134). In general, when critical teachers move their theorizing to the classroom, turn reflection into action, they import the motivating concern for a just society, concretize it for students through investigations of cultural conditions, reconceive their disciplinary materials in critical terms, and “work hard,” as Freire puts it, to create opportunities for students to “experience being a subject.” But the nature of those opportunities, the nature of the “experience” itself, grows out of the realities and possibilities of a distinct educational setting.

For Freire, human beings as “knowing subjects” accept responsibility to learn, not merely be taught, and to act, not merely be acted upon. Through education, they improve their power to “perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world . . . ; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (*Pedagogy* 56). Education in and for critical consciousness does not transform the world (except insofar as it may change the school); rather, it works to develop the habits of mind that make transformation possible. It assists the emergence of the knowing subject, for whom awareness of the imperative of transformation derives from prior understanding of conditions that jeopardize the continuing possibility of democratic culture. Accordingly, the principal focus of educational work is reflection, a politically, no less than intellectually, disciplined will to inquire rather than to take the world on its own, apparently self-evident terms. Freire describes the habitual stance of the “knowing subject” in *The Politics of Education*: “whether it be a

raindrop (a raindrop that was about to fall but froze, giving birth to a beautiful icicle), be it a bird that sings, a bus that runs, a violent person on the street, be it a sentence in the newspaper, a political speech, a lover's rejection, be it anything, we must adopt a critical view, that of the person who questions, who doubts, who investigates, and who wants to illuminate the very life we live" (198). Freire's concern is, in a manner of speaking, very like Elbow's, but more encompassing: his concern is a world in which a lack of reflectiveness, an uncritical assent to cultural "common sense," and a docile immersion in history work for the most part inconspicuously, and therefore effectively, to maintain existing social arrangements. His concern, more pointedly, is a world awash in bamboozlement, where unequal privilege and opportunity are rationalized or mystified by the manipulations of political parties, corporations, mass media, and even state-sponsored education, while the critical faculties of the citizenry grow flaccid from underuse.

Elbow is probably correct that the "doubting game" for Freire receives more attention than the "believing game" (see "Methodological Doubting and Believing" in *Embracing Contraries* 254–300), just as, arguably, there is more room for the affective in education than Freire sometimes appears to provide (we can think of more responses to a raindrop, a lover's rejection, than critique). But Elbow has introduced the issue of bamboozlement, even if limited to the self-deceptions of certain teachers; and Elbow certainly recognizes, no less than Freire does, that belief and bamboozlement make good partners—that misrepresentation and deceit are not easily perceived from the stance of the believer, even, perhaps, the "methodologically" sophisticated one (282–84), let alone that habitually uncritical human being who is (one of Freire's darkest words) "naive." The naive person is one who submits to the power of cultural common sense—"my country, right or wrong," "you can be whatever you want to be," "one nation, under God, with liberty and justice for all"—thereby becoming easy prey for bamboozlers. What makes "common sense" so mischievous is that it evades one of those "stringent" tests for intelligent belief that Elbow cites from Wayne Booth: "you have good reason to believe that all men [*sic*] who understand the problem share your belief" (281). It's the nature of "common sense" to be uncritically believed—because it has lost its visibility as an argumentative proposition—and scrupulous examination alone, Elbow's "doubt," can reveal its non-necessity. American life is replete with representations that should cry out for public inspection but that, instead, have successfully wrapped themselves in the mantle of common sense. People speak glibly of trickle-down economics amidst manifest, and accelerating, inequities in the distribution of wealth. Equal opportunity has become reverse discrimination; new schemes for segregated education are nostalgically presented as returns to neighborhood schooling;

civil regard for the sensitivities of historically disenfranchised groups is mere political correctness; laying off workers to increase profits is framed as corporate responsibility to stockholders; welfare is a free lunch for shirkers; the bombing of civilians in war is collateral damage; incinerating wrongdoers in electrified chairs is getting tough on crime. Are these representations necessarily bamboozlements? Let's just say they are splendid candidates for critical inspection and reasonable examples of the type of unexamined assertion that might have pre-occupied Freire had his work been here and now. Cultural common sense is not always bamboozlement because it is not always deceptive; but it encourages the possibility of bamboozlement because its formulations present themselves as self-evident and therefore beyond debate.

Critical pedagogy investigates common sense, seeks in effect to "doubt" it, in order to root out the bamboozlements that jeopardize free and fair communal life. The effort does not presume some transcendent vantage point from which deceit or mystification is clearly visible (after all, if bamboozlements were self-evident, they would not be effective). It presumes instead the efficacy of public dialogue in which engaged participants evaluate, judge, and challenge public representations, analyzing their claims, testing their integrity, weighing their sufficiency. The trouble with common sense is not that it is false but that it is, by definition, unreflective. The trouble with bamboozlement, meanwhile, is that it is corrupt, a form of representation in which the complexity of experience is wrongly simplified, whether through naivete, conceptual laziness, or malice, in order to control or close off deliberation. If the representations above—"trickle-down" economics, "collateral" damage, "neighborhood" schools, and the rest—were to deserve the label of bamboozlement, the reason would not be the argumentative stands they signify on complex issues (relying on investment to prime the economic pump, tolerating casualties in order to win a war, using the social network of a neighborhood to support a school). The truth of such issues is not so readily discerned nor does it attach to liberal positions more reliably than to conservative ones. Rather, the reason would be that they willfully simplify, distort, or mystify in a bid to manipulate the public mind. It might be found, for instance, that the warm and fuzzy concept of "neighborhood" has been allowed to obscure the reality of white, suburban enclaves competing unfairly for resources with inner-city ghettos and barrios. It might be found that the evocation of "toughness" on crime has been calculated to imply that alternative views of the electric chair signify weakness, masking the likelihood that the innocent are sometimes executed, while eliminating the possibility that a desire to do justice without descending into savagery could be something nobler than "bleeding-heart liberalism." The issue here is not truth, correct conclusions versus false ones; the issue is honesty, a rhetoric of inquiry versus a

rhetoric of manipulation, a practice of sustaining debate versus a tactic designed to preempt it. Bamboozlements are not overcome by posing counter-arguments, because they are not in themselves argumentative. They can only be exposed for what they are, displayed for their naivete or intellectual laziness or cynical distortion. The business of critical pedagogy is to scrutinize representations, rendering them problematic in and through public dialogue, not because we know them to be bamboozlements but precisely because we do not yet know, precisely because a free citizenry must remain alert to the possibility of deception and manipulation.

Elbow worries about Freirean wannabes bamboozling themselves and their students, though he also admits that teachers are, even at their worst, amateur bamboozlers: “most teachers are not good at *conscious* deception. . . . They simply allow things to be fuzzy in their own minds” (“Bamboozled” 93). And the worry is reasonable even if the (self-)deception derives from good intentions. Were a teacher and her students to work together (in a writing course, say, or a civics course) to examine the politics of representation through scrutiny of significant public mystifications, the teacher would certainly be mired in bamboozlement if she believed, and led students to believe, that their isolated work is changing the world. Innocence is not helpful even when harmless, and it is not always harmless (particularly if the students are gullible or if school administrators don’t appreciate the teacher’s enthusiasm). But if, for Elbow, this “radical” teacher’s activity deserves critique, a move that her own pedagogical philosophy should encourage, how much more deserving of scrutiny are the bamboozlements that she and her students are investigating, public flimflams that do not, themselves, encourage public reflectiveness? And if the students’ efforts to identify bamboozlement are of limited effect, how much greater might the effect be if a society of critical inquirers were engaged in the same principled activity? To be sure, one bamboozlement does not justify another: the teacher’s obligation is to consider more carefully the meaning of her practice. But if it is possible to imagine such careful self-scrutiny, then perhaps it is reasonable to conclude that the ideal of a society of inquirers is an appropriate aspiration for an educator.

We have certainly been bamboozled as teachers and have probably done our share of bamboozling, including unreflective ventures in critical practice. But it is not *critical* teaching that risks bamboozlement; it is *teaching*. We have been at least as self-deceived in our conscious and unconscious involvement in traditional forms of educational practice that show themselves, on examination, to be authoritarian, functionalist, and culturally biased, as well as unreflectively committed to such values as technological superiority, competition, and the pursuit of merely individual prosperity. We have also been self-deceived by

those more liberal practices, sometimes generalized as “process pedagogy,” that seek to resist authoritarianism and functionalism, but that sometimes also romanticize “expressivity,” “authenticity,” and the power of “self”-actualization, thereby mystifying students and teachers alike about social and political realities, such as school testing or the conventions of public discourse, that do not readily accommodate “process” ideology. Bamboozlement is, of course, no more necessarily linked to expressivist pedagogy than it is to critical pedagogy: teachers can mystify themselves or others through any unreflective practice. Indeed, that is the point: what opens the door to bamboozlement is unreflectiveness, not an “incorrect” or “unrealistic” educational philosophy. We would add, however, that what makes critical pedagogy conceptually different from other perspectives is not just its introduction of an altered philosophical framework for teaching but the attendant concern to scrutinize representations, thereby rendering problematic the common sense knowledge forming the silent backdrop of all our pedagogical activity, traditional, liberal, and radical alike.

Of course, if such a pedagogy is to actualize its potential, teachers must understand its demands on them and find explicit, culturally sensitive ways to implement it. Elbow’s adroit playing of the doubting game effectively challenges American advocates to confront practical issues without hiding indefinitely behind the disingenuous observation that critical pedagogy is, after all, “just a theory.” So, let us face that discomfiting challenge and explore the possibility of implementation by looking more carefully at how American teachers, working in conventional school settings, might understand the four “principles” of Freirean practice that Elbow extracts interpretively from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. As we do so, however, we propose to take unapologetic advantage of Freire’s invitation to imagine his practices in other social circumstances than those in which they were first formed, recognizing that American teachers far more frequently confront the culture of privilege—middle-class students, well-to-do, already literate, bound for success—than the culture of poverty and oppression. In mainstream U.S. education today, critical pedagogy is not for the poor and disenfranchised. It is for the bamboozled, only some of whom are poor and disenfranchised. The principles are, once again, (1) the teacher is an ally of students; (2) the subject matter is students’ own experience; (3) the end is changing the world; and (4) the teaching and learning processes are primarily rational and cognitive. And let us start with the immodest notion of “changing the world,” even though it comes third in Elbow’s original order, since, of the four principles, no other is more immediately damaging to the realistic possibility of a “critical” American classroom if it cannot be sympathetically recomposed. Why struggle over the nature of the teacher’s role or the

substance of a syllabus if the end of the enterprise is either inconceivable or unacceptable?

Surely, it is difficult to conceive a less plausible ambition than the one Freire refers to as “intervention in reality” (*Pedagogy* 81), the more so for American teachers when Freire’s sources of theoretical inspiration range from Karl Marx to Che Guevara. Elbow observes wryly that few teachers propose in their classes “a particular set of partisan activities designed actually to change some social, personal, or political situation” (“Bamboozled” 90), implying not only that the end of a critical pedagogy is, on the face of it, impractical but also—assuming that the word *partisan* means blind, prejudicial adherence to some cause or faction—that it is wrong-headed. But what does it mean to change the world? Freire, to be sure, speaks frankly of liberation, the “incessant struggle” of oppressed people to “regain their humanity.” His pedagogy “makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation” (*Pedagogy* 25). He speaks admiringly of “revolutions” in Cuba, Mexico, Bolivia, which “broke open the closed structures of rural areas” (*Politics* 95). Freire’s language, with its references to “oppression” and “struggle,” appears to equate, and sometimes does equate, “changing the world” with political revolution. Because his argument emerges from conditions of life among the poor in Latin America and Africa, it fails to ring true, as Elbow seems to imply, for “ordinary” Americans (even those who may be economically disenfranchised) in the mostly comfortable environments of U.S. life and education. But critical theorists understand that “oppression” is a relative construction, as is the “struggle” that responds to it. Concrete circumstances give specific meaning to the notions of freedom and domination and also shape the imperatives, as well as the strategies, of action. Notwithstanding the uncomfortable overtones of revolution, Freire’s argument does not identify the transforming of reality with catastrophic social disequilibrium or the dramatic overthrow of existing institutions. True revolution consists in the emergence of a new subjectivity among dominated human beings (81–84), an educational and political project the radicalness of which depends on the tolerance of an existing social order for the dialogue of renegotiating reality. Repression of dialogue in apartheidist South Africa proved over decades to have tumultuous consequences. By contrast, tolerance of dialogue in American political history, though that tolerance has been sorely tested, has largely retained its social value even amidst the agitations of labor unions and civil rights activism.

To equate change with revolution is finally to misunderstand the nature of change, to see it mechanistically, as though the “ordinary” condition of life is stasis, a monolithic, imperturbable order that is rarely, and then only violently,

destabilized as pressures build up within and overwhelm it, leading to a new monolith. For Freire, however, it is change, not stasis, that is the natural condition of society because society is comprised of “uncompleted beings conscious of their incompleteness” (*Pedagogy* 20), “restless beings incessantly pursuing a fuller humanity” (24), beings forever “in the process of becoming” (57). Critical thinking “discerns an indivisible solidarity” between the world and human beings, perceiving reality “as process and transformation, rather than as a static entity.” The mechanistic view of history, which Freire calls “naive,” sees historical time as a “weight” that has yielded a “normal present” to which, as a matter of “common sense,” human beings must accommodate themselves. But for the critic, history is the “continuing transformation of reality, for the sake of . . . continuing humanization” (65). The challenge of critical pedagogy is to intervene creatively in processes of change that are always and necessarily under way, not to deploy kamikaze politics in the vain hope of dismantling massively impervious social institutions. The realistic possibility of directed social change derives from this insight while the pragmatics of change derive from analysis of existing social conditions.

Changing the world, then, is neither more nor less than “intervening in reality.” Human beings ceaselessly change what we ourselves have made in the first place, although we are only able to participate in its re-making when we first perceive human beings to have been its makers, when we understand ourselves as subjects, not as objects of the will of others or of an ontological historical process. One function of pedagogy is to assist that understanding. But just as a mechanistic view of change—stasis followed by revolution and a new stasis—is unhelpful to understanding the possibility of critical intervention, so too is a teleological view, which supposes that the aim or conclusion of intervention is social utopia—a preconceived political order. Utopian thinking presumes a “modernist” view of history, in which great individuals and great events occasionally take society upward another notch in the long march toward a perfected condition. A utopian understanding of change justifies Elbow’s concern about “partisan” activity on behalf of some explicit political agenda, raising the specter of a “visionary” individual or group willfully imposing on others. The modernist image of steady progress toward the end of history is a damaging illusion that can lead to elitist and paternalistic formulations of intervention, denying equal participation in the project of transforming reality to those who lack the requisite genius, the latest technologies, the “professional” expertise, the appropriate class affiliation, or the correct political vantage point. A desire to “save the masses,” to do something “for” the less enlightened or the dispossessed, turns would-be progressives into the new reactionaries, the latest oppressors. Freire retains a notion of “utopia,” just as

he retains a concept of “revolution,” but he insists that “a true revolutionary project, to which the utopian dimension is natural, is a process in which the people assume the role of subject in the precarious adventure of transforming and recreating the world” (*Politics* 82).

Human beings can and do work to change what they perceive to be limiting to their potential to be more fully human. But the change is not controlled by a privileged group, not “progressive,” not “developmental,” and not linear; rather, it is a continuing process of critical reimagining in the pursuit of social justice, typically a dispersion of slow, unpredictable communal “dialogues,” including oppositional discourses, perhaps never fully aware of their tendencies, their “bearings,” as they proceed. Change is what we see when we look backwards, when we understand ourselves historically; it does not begin from a blueprint. Dialogue can occur in any community setting—a church basement, a union hall, a town meeting, a public school; it does not continue “on behalf of” the voiceless but rather, recognizing the entitlement of every citizen to speak, insures a voice for everyone. The intent of critical pedagogy is to renew that dialogue wherever it has been silenced or perverted, to insure that all citizens have opportunity—and requisite ability—to participate, and to assist the development of practices of inquiry that can unveil bamboozlement. The commitment to full participation and the explicit challenge to bamboozlement are precisely what separate Freirean dialogue from the current workings of practical American democracy, where the debate may be animated—“democrats” and “republicans” hammering away at rising costs of welfare—but where no one scrutinizes either the common sense framing the terms of debate—“people who won’t work should not expect handouts”—or the exploitation and oppression that such “common sense” enables. For Freire, common sense itself, with its attendant bamboozlements, becomes the object of attention. And those who are least enfranchised speak about the nature of their disenfranchisement. There lies the “revolution.”

An issue that is crucially corollary to these problems regarding the nature and possibility of social change is the relationship between “changing the world” and “changing the school.” Elbow speaks at times as though schools enjoy a reprieve from life, suggesting, for example, that Dewey is less radical than Freire because he advocated a “laboratory” or “practice” kind of action whereas Freire intends “to make a difference in the real world” (“Bamboozled” 90). Indeed, Elbow’s challenge of the practicality of a critical pedagogy begins significantly from the assumption that schools simply are what they are; we should not pretend we are doing things that the realities of the school world render impossible. To be candid with students, for instance, teachers should explain up front the power arrangements that circumscribe school life, that

render teachers and learners alike helpless before imposing institutional realities: this is my course and I have developed it without consulting you; credit decisions are unilaterally mine; we are not studying your lives here but rather my course materials; we are not trying to change the world; this is not education designed to make you free (94). His point in commending these frank admissions is, however, less to draw critical attention to the power realities of schooling—something that a critical teacher would seek to do in somewhat similar terms—than to underscore, through overstatement, the seeming impracticality of bringing that kind of attention to bear in the first place. After all, the prospect that Elbow envisions, large numbers of students simply leaving public schools in favor of alternative education, must rest on the dubious assumption that students already wish for, and are determined to seek, the freedom their teacher is telling them they cannot have in this classroom. Even if such an assumption were plausible, the politics of such a move would seem more reckless than productive since the teacher offers to say nothing more to these freedom lovers than “Seek your freedom somewhere else,” when he might have said, feeding off of their energy, “let us work where we are to analyze and change the conditions of schooling.” But the assumption is not really plausible, and we doubt that Elbow wishes to be reckless. More likely, he wishes to be truthful in emphasizing the limitations of critical pedagogy—but overstates the limits.

We agree, as Freire does, that there is no reason to assume that schools are ideal locations in which to enact a critical pedagogy or, still less, to suppose that schools are the point of origin for more comprehensive social transformation. But we would add that there is no reason to assume that other locations are better or easier or that the school is somehow less a part of the world than other venues might be. We agree that the school does not readily permit a redistribution of authority, but we would add that this reticence does not distinguish it from other institutions or other potential sites of critical engagement. The school is part of the world, and the contradictions inherent in establishing critical dialogue there exist equally in establishing it elsewhere. The larger point, which critical theory has explored in some detail, is that, while schools do indeed function to reproduce existing social arrangements, they are also, no less than other social institutions, sites of contestation, where competing social values, diverse constituencies, various pressures for conformity and change vie with each other for authority. Hence, the school is as good a place for dialogue as any, and as limited as any, and when school practices change, as they surely do, something is different, not just in a laboratory that simulates the world, but in the world. When teachers work to change the schools, therefore, they work to change the world. This does not mean that what happens in

schools constitutes the starting point for more pervasive social change. As Freire notes, schooling is too deeply “rooted in the global conditions of society” to serve as the “lever” of transformation (Shor and Freire 129). Changing the school is part of changing the world, but it is not the agency by which the world is changed. It is only the part of the world that teachers and students—along with school administrators, parents, school board members, and other committed citizens, working collaboratively—can change.

Elbow’s other representations of Freirean practice are best reviewed against the backdrop of this understanding of the school world—because they accurately presume a conflict between the sort of school that critical practice envisions and the kind of school that presently exists in American institutional reality. There are two ways of responding to the remaining principles, therefore: one is to rewrite Elbow’s expression of them, accommodating the differences between American schools and Latin American “culture circles,” but the other is to examine how existing school practice would need to be, and can be, reconceived in order to meet their expectations. We propose to respond in both ways. Consider the principle that the teacher must be a collaborating ally rather than a supervisor of students. Elbow believes that the role of ally is largely unavailable to classroom teachers, given the power arrangements of schools, and would be inappropriate even if available to the extent that teachers are legitimately expected to be “credit-givers” (“Bamboozled” 88), not intellectual comrades. In this formulation, Elbow presents teachers with stark choices (rather than contraries to embrace): either be an ally or be a credit-giver; if they must be the second, then they cannot be the first. To be sure, this issue is less complex in the circumstances of Freire’s culture circles, noninstitutional, indeed *countercultural*, settings that do not implicate the teacher in the accrediting actions of a state educational apparatus. But Freire’s reasoning about the critical teacher is applicable beyond the culture circles if one appreciates his careful definition of the relationship between the teacher and the learner. He establishes some contraries of his own for us to embrace, neither usurping the critical authority of the student nor shirking the teacher’s role in sustaining the practice of critical inquiry. “The role of an educator who is pedagogically and critically radical,” he writes, “is to avoid being indifferent, a characteristic of *laissez-faire* educators. The radical has to be an active presence in educational practice. But the educator should never allow his or her active and curious presence to transform learners’ presences into shadows of the educator’s presence” (*Literacy* 140). What is finally at issue, Freire suggests, is not the (naive) claim that teachers can give away their authority, can “empower” students in the face of the overdetermined institutional reality of the school, but instead the more plausible claim that the teacher can foster an atmosphere

of critical engagement that includes learners as active subjects, while conceding, indeed drawing scrupulous attention to, the concrete circumstances of the school world. It is in such a context that Elbow's recommendation of cautionary statements a teacher might make at the beginning of a course could be meaningful. His statements in that circumstance, instead of drawing ironic attention to the unlikelihood of critical activity, would focus student attention on the reality of school life, inaugurating a cultural investigation suited to the oppositional aspirations of the course.

As Freire tells Ira Shor, the objective "is not for the teacher to have less and less authority," but rather that "the democratic teacher . . . never transforms authority into authoritarianism" (*Shor and Freire* 91). Being an "ally," then, does not mean denying or evading responsibility as a teacher, including the responsibility to judge; it means trusting the reasoning abilities of the learner (*Pedagogy* 41), trusting the possibility that the learner can teach and the teacher learn (53), understanding that it is not the mission of the teacher to domesticate the learner by "giving" a knowledge that the learner can only depend helplessly on the teacher, as expert, to provide (124). Nonetheless, rewriting Elbow's version of Freire's "principle" does not explain away the teacher's inescapable position within the power arrangements of the school. Aronowitz and Giroux have noted the importance of facing up to the "contradictory roles" that transformative intellectuals occupy in schools, earning a living within institutions that help to produce dominant culture while offering "forms of alternative discourse and critical social practices" at odds with the "overall hegemonic role of the school" (40). The teacher does not, cannot, give away authority in the process of becoming an ally. The teacher can only make authority a problem for critical analysis and join with other teachers in the same practice, together creating classrooms in which students are invited to examine "hegemonic" practices, including the arrangements of schooling, and thereby assume roles as knowing subjects. Through such a practice, teachers acknowledge the difficulties of critical engagement while also adapting strategies of engagement to the circumstances of the school world, confronting with learners that powerful silence about themselves that schools, like other social institutions, depend on for their reproduction of dominant culture. Does this effort count as changing the world? In the larger sense, no, because of the practical limits of formal schooling for social transformation. As Freire laughingly tells Ira Shor, "I am not thinking that when I say goodbye to the students I have twenty-five more revolutionaries. No, no! But what we may have after finishing the seminar is an increase in the curiosity of the people." Having asked new questions, having discovered a new critical awareness, perhaps some of those students "will become much more strongly engaged in the process of transformation" elsewhere (*Shor*

and Freire 130). Perhaps, too, the world of the school will have seen a transformation in how some teachers envision the practice of education.

Another of Freire's four principles, according to Elbow, is that the object of study "is the actual lives of the students and their perceptions of their lives," rendered as problems for critical reflection. And once again, we must try both to rewrite the principle in the context of American education and also to imagine how ordinary school practice would need to be reconceived to accommodate Freire's intent. To be sure, the preparation of the culture circle entails the sort of "anthropological" analysis that Elbow describes ("Bamboozled" 88), a prior ethnographic study of the local reality of the peasants leading to a derivation of generative words and themes from their life-world that will later form the substance of the literacy workshop (see *Education for Critical Consciousness*). These words and themes then serve to relate the practical business of learning to read and write to the cultural work of investigating the conditions of life evoked through the generative language. Freire's approach presumes learners who have never experienced active control of the written word and who rarely if ever have had motive or leisure to inquire systematically into the circumstances of their lives. In short, his methods reflect his experience of a specific educational setting and do not transport to other settings, least of all the American school in which broadly literate, media savvy students engage familiarly in superficial academic rituals of thinking, doubting, investigating, and discussing. But the larger questions here go beyond pedagogical tactics and have to do with how "knowledge" and "learning" are to be understood and how teachers and learners are to relate to each other in the pursuit of critical understanding. For all the evident differences between the culture circle and the school room, one similarity stands out: in each case, the critical educator works with learners as they become serious, active producers of knowledge, "knowing subjects," rather than passive recipients of information.

Focusing on the "actual lives" of students does not mean a "voyeuristic" preoccupation with their "private" experience of the world, nor does it mean that education is "about" student biographies or "about" finding meaningful issues with which students can identify—"drugs, sex, suburbs" ("Bamboozled" 89). It's worth underlining the fact that peasants in the culture circles are learning to read and write: these activities constitute the proximate object of study. But Freire does not conceive of reading and writing as mere technologies to be given to people who lack them. Instead, these competences represent ways of understanding the world, ways of composing and recomposing reality. There is a reciprocity, therefore, a dialectic, between understanding the world and living in the world—reflection and action—naming the world and changing the world. "Actual life" and the perception of actual life are focuses of instruction, but they

are dialectically related to the proximate object of study: each informs the other. Hence, when Jonathan Kozol invites his learners to read or write such words as ‘tenement,’ ‘landlord,’ and ‘rat,’ instead of *Dick*, *Jane*, and *Spot*, his object of study is equally the substance of literacy—sounds, letters, words, combinations of words—and the reality that his learners experience, a reality concretized through these words. When a college writing teacher invites her learners to read Toni Bambara’s “The Lesson” and write about it in the context of sociological arguments relating wealth and social class, she is teaching reading and writing—but she is also encouraging a critical perception of American consumerism, an investigation of students’ own images of The Good Life. In either of these instances, writing and reading ultimately become ways for learners to act upon their experience as “knowing subjects.” The formal curriculum of the school represents, in Freire’s terms, diverse ways of understanding the world, “knowing” it verbally, mathematically, historically, or physically. Learning disciplinary knowledges opens new possibilities not only for understanding the world and students’ own positions in it, but also for transforming the world—where change is conceived not as “improvement” through technological or other advance but as continued negotiation, through dialogue, of free and fair communal life. The object of study is precisely “the lives of students”—as some disciplinary knowledge contributes to the composing and enables the recomposing of those lives, as a specific knowledge provides the lens for posing problems about the conditions of life.

But this adaptation of Freire’s principle to the school context sharply defines the difference between what critical pedagogy envisions and what American schools actually do. The school curriculum, far from representing disciplinary knowledges as ways of understanding and acting in the world, represents them as static, commodified bodies of information, designed to “explain” the necessity or desirability of the world-as-it-is, while preparing students for docile service in it. Changing this perception of school studies requires directing explicit critical attention toward the differences between the two ways of conceiving knowledge, along with classroom enactments of authentic disciplinary inquiry, consciously designed to oppose the inert transferring of information that Freire calls “banking” education (*Pedagogy* 45–59). While these practices take time and energy to concretize as the work of Monday morning, many teachers, indeed many students, are already allies in the effort, even if they are not advocates of critical pedagogy. They recognize already the dissatisfactions of lecture formats, the lack of engagement, the deadening of curiosity. Consistent with the nature of social change generally, the task is to intervene creatively in the midst of these dissatisfactions, seeking to imagine alternatives. No doubt, the aspiring critical educator will encounter

the problems that worry Elbow, including negative reactions from students to an unfamiliar focus on dimensions of social experience ordinarily left outside of school studies. The issues the teacher introduces may not seem “relevant to the real lives of the students” (89) because students are not accustomed to thinking of their lives, certainly their school lives, in critical terms. There could even be some bamboozlement because the work is difficult for teachers as well as learners and the potential for missteps is significant. But never mind: the real bamboozlement perpetuated across the curriculum does not derive from the clumsy aspirations of critical teachers; it derives from the well orchestrated “banking” of reified, ossified information that schools settle for as a pale facsimile of learning. “Knowledge,” Freire says, “emerges only through invention and reinvention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry men [*sic*] pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (*Pedagogy* 46). The pursuit of this idea can tolerate some minor-league bamboozlement along the way.

The fourth and final principle that Elbow identifies in Freirean method is an insistence on rationality, critical thinking, the posing of problems. The opposition that most interests Elbow is that between “education as cognitive dissonance,” a model of skepticism, doubt, resistance, which he ascribes to Freire, and “education as emulation or participation,” identified variously as the Platonic, Socratic, Freudian, and Piagetian model. The second depends on belief, trust, admiration, and a willingness to participate in, rather than resist, “what is different from the self” (“Bamboozled” 96–97). Elbow does not repudiate the first in favor of the second: he intends here a real embracing of contraries. But he argues that a resistance model may be somewhat more appropriate for adult Brazilian peasants, bamboozled for centuries by the assumption that their misery is part of a divine plan, and proportionately less appropriate for middle-class American adolescents already steeped in skepticism, isolated in their individualism, and fearful of dependency or commitment. We suggest, however, that Elbow has picked the wrong target when he invokes Freirean liberatory rationality in what would otherwise be a plausible critique of American adolescent alienation. The real target is the authoritarian rationalism that currently dominates American schools and that may very well encourage just the alienation that Elbow describes. Freire speaks of the “culture of silence” that results when people are not free to speak their word. In such a culture, people are “mute,” prohibited from “creatively taking part in the transformations of their society and therefore prohibited from being” (*Politics* 50). Freire has in mind, to be sure, the oppressive conditions experienced by the peasants in his culture circles. Yet how apt a metaphor is the “culture of silence,” suitably modified in the context of American education, for characterizing

sullen, apathetic students whose school days are comprised of lectures, artificial discussion, and cold attention to ideas they are not invited to own, explore, or even react to as something meaningful in and for their lives. Alienation is a response to bamboozlement, ineffective but understandable. Freire has much to say, by contrast, about the comradeship, the mutual trust, the selflessness that come to exist among teacher-learners and learner-teachers involved together in projects of cultural transformation. He can imagine an “unquiet pedagogy,” a critical stance, that does not entail alienation—that promotes just its opposite, communal engagement, faith in a productive future, commitment to an articulate public pursuit of social justice.

We acknowledge, with Elbow, the dehumanizing impact of authoritarian rationalism in American education, and we support, as he does, the need for belief, affirmation, and commitment outside the self. We also think that liberatory rationality responds to that need by imagining a culture of creative dialogue to supplant the culture of silence. And we suspect that there is little in that imagining with which Peter Elbow, long-time foe of bamboozlement and long-time advocate of “unquiet pedagogy,” would disagree.

6 NEW USES FOR DOUBTING

THOMAS G. O'DONNELL

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. Anscombe. 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,¹ and both authorize *individuals* to speak as representatives of 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.² 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)

7 BELIEVING IS NOT A GAME *Elbow's Uneasy Debt to Michael Polanyi*

M. ELIZABETH SARGENT

With every year that passes, I become more and more aware of the profound impact Peter Elbow's work has had on my theory and practice of teaching writing. But I also find myself wondering nearly as often why Elbow's work doesn't always get the serious attention it deserves—to mention one particularly incomprehensible instance of this, his complete absence from a lengthy bibliography of the field which Andrea Lunsford produced for MLA in 1992. I've finally concluded that Elbow's powerful misreading of Michael Polanyi's influential work may be partly to blame. Elbow quite simply gives too much away—by his own standards—when he writes about believing as a game and about the “tacit dimension” (Polanyi's phrase) as magic, opposing it to reason (*Writing With Power* xxii, xxvi). It was precisely here, in altering and widening our definition of the rational to include—as *central* and *necessary*, not peripheral—the tacit and belief, that Polanyi's major contribution was located.

I take Elbow seriously as a theorist: his work deserves the most careful theoretical discriminations we're capable of making, with a close attention to chronology and change in his thought. In examining one of the founding documents in our field, a text that exists in two closely related but distinct forms—“The Doubting Game and the Believing Game: An Analysis of the Intellectual Enterprise” and the later “Methodological Doubting and Believing”—and the extent to which both were influenced by Polanyi's work, I am concerned not just with setting the record straight, but with the continuing fruitful development of our discipline. In all fields, scholars go over and over foundational documents to tease out every nuance, paying particular attention to moments where the thought seems to take a wrong turn or grow tangled. Similarly, we need to give Elbow's doubting and believing essays the meticulous reading and

Recurring references to works by Polanyi and Elbow will be abbreviated in the text as follows: “The Doubting Game and the Believing Game”—“DGBG.”; *Embracing Contraries*—EC; *Everyone Can Write*—ECW; *Knowing and Being*—KB; *Meaning*—M; “Methodological Doubting and Believing”—“MDB”; “Polanyian Perspectives”—“PP”; *Personal Knowledge*—PK; *Science, Faith and Society*—SFS; *The Tacit Dimension*—TD; *Writing With Power*—WWP; *Writing Without Teachers*—WWT

critical rereading they deserve. This essay attempts one such rereading, attending to difficult intersections with Polanyi's theory, because chasing the thought back to the source of the difficulty might give us a chance to start over and carry the thought forward in a more productive direction. If we *are* able to do this, we can do so only *because* of the particular way in which Elbow misread Polanyi, only because of his sensitivity to a particular line in Polanyi's thought and the generosity with which Elbow has expressed his indebtedness to Polanyi's work.

Consider, for example, one of the passages Elbow cites, in which Polanyi argues that our use of language is itself sufficient to reveal that belief is the crucial and primary power of the human mind:

A child could never learn to speak if it assumed that the words which are used in its hearing are meaningless. Or even if it assumed that five out of ten words so used are meaningless. And similarly no one could become a scientist unless he presumes that the scientific doctrine and methods are fundamentally sound, and that their ultimate premises can be unquestioningly accepted. We have here an instance of the process described epigrammatically by the Christian church fathers in the words *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith in search of understanding. (SFS 45)

The Hungarian-born medical-doctor-turned-research-scientist Michael Polanyi published these words in 1946 in his first book, two years before he officially shifted his focus to philosophy of science and epistemology by exchanging his chair in Physical Chemistry at the University of Manchester for a chair in Social Studies. Peter Elbow read Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge* (1958) in the late 1960s; and certainly anyone familiar with Polanyi's work would be struck by the extraordinary echoes of Polanyi everywhere present in Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers* (1973), but most obviously in Elbow's appendix essay to that volume ("DGBG").

In the recent reissue of *Writing Without Teachers* (WWT), Elbow—in a new introduction—acknowledges his intellectual debts, the formative reading that fed into that early book. To use a phrase from David Bartholomae, Elbow's early published pages were "crowded with others" ("Writing" 63): Elbow lists seventeen by name, from Ken Macrorie to Peter Medawar, from Carl Rogers to Jerome Bruner. But the second name on this long list is Polanyi's:

His rich and monumental book *Personal Knowledge* made a huge impression on me when I read it. . . . I learned more from him than it would be easy to say, but certainly I owe a large debt for my thinking about the believing game; he talks about the "fiduciary character of doubt." He stresses the need to make use of what is tacit, unarticulated, and known by the body. He provides a larger picture of rationality and knowing. (xxviii)

In a little-known essay on Polanyi published in 1991, Elbow goes a bit further:

I read Polanyi a long time ago. . . . I'm indeed embarrassed at how deeply I had internalized and perhaps not credited his thinking. ("PP" 5)

Then, commenting on the passage above from *SFS*, Elbow continues,

The Polyanian phrase is "fiduciary transaction," which suggests the act of belief that's necessary, that underlies any act of knowing. I cite Polanyi in my doubting and believing essay (*EC* 258), but I see now that merely citing him doesn't do justice to the degree to which I had simply internalized his point and was essentially borrowing it. And the "fiduciary transaction" is central to my teaching. When I write and when I try to help my students write, the necessary thing is the act of trusting it, the act of believing it. Freewriting is an act of believing that meaning will come. (8)

Elbow explicitly mentions Polanyi in *WWT* only twice (173, 189), yet Polanyi's influence is clear on almost every page. What I want to do here is suggest, first, how accurate Elbow is when he says he had deeply "internalized" and "not credited" Polanyi's thinking (even at those moments when he quarrels with it), and second, how, nevertheless, his formulation of the believing and doubting games is significantly at odds with Polanyi's insights. For Polanyi, believing can never be as detached or as reversible as Elbow's formulation of it as a "game" or a "method" suggests. Elbow's take on Polanyi may have been strategically necessary and effective at the time, but I'll argue that some of the continuing resistance to Elbow's work grows out of two reactions: an uneasiness with Elbow's wavering theory of knowledge, and, an underlying sense that deep un-game-like beliefs are being asserted or threatened.

In doing so, I won't be able to claim that I'm taking up the full challenge Elbow issues in his new introduction to *WWT*: yes, I hope to engage "at the theoretical level" with the substance of his argument about "the epistemological strengths of the doubting and believing games," but I can't promise to do so by "using the doubting game or critical thinking . . . on [his] argument to see what we can learn" (xxv–xxvii), at least not in the way that Elbow means those terms. My thinking has been irreversibly shaped by both Polanyi's and by Elbow's; this does not mean that I am unable to answer back to them or to raise questions about parts of their intellectual frameworks, but I can do so (as Polanyi says in relation to the language in which we think and speak and write) only by relying acritically on the rest of those frameworks as I analyze or criticize one part of them at a time. In fact, some of the critiques of his own work, which Elbow describes but dismisses as having misunderstood or misrepresented what he was saying (xxvi–xxvii in "Introduction to the Second Edition" of *WWT*), fail precisely because they have not believed or indwelt Elbow's

work *enough*. Elbow, characteristically, might hope to have it both ways—to have a thoroughgoing doubting of his argument that nevertheless fully understood it—but I’m not sure that he can.



In an attempt to make explicit Elbow’s debts to Polanyi—and to highlight what I see as the uneasiness of those debts—I lay out below eight theses on how *Writing Without Teachers* builds from *Personal Knowledge*.¹

1. Without Belief, There Would Be No Knowledge

The insistence on belief in Polanyi’s *Personal Knowledge* clearly influenced the appendix essay in *WWT*, on the third page of which Elbow echoes Polanyi’s often-repeated use of Augustine’s formulation *credo ut intelligam*—“I believe in order to understand” (*PK* 266)—although Elbow mistakenly attributes it to Tertullian, who actually said, “I believe it because it’s impossible.”² Of course, Tertullian would leap to mind in relation to the *Through the Looking Glass* epigraph with which Elbow opens both versions of the doubting and believing essay—“sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.” An emphasis on the role of belief in all knowing is central to both Elbow and Polanyi but is also the site of their primary disagreement (and in ways that correspond closely to Elbow’s revealing confusion between Augustine and Tertullian here); I will return to the role of belief at the end of this essay.

2. Doubt Has Been Overvalued as The Only Way to Arrive at Trustworthy Knowledge

“The Critique of Doubt” is the title of the ninth chapter of *PK*. Clearly, when Elbow announces on the third page of his *WWT* appendix that “this essay is an extended attack on the doubting game” (149), he is linking his project with Polanyi’s. He emphasizes that “somehow the doubting game has gained a monopoly on legitimacy in our culture”; since Descartes, we have come to believe that “the way to proceed to the truth was to doubt everything” (150). The result is that an intellectual who doubts in the twentieth century is seen to be “rigorous, disciplined, rational and tough-minded” (151).

The echoes from Polanyi’s “Critique of Doubt” are remarkable:

It has been taken for granted throughout the critical period of philosophy that the acceptance of unproven beliefs was the broad road to darkness, while truth was approached by the straight and narrow path of doubt. We were warned that a host of unproven beliefs were instilled in us from earliest childhood. . . . We were urged to resist the pressure of this traditional indoctrination by pitting against it the principle of philosophic doubt. Descartes had declared that universal doubt should purge

his mind of all opinions held merely on trust and open it to knowledge firmly grounded in reason. . . . The method of doubt . . . trusts that the uprooting of all voluntary components of belief will leave behind unassailed a residue of knowledge that is completely determined by the objective evidence. Critical thought trusted this method unconditionally for avoiding error and establishing truth. (*PK* 269)

However, Elbow—in both “DGBG” and in “MDB”—differs from Polanyi in presenting doubt and belief as equal opposing binaries, both effective methods for establishing the truth. Polanyi’s project is to reveal how inadequate “the method of doubt” is for the production of knowledge; he continues the above passage in this way:

I do not say that during the period of critical thought this method has been always, or indeed ever, rigorously practiced—which I believe to be impossible—but merely that its practice has been avowed and emphatic, while its relaxation was marginal and acknowledged only in passing. (269–70)

By the time of *Embracing Contraries* thirteen years later, Elbow declares a fuller disagreement with Polanyi on the issue of doubt and belief (contrast “MDB” 267–68 with *PK* 272–73, 276), but it’s clear even from this early point (“DGBG”) that Elbow is willing to grant more powers to systematic doubt than Polanyi ever is.

3. When We Say That a Theory or a Finding Will Be Fruitful, We Are Saying We Believe It to Be True

Elbow’s second direct mention of Polanyi in “DGBG” comes near its close:

People like Thomas Kuhn and Michael Polanyi give an account of the history of science to the effect that . . . important cruxes are settled by something very like the believing game. . . . At a period of scientific revolution—when competing paradigms or models are up for grabs—it is as it is with readings of a poem: the wrong paradigm is not proven wrong; rather [scientists] perceive another one as more fruitful and indeed truer. They perceive this truth from within it, not from without. (189–90)

Elbow rightly adds “and indeed truer,” recognizing Polanyi’s impatience with those who would use circumlocutions to avoid acknowledging their reliance on a theory or a finding to do their intellectual work—referring, for instance, to the beauty or elegance or explanatory power or fruitfulness of a theory instead of to its truth (*PK* 147). But Elbow significantly does not qualify his use of the word “fruitful” as Polanyi would: Polanyi insists that it is the “*intimation* of a theory’s fruitfulness” to science, not the fruitfulness itself, that is a primary criterion for scientific truth (148). That is, we must be willing to

admit we are trusting an intimation of the fruitfulness of a hypothesis, based on our informed judgment, since we cannot know ahead of time whether a particular theory will be fruitful or not: “At the stage when we have to make up our minds about the merits of a discovery its future repercussions are still unknown” (147–48). Polanyi argues that the trained instincts and intimations of the scientist—indeed, of an explorer in any field—play a key role in the *selection* of productive problems to work on and lines of inquiry to follow. Elbow, however, insists from the start that we must *not* select: “Believe *all* the assertions. If you merely look through the pile and pick out what seems truest, that would be the guessing game or the intuition game, not the believing game” (148). We will return to this important disagreement between Polanyi and Elbow below, noting here simply that for Polanyi random guessing and trained intuition would be distinct behaviors.

4. Explicit Knowledge *Always* Relies on Tacit Knowledge and on Distinctions Between What Is “Focal” and What Is “Subsidiary”: Thus, Indwelling Is “The Very Mechanism for Knowing” (“DGBG” 173)

Elbow nowhere uses Polanyi’s term “indwelling” in “DGBG,” but when he contrasts the doubting game—dedicated to the attempt to “extricate the self” from the propositions being tested—to the believing game—“built on the idea that the self cannot be removed: complete objectivity is impossible” (172)³—he makes his other explicit reference to Polanyi:

It takes practice over time . . . to learn to “project” more in the good sense—to see more of what’s really there by getting more of the self into every bit of it. . . . The believing game is built on the idea that you can’t get away from projection since it is the very mechanism for knowing and seeing—and that the culprit is not projection but inflexible and limited projection. . . . The believing game emphasizes a model of knowing as an act of constructing, an act of investment, an act of involvement: what Michael Polanyi calls “the fiduciary transaction.” (171, 173)

For Elbow, the impossibility of objectivity is closely related to the nature of perception, to the fact that both thinking and perceiving are “active and constructional” (171).⁴ Yes, the active shaping nature of perception and the necessity of indwelling make mistakes inevitable, but they also make knowledge *possible*. However, by the time Elbow publishes *Writing With Power* eight years later, indwelling has become an emotional, even magical, practice, as Elbow’s description of “a more magical view . . . this act of putting-yourself-in” (368) makes clear. Polanyi, however, emphasizes that the way we use tools—focusing not on how the hammer hits our palm with varying pressure, but on where the hammer hits the nail—is structurally identical to how we use *all* intellectual

tools, everything from microscopes to telescopes to X-rays to language. All of our knowing has this *from-to* structure: that is, we are relying on something subsidiarily, often tacitly, pouring ourselves out into it, while we focus on whatever it is we want to know or discover. If we suddenly shift focus—concentrate, say, on how the wooden handle of the hammer touches our palm—we momentarily lose our ability to hit the nail. Elbow's emphasis on freewriting owes a great deal to this distinction between the focal and the subsidiary in Polanyi's work, as Elbow himself acknowledged fifteen years after *WWT*, reflecting on a key passage in *PK*:

"We pour ourselves out into [our tools] and assimilate them as parts of our own existence. We accept them existentially by dwelling in them. . . . Our subsidiary awareness of tools and probes can be regarded now as the act of making them form a part of our own body" (*PK* 59). Then [Polanyi] makes one more turn into the next paragraph: "Hammers and probes can be replaced by intellectual tools." That is, we use words and language as tools in the same way. I take the hammer, I take the cane, and in a sense I pour my body out into the end of the thing so I don't feel like I'm touching the hammer or the cane but rather the nail or the street. I do the same self-pouring into language. This seems a potent, pregnant theme in Polanyi; I'm struck in retrospect with how much I got from it and how it informs what I do. . . . Freewriting: pouring yourself into the act of writing, indwelling in the tool. ("PP" 6–7)

Polanyi's distinctions between focal and subsidiary awareness helped Elbow articulate one of his crucial insights, the necessity of separating the composing process from the editing process. However, Elbow wavers between wanting to reproduce the old binaries Polanyi set out to discredit and redefine—between objective and subjective knowledge, between rational and emotional/magical ways of knowing—and wanting to acknowledge, as Polanyi insists we must, indwelling as a deeply rational, structural principle on which all knowing depends.

5. The Languages We Are Born Into Inevitably Immerse Us in Theories about the Nature of Reality, Simultaneously Limiting Us and Equipping Us to Think Further, Even to Challenge Those Theories.

According to Polanyi, it is the interplay between these two kinds of awareness, focal and subsidiary—the shifting of our focus from our meaning to our symbols and back again—that extends our powers of thought. Carefully defining articulation (language) to include all symbolic representations, from maps to mathematical formulas to words, Polanyi argues that temporarily focusing on our tools, on an element that was previously subsidiary—to complicate or challenge or refine or explain it—can lead to important discoveries (*PK* 115).

Alternating between *using* our symbols as tools and *attending* to them “represents in miniature the whole range of operations by which articulation disciplines and expands the reasoning powers of man” (131). Thus, while Polanyi’s primary aim—like Elbow’s—is to allow us to trust language, to dwell in it, to pour ourselves into our tools to get work done, his epistemology (again, like Elbow’s) also requires that we challenge language, that we examine our tools, improve them, or toss them out and get new ones. But he insists we can never challenge all of them at once: a full-scale doubting of our entire socially created symbolic framework would render us imbeciles (295).

Elbow, too, argues that the rules for meaning building are tacit: they “are not explicitly set down and agreed to. . . . Our rules for building meaning into words are unspoken and are learned by doing” (“DGBG” 154). While there is a constant tension between what an individual wants words to mean and what various overlapping speech communities are willing to let them mean at that moment, language also has to follow certain other guidelines—economy, flexibility, redundancy, ambiguity (see 167, 157⁵). The debts to Polanyi’s fifth chapter, “Articulation”—(*PK* 77–117), which draws on the work of linguists to engage “in an epistemological reflection on the relation of language to its inarticulate roots” (77 n.1), are stated explicitly in Elbow’s 1988 talk at MLA (“PP”), but they are also clear in *WWT*. Polanyi, like Elbow, insists on the necessary imprecision of language—since language must be flexible enough to be applied to new experience—and on our inability ever to get outside it. As contemporary critics have pointed out from other vantage points, language writes us. Polanyi puts it this way: every word we learn and use is a theory about the nature of reality (see *PK* 80–81, 104–5, 95).

6. All Knowing Is Inherently Social

Elbow argues that both the believing and the doubting games are inherently social (176). Throughout *WWT* runs the assumption that writing and language are social activities, that words have meaning only within speech communities, and that these meanings are constantly shifting slightly as we talk and write to each other. The teacherless writing class is dedicated to the principle 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 those things by those words” (154)—with the important exception, of course, of the powerfully original writer who makes us hear “in an utterance what [we] never used to hear in it” (155).

As a scientist, Polanyi naturally pays particular attention (in Chapter 7, “Conviviality”) to the complex workings of the scientific community in policing and preserving the integrity of science: the convivial nature of knowledge

involves overlapping networks of mutual control that exist within and between disciplines. In fact, Frank Kermode and Wayne Booth both, like Elbow before them, draw on this aspect of Polanyi's thought in relation to the idea of consensus in interpretative communities (see *Art*, 157–61, 168–84; *Dogma* 120). Polanyi emphasizes the social, communal nature of all knowledge and the necessity for challenging and revising each other's findings; while individuals do challenge the scientific community (indeed, the growth of science depends on their doing so), they can't challenge all of it at once—and they can only mount an effective challenge after serious apprenticeship and submission to science and identification with most of its skills, standards, and concerns (*PK* 206–8; cf. *EC* 96–97).

7. All Knowing Is Rooted in the Body

To ask how I would think if I were brought up outside any particular society is as meaningless as to ask how I would think if I were born in no particular body, relying on no particular sensory and nervous organs (*PK* 322–23).

In his new introduction to *WWP*, Elbow stresses the importance of Sondra Perl and Eugene Gendlin's contributions to our thinking about "felt sense," about our ability to sense where we connect with meaning in the body (xvi); but ten years earlier, he had already made the connections he saw between Polanyi's work and theirs explicit, citing *PK* (71):

The famous word in Polanyi's work, of course, is "tacit". . . Polanyi is getting at the fact that what we can say rests on a foundation of what we can't say. He talks at length in Chapters 4 and 5 of *Personal Knowledge* about the paradox that what humans achieve through language actually rests on a *root* ability that we share with animals and infants—the root ability to simply match a sign or symbol with an experience. . . . Polanyi wants us to honor and develop and dignify the inarticulate. Gendlin and Perl have developed a teaching practice that trains people when they put out words to stop for a minute and say, "Wait, is that what I wanted to say?" Eugene Gendlin's work, focusing on the bodily dimensions of that question (which of course fits Polanyi too), suggests for writers a reflective routine. . . . A related teaching practice is freewriting, writing out of inarticulateness, writing when you don't yet know what you want to say and trusting it—plunging into the unknown. The practice of freewriting follows from this Polyanian insight about the priority and fecundity of the inarticulate. . . . In short, we know more than we can say. ("PP" 5–6)

Elbow clearly found Polanyi's emphasis on the "bodily roots of all thought" (*TD* 15; cf. *KB* 147–48, 183–85), on the physical roots of language, congenial. The inseparability of mind and body is central to Polanyi's work: "To a disembodied intellect, entirely incapable of lust, pain or comfort, most of our vocabulary

would be incomprehensible” (*PK* 99). But for all his emphasis on the personal, bodily, social, and limited nature of all knowing, Polanyi’s stress—like Elbow’s—is on how we can arrive at trustworthy knowledge. Polanyi sees all knowing existing on a continuum between the knower and the known, the person discovering/creating/upholding knowledge on one end and the claim/discovery/creation itself at the other. He never abandons what he refers to as the “universal pole” of personal knowledge: skillful knowing claims to reveal something about reality, and “any presumed contact with reality inevitably claims universality” (313). A believer in socially constructed knowledge—Polanyi would say there is no other kind—he simultaneously insists that this constructed knowledge is not whimsical or arbitrary: in any search for truth, the freedom of the discoverer/producer of knowledge “to do as he pleases is overruled by the freedom of the responsible person to act as he must” (309). Knowledge is always simultaneously *both* created and discovered in Polanyi’s epistemology; Elbow speaks in similar terms in “MDB” when he suggests that the interpretation of texts, hermeneutics, is a useful model for all knowledge, a paradigm revealing the world as always, simultaneously, both “given” and “made up” by perceivers (298).

8. The Hunger for Certainty Should Not Be Confused with the Search for Truth

“What kind of truth do you need?” Elbow asks in the appendix essay:

There is a dirtier and a cleaner truth, and the believing game settles, much of the time, for the dirtier kind: truth mixed with error. . . . There is a contrast here between the thirst for certainty and an acceptance of uncertainty and ambiguity. The doubting game . . . tends to confuse *certainty* with *truth*. This confusion is so widespread that many people equate the two. (“DGBG” 177, 179)

Indeed, Polanyi argues in *PK* that “truth mixed with error” is all we have: there is no “cleaner” kind. Since we would have no truth, no knowledge, not even any facts, without people who were committed to and upholding that truth or that knowledge or those facts and since we could always conceivably be mistaken, in whole or in part, *no* truth is certain. Polanyi talks about three factors that jointly determine scientific value, that is, how precious a particular hypothesis or finding is to science: (1) certainty (precision or accuracy); (2) systematic relevance; and (3) intrinsic interest. He argues that science can be very precise indeed about many things that are not in and of themselves very interesting to science, let alone to anyone else, and that within scientific fields these “three criteria apply jointly, so that deficiency in one is largely compensated for by excellence in the others” (136):

The scientific value of biology is maintained at the same level as that of physics by the greater intrinsic interest of the living things studied, though the treatment is much less exact and coherent. (139)

Polanyi then extends these values to all disciplines, arguing that each discipline has a kind of precision natural and appropriate to it and is thus equally valuable to human knowledge. Absolute certainty or precision is worth little indeed in the absence of the other two values. Elbow appreciated Polanyi's insistence on appropriate forms of precision in different fields of inquiry:

Though the believing game produces less precision, what I wish to stress here is that it does represent a huge advance in precision over undisciplined thinking. And that using the doubting game in the realm where it doesn't work is nothing but undisciplined thinking. ("DGBG" 173–74)

Elbow connects this hunger for certainty with the "itch for closure," our impatience for answers, our unwillingness to dwell in uncertainties, complexities, contradictions: the parallel with Keats's "negative capability" is close. All of *WWT* is an extensive, carefully articulated, and effective heuristic device designed to help writers resist the urge for too-early closure and for spurious forms of certainty. Thus, as with any heuristic device, its only true readers are those who, in the words of Elbow's dedication, "actually use it—not just read it," who fully test its usefulness in practice, who, in Polanyian terms, indwell it long enough to make it a fully operative extension of their bodies or use it as a lens to look through (*M* 36–37; Elbow, incidentally, also uses the metaphor of the lens, "MDB" 283, 299).

However, of course, once a reader has done this, the existential change, the change in his or her being, is irreversible. It is on this issue in particular—the irreversible nature of indwelling, tacit knowing, and belief—that Polanyi and Elbow part company.



Insofar as the late 1960s began the last three decades of intense scholarly activity in the field of rhetoric and composition, Elbow is one of the founders of that field. He worked out some crucial concepts for the discipline in reaction to Polanyi's thought; like all founders, he got many things right and some wrong. Polanyi functions here as a similar authority in another field, an epistemologist who got certain things wrong and many right—for example, his later work with Harry Prosch on literature and metaphor (in *M*) is frustratingly unsatisfactory: he could have learned a lot from Elbow. My own experience using Elbow's theories and practices in the classroom over the past fifteen years has convinced me that they work—and not because of Elbow's account of how they work, but because of Polanyi's. I'm also convinced that it's a matter of some importance that we figure out not only *that* Elbow's methods work, but *why*.

In the eight theses above, I've argued that Elbow drew on Polanyi for his formulation of the doubting and believing games, in *WWT* in particular. In *Embracing Contraries*, a collection of essays written between 1965 and 1986, Polanyi's influence is still clear: he is cited only five times throughout *EC*, but as in *WWT*, his thinking leaves its mark throughout. And the final essay in that book, "Methodological Doubting and Believing: Contraries in Inquiry," in its very title reveals the continuing debt to, argument with, and backing away from Michael Polanyi's thought. The project of "attacking" doubt has been softened in the second version (contrast "MDB" 258 with "DGBG" 149); the emphasis on hermeneutics, the interpretation of texts, as paradigmatic for all knowledge has been heightened. Elbow has a more assured sense of his epistemological project in the second version (300), claiming that in the absence of certainty, our task is to find "valid" or "trustworthy knowledge" (296—the echoes of Booth are strong here). However, what seems from the essay's title to have been meant as a great stride forward—believing and doubting *systematically, methodologically*—was in fact present in the earlier essay ("Believe *all* the assertions," 148; cf. p. 10 above)—and underscores the major differences between Elbow's views and Polanyi's.

Polanyi worked to accredit a scientist's trained intuitive ability to select, to ask good questions, and to identify worthwhile problems: any systematic attempt to believe everything would be irresponsible, a waste of scientific resources (*PK* 124). Polanyi argues that we have to accredit our ability within our individual disciplines to recognize what counts as a serious hypothesis within our field and to make decisions—decisions which, of course, could always be mistaken—about which hypotheses deserve further investigation. Elbow's emphasis on believing as a systematic game disregards the limitations on our believing time and energy.

Unlike Elbow, Polanyi warns us from the start that "Personal knowledge is an intellectual commitment, and as such inherently hazardous" (viii). Precisely because of the bodily roots of all thought, the way we place our bodies in space and time makes irreversible changes in us—we arrive at discoveries already committed to them:

The change is irrevocable. . . . Having made a discovery, I shall never see the world again as before. My eyes have become different; I have made myself into a person seeing and thinking differently. I have crossed a gap, the heuristic gap which lies between problem and discovery. (143)

Further, once we *do* see differently, nothing can relieve us of the responsibility of acknowledging the assumptions on which we rely to guide our thinking from that point on. In his section on "The Critique of Doubt," Polanyi argues

that modern science is a system of beliefs just as circular and unassailable by doubt as the superstitions of the Azande tribe (288 ff.); nevertheless, he affirms that he and his fellow scientists believe that the framework of contemporary science offers them a closer relation to reality than the beliefs of the Azande do. He does not argue that he and his fellow scientists are wrong to do this—only that they must responsibly acknowledge that they cannot themselves (and could not, ever) prove irrefutably all of the scientific assumptions upon which they rely. Further, within the framework of modern science, controversies develop that cannot be solved by carefully presenting one's irrefutable data:

Formal operations relying on *one* framework of interpretation cannot demonstrate a proposition to persons who rely on *another* framework. Its advocates may not even succeed in getting a hearing from these, since they must first teach them a new language, and no one can learn a new language unless he first trusts that it means something. (151; cf. *SFS* 45)

Thus, Polanyi argues, it can be extraordinarily difficult to “persuade others to accept a new idea in science”:

[T]o the extent to which it represents a new way of reasoning, we cannot convince others of it by formal argument, for so long as we argue within their framework, we can never induce them to abandon it. (*PK* 151)

No list of good reasons (cf. Booth)—no matter how full, how long, or how good—is ever *sufficient* to force someone across a logical gap into a new intellectual framework. Elbow may be right that only a stance something like what he calls the believing game—some imaginative willingness to indwell a new way of seeing, to take the time to learn a new language—may allow such changes to take place. Indeed, Polanyi suggests something similar, an “intellectual sympathy” enabling others to “listen sympathetically. . . to a doctrine they have not yet grasped” (151); Martin Buber describes it as physical action, a “bold swinging—demanding the most intensive stirring of one's being—into the life of the other” (“Elements” 81).⁶ But systematic, methodological attempts to believe everything that is difficult or impossible to believe are unrealistic: Elbow gives too much away when he uses the word “believing” in this way.⁷ Intellectual beliefs are life-changing; Polanyi speaks of them as “conversion[s]” and “self-modifying act[s]” (*PK* 151). Elbow's critics are correct when they refuse to accept his proposal that the believing game is safe or reversible—it is neither. And it cannot be a game. Crucial issues are at stake about how we are going to invest our limited life energy and time.

At many points, Elbow seems close to admitting this (see “MDB” 270); at one point, he seems almost to be answering an objection from Polanyi: “Am I

seeming to say that there is nothing about *commitment* in the believing game? Not quite” (284). But he always ends up claiming that the beliefs can be temporary (270, 284).

Polanyi disagrees: “We must now recognize belief once more as the source of all knowledge” (*PK* 266). Our beliefs can be mistaken or inadequate, and they can certainly change; our next beliefs may replace or build on or complicate or challenge our current beliefs—but our current beliefs are not simply reversible: they influence our behavior and our subsequent beliefs; they have consequences over time.

I have tried to demonstrate that into every act of knowing there enters a tacit and passionate contribution of the person knowing what is being known, and that this co-efficient is no mere imperfection, but a necessary component of all knowledge. (312)

Polanyi insists that belief is prior, is the root of all knowing, is the essential power of the mind:

The learner, like the discoverer, must believe before he can know. . . . Such granting of one’s personal allegiance is—like an act of heuristic conjecture—a passionate pouring of oneself into untried forms of existence. (208, as quoted in “MDB” 264)

Elbow relies on Polanyi’s discussion of indwelling and the structure of tacit knowing in the final chapter of *WWP*, citing for the first time there Polanyi’s example of pouring oneself into a tool, a probe, indwelling it, and making it an extension of one’s body in order to use it successfully (368–73). But while Polanyi develops this example to analyze the structure of tacit knowing and thus to give us a larger definition of rationality (see *TD*, esp. 17–18), Elbow associates it with magic (368), further heightening his association of “the non-rational, the unexplicit or tacit and the magical” (xxvi).

I’m torn, however, because Elbow’s pulling back here from the full implications of Polanyi’s thought may indeed have been both strategic and effective. By not requiring us to go all the way with Polanyi’s argument for the priority of belief, by pulling back to a binary we’re comfortable with—the familiar opposition between rationality and magical thinking—Elbow has, I think, succeeded in getting a much wider range of scholars to try out freewriting in their classrooms, assuming they could always pull back and critique it or dismiss it later. They were free to consider it a mere strategy, a technique that couldn’t possibly commit them to a particular epistemology or theory about the nature of reality (although, of course, James Berlin argued otherwise—“Contemporary” 776). In my own experience, however, the results have been so reliable that it would be irresponsible to attribute the change in my students’ writing to “magic.” Nor could it be attributed to my requiring students to systematically believe and

then doubt all assertions because I have never made any such requirement or even suggestion.

Studying the change in my students' writing brought about by varieties of free and exploratory writing (see Sargent, "Errors," "Mapping," and "Peer") has led me to hypothesize that something else is going on here—and to decide that I want to spend 90 percent of my energies on this something else because it is more productive and more intellectual, richer in ideas, concepts, thinking, than any other theory or practice I have tried in the classroom. Elbow's theories of systematic believing and doubting don't account for what I see happening in my students' writing with such regularity. Polanyi's theory, on the other hand, does.

Elbow chooses William Blake's "Without contraries is no progression" as one of three epigraphs to open *EC*; and throughout both versions of the doubting and believing essays, Elbow insists that these contrary games, doubt and belief, are equally weighted and equally important: his deepest argument is for the fruitfulness of the dialectic between them, for *Embracing Contraries*. This dialectic remains central—even though Elbow's most eloquent and forceful passages are critiques of doubt, convincing illustrations of how academic doubt can paradoxically reinforce credulity, the unexamined belief of ideas we already hold ("MDB" 263). This dialectic remains central—even though Elbow also writes powerfully about the believing game as a way to the truth and about our culture's fear of belief ("DGBG" 176, 183). In the end, Elbow always returns to the balance of opposites: he presents doubt and belief as equally important, both necessary and balancing each other. In Polanyi's epistemology, on the other hand, while doubt has an essential role to play, it is always a subsidiary, dependent, secondary role. It can test what believing has made or discovered, but it can never make or discover anything on its own.

Many of us have turned to Elbow's doubting and believing essays for help in our teaching, particularly when students trained in glib forms of critical thinking refuse to enter into any work of literature or theory with energy; we've pointed out to these students how skilled they are at holding new ideas at arm's length, at distancing techniques that are ultimately self-protective and self-indulgent. We owe Elbow an enormous debt of gratitude for expressing this dynamic so forcefully and convincingly. But the insistence on the "tacit" as a form of magic shows Elbow's continuing uneasiness with belief and with Polanyi's thought. The structure of tacit knowing as Polanyi describes it—of focusing, say, on where the hammer head hits the nail instead of on where the hammer handle touches our palm—is not magic. It's simply how the mind works. Elbow's turn—in the last chapter of *WWP* as well as in his 1998 introduction to it—back to the old binary of emotion versus reason, of mystery and

chaos and magic and the tacit versus analysis and control and care and the explicit (xxvi), allows too many to dismiss or disregard his groundbreaking work as irrational or unintellectual or “deeply flawed” (*ECW* xvi; see Covino on Winterrowd and Young’s dismissal of Elbow’s “magic”⁸). The tension between equal opposites can often be productive for our thinking, but—as Elbow himself acknowledges in “The Uses of Binary Thinking”—we shouldn’t necessarily “balance every dichotomy we encounter” (52). I would argue that the dichotomy between doubt and belief is one Elbow needs to revisit. Even while he admits that he’s been partisan—that he’s been preoccupied with generating, with freewriting, with private writing, that he’s “campaigned [his] whole career for the believing game” (68)—he nevertheless insists that he’s only fighting to get his view heard equally, not to conquer or win over the opposite emphasis on criticism, control, audience, and doubt. He wants an epistemology of dialogue, dialectic, not just rhetoric (69–73), and he can’t understand why people misread him as someone who doesn’t value critical thinking and doubting. Why do they “see me as one-sided . . . when I preach over and over this theme of embracing contraries”? (69).

My criticism, however, is that Elbow hasn’t been one-sided *enough*, that he hasn’t campaigned hard enough or far enough for believing. Perhaps those who resist his position are sensible because, in the end, these matters don’t fit into equal binaries—those who critique and doubt will always feel themselves embattled and at risk at some level *because* they are secondary, subsidiary. Elbow can’t argue that generating words and then critiquing or revising or editing those words are completely equal oppositions; as he states them, one is absolutely prior: if there is no generating, there are no words to critique or revise or cut. Similarly, Polanyi makes clear, belief is the prior and essential condition for doubt—the very operations of the mind that allow us to doubt are absolutely dependent on belief, on our prior ability to pour ourselves into and learn various symbolic languages in order to do our thinking and our doubting. However, simply because a practice or perspective—like doubting—is secondary and dependent upon some prior activity—like believing—does not mean that it is therefore expendable or wrong: its continuing strong presence may be necessary and productive and, in the case of doubting, crucial for the growth of human knowledge.

Polanyi’s life work was a refusal to abandon the words “knowledge,” “objective,” and “reason” to those who would equate them only with empirical, explicit, impersonal skepticism. He fought for the word “knowledge” to include intellectual passions, belief, commitment, and the tacit—and not as secondary, occasional, barely tolerated, marginal, or exceptional extras, nor as equal balancing opposites, but as central, necessary, prior. Elbow’s appreciation

of binary thinking has blinded him to the fact that linking the tacit and emotion with magic lets his critics off the hook too easily. They are not forced to confront the full complexity of his thought and practice as serious knowledge claims. Appeals to magic, emotion, and the personal can be laughed out of court (cf. Winterowd in n. 8 below or Hashimoto, quoted in *ECW* 147) in a way that serious, thoughtfully argued and supported knowledge claims usually cannot be. And Elbow's critics have rightly sensed that if his methods work, their own methods are called into question. In his theory, Elbow wants the field to be large and generous, able to hold opposing but equal contradictory views (*ECW* xiii-xxiii)—I do too. I just think this particular binary cannot be one of them.

Note the hesitations in Elbow's introduction to Part I of *Everyone Can Write* as he talks about his "philosophical foundations":

It might be that the believing game underlies everything else. . . . Yet since I also love doubting, criticism, and logic, binary thinking may lie deeper than the believing game. (*ECW* 3)

However, he also acknowledges that "someone's conscious or unconscious theory of knowledge is less real and important than how they act, and especially how they behave toward their students and colleagues and staff" (3). I would argue exactly this: that Elbow's *practice*, as opposed to his *theory*, reveals his profound commitment to Polanyi's more disturbing, thoroughgoing, and radical conception of rationality. Elbow creates in the body of *WWT* a powerful heuristic, a practice, based on a Polanyian theory of knowledge, but then wavers in the theoretical appendix: the belief enacted in the way he teaches writing suddenly, in his theory, becomes not the ground of all knowing and discovering but a game, *make-believe*. However, he trusts the power of writing—it is the deepest truth in his life. And in his teaching and his writing he is steadily operating not in the framework described in his wavering theory, but in a Polanyian framework—which is, I would suggest, why the practices he suggests (freewriting in particular) work.⁹

Elbow's critics are right to feel threatened by his work; just as our students learn more from what we *do* than from what we *say*, Elbow's critics sense behind his words the fully operational reality of a new conceptual framework, a framework in which their old forms and distinctions and ways of working are all at sea. They can't be argued out of their paradigm into a new one; and even Elbow himself hasn't completely accepted—in his theoretical writing—his new location. But he writes and he teaches writing from a larger, more inclusive conception of rationality, a theory of knowledge that he hasn't yet consciously, consistently, and fully described. It is *not* a theory of knowledge

that requires him, as his Lewis Carroll epigraph might suggest, to believe impossible things (before or after breakfast)—unless the necessity of belief itself as the ground of all knowing *is* that impossible thing.

NOTES

1. It's not clear if Elbow read more of Polanyi's work between 1973 (*WWT*) and 1986, when *Embracing Contraries* came out, but he did read Booth's *Modern Dogma* during that interval and expresses his debt to that work (280–81) in *EC*'s alternative version of the doubting and believing essay—which is thus influenced by Polanyi's thought as mediated through Booth. Elbow returned directly to Polanyi's work again, however, in the late 1980s, chairing an MLA session on Polanyi at my request in 1987 and then giving a paper on Polanyi at MLA 1988 in a session I chaired and organized (see Wallace).
2. Tertullian's thinking on these issues was far from Augustine's (cf. *PK* 266, *TD* 61). I'm indebted to Professors Dale Cannon (Western Oregon University) and Richard Lord (Willamette University) here.
3. Elbow's development of the believing game seems to owe as much to Carl Rogers as to Polanyi (see his new Preface, *WWT* xxix). However, in contrasting Rogers to Polanyi, he inadvertently suggests that Polanyi's thinking was less disciplined, perhaps even "sweet, soft and fuzzy," an implication I'm sure he did not intend. Rogers and Polanyi were, by the way, interested in each other's work and participated in a televised dialogue together (cf. Coulson and Rogers).
4. Though Elbow speaks of a "mechanism for knowing," neither he nor Polanyi think of knowing as a mechanical process: both Elbow and Polanyi root their epistemological projects in the findings of Gestalt (see, for example, "DGBG" 167–68 and *PK* vii).
5. These correspond closely to Polanyi's discussion of the operational principles of language—the Laws of Poverty, Grammar, Iteration, Consistency, Manageability (*PK* 77–82).
6. See Sargent and Watson on Buber's "History of the Dialogical Principle," esp. 415–18.
7. Is my objection simply a semantic one?—that is, would I object less if Elbow had referred instead to "make believe" (he does use the word "pretend" a few times, "MDB" 277) or to "the holding-at-arm's length game" vs. "the empathy game" (à la Carl Rogers)? Probably—though the insistence on systematic methodological game playing would still strike me as a nonproductive reach toward rigor. Certainly, since Elbow framed the debate in Polanyian terms, the words *doubting* and *believing* were loaded from the start. Further, Elbow insists that believing is what he has in mind, especially when he accuses Coleridge of "ben[ding] over backwards to avoid the word 'belief' itself" in his "rubber-gloved double negative"—the "willing suspension of disbelief." Elbow insists that "opening and

restructuring of the mind . . . don't usually occur unless the attempt to see is fueled by some kind of assent. . . ." ("MDB" 279).

Believing, as a term, covers two related but at times separable realms here—the realm of belief systems (believing in, focusing on, ideas that can be articulated) and the realm of existential belief, of skill, behavior, or action (believing as skillful tacit knowing, as indwelling, as pouring oneself into a tool—like a hammer or language—in order to focus on something else, in order to accomplish a focal task). Polanyi at times used the word *belief* to cover both meanings, but increasingly extended the notion of indwelling and tacit knowing in his later work, especially in *The Tacit Dimension*, to reduce his reliance on terms like *commitment* and *belief* when talking about tacit knowing. Elbow doesn't turn to the deep rationality of tacit knowing to anchor his discussions of the believing game, thus opening his position to the following critique from Polanyi scholar Dale Cannon:

Sometimes one can find persons who become so enamored with this kind of experimental believing that they never come down anywhere—nothing ever is wholeheartedly believed by them, nothing ever becomes the object of full commitment. The resulting position is a variety of postmodern romantic irony: believing becomes a game only, intellectual passion is enervated, and any deeper respect for the integrity and profundity of genuine belief gets lost. Even though Elbow may not be such an ironist himself, his position affords little if any leverage to critique that intellectual posture. (unpublished e-mail, 10 Oct. 2000)

Significantly, this critique is leveled by a philosopher; it's highly unlikely that anyone in the field of composition and rhetoric, knowing Elbow's work and reputation, would notice this weakness in Elbow's position or ever think of him in terms of ironical detachment.

8. Covino quotes Winterrowd's critique of Elbow's belief in magic in *WWP*, that writing involves "access to a mysterious power that may or may not materialize the 'right' words" (153, n.2).
9. A parallel essay could be written about Elbow's use of Eugene Gendlin's concept of "felt sense" (cf. Sargent, "Thinking"); Gendlin's work in epistemology corroborates Polanyi's findings and gives us a convincing and nonmagical explanation for the effectiveness of methods like freewriting and Sondra Perl's composing guidelines (recommended in Elbow and Belanoff, 32–35).

8 EAST MEETS WEST

Peter Elbow's "Embracing" of "Contraries" Across Cultures

GEORGE KALAMARAS

BEYOND CONTRARIES

Eastern philosophy—vast and diverse as it is—is replete with references to the paradoxical nature of reality. Peter Elbow's play with paradox as a way to shatter oppositional thinking and truly "embrace contraries," specifically, his work with "contraries" as a vital dialectic (such as "doubt" and "belief"), resembles Taoist concepts of *yin* and *yang* and Hindu concepts of *pan* and *apan* (meditation on the "contraries" of inhalation and exhalation of breath). For Elbow, as with Eastern meditative traditions, embracing contraries yields a consciousness nonattached to either pole of an apparent contradiction but, rather, a deepening attentiveness to their reciprocal interaction.

One's initial impression of Elbow's contraries might be that they are an extension of the dichotomous thinking found in Descartes and other positivists. Let me be specific: this, indeed, was the case with me in first reading him. Thus, Elbow has presented me with an essential challenge in light of what can appear to be his dualistic framework, one incompatible with Eastern practices that continually challenge dichotomies in order to embrace a consciousness that is reciprocal rather than oppositional.

To be sure, Elbow's prose is packed with contraries. A mere glance at the table of contents in *Embracing Contraries* yields such seeming binaries as "two roots of real learning," "the interaction of conflicting elements [in 'cooking']," "two kinds of thinking by teaching writing," "contraries in responding," and "the value of dialectic," to name a few. These contraries at surface appear to extend Elbow's seeming dichotomy of "doubt and belief" presented in *Writing Without Teachers* and perhaps to reinforce the kind of dualistic thinking our most generous feminist and postmodern thinkers have rightly argued against. In piece after piece, Elbow seems to struggle between two poles of thought, finding value, strangely, in each, yet also, more importantly, within their seemingly contrary interaction.

At the same time, it is important not to read Elbow too narrowly. Interpreting his "contraries" through primarily Western rhetoric alone may very well yield a vision of a writer embattled by and caught within a dichotomous vision. But

what happens if we shift the focus to the East? What vision of Elbow's contraries emerges? It wasn't until I was bold enough to subject Elbow's contraries to the same rigor as my own meditative practices (rooted in Eastern philosophy, particularly the Hindu-yogic tradition), that a more generous understanding of his paradoxes emerged. Furthermore—and a bit unexpectedly—examining Elbow in the light of Eastern philosophy has enabled me to make a critical turn in my own thinking about Eastern traditions themselves and their relevance to Western discourse theory.

Here, I want to be sure not to sound dichotomous myself, pitting, say, East against West. Rather, I'd like to argue that reading Elbow within the perspective of Eastern philosophy is illuminating, given the paradoxes at play within his theories, and that not doing so does him a grave injustice by excluding a more generous view of "opposites" that his writings suggest. Furthermore, given the interactive element of Elbow's opposites, what could be more apropos than utilizing a further apparent contrary (East and West) to flesh out an interpretation of the value of his work? Finally, it is important to emphasize that the terms Eastern and Western are indeed not monolithic, nor are they separate, or, for that matter, contrary. However, some Eastern meditative theory presents a more complex understanding of contradiction that often gets displaced within the confines of Western logic; as to the issue of a monolithic rendering of both East and West, in examining the East I will limit my discussion to three key wisdom traditions. I will focus on their commonality regarding paradox and reciprocity—the complementary rather than conflictive nature of "contradiction"—rather than nuances of their differences, which might be more appropriate in a study of comparative religion.

Before proceeding further with reading Elbow through this nondualist framework, though, let me first claim as my philosophical ground the Advaita Vedanta tradition—radical (or absolute) nondualism—the dominant school of Hinduism, and within it, the philosophy and practices of yogic meditation. Yoga, comprised of a variety of specific psychospiritual practices, has as its goal the joining or "yoking" of the individual "self" (*atman*) with the larger, more expansive "Self" (*brahman*). (The etymology of the word, yoga, itself means "to join, to yoke.") Therefore, focusing on certain nondual yogic aspects of the Advaita Vedanta tradition can deepen our understanding of the reciprocal nature of Elbow's contraries.

Self-realization, the Hindu scriptures repeatedly describe, is experiential, and the actual practice of yoga (*asanas*, or postures, and meditation) is the central method of attaining the nondual state of enlightenment described philosophically. In other words, the study and practice of yoga is a site of meta-physical "praxis," a true praxis in which theories and practices inform one another in reciprocal, nonhierarchical ways.

PARADOX AND THE PRACTICE OF ATTENTION

Eastern wisdom traditions focus on paradox as a generative rather than debilitating condition (indeed, mystics often describe the meditative experience itself in paradoxical terms as a “full emptiness”); understanding this aspect is key to understanding the reciprocal nature of Elbow’s contraries. For the meditator, *attention* to apparent contradiction enables the critical transformation of consciousness from oppositional to reciprocal perception—an attentiveness that ultimately allows one to break free of binary constructs altogether. Meditative practices that focus on paradoxical elements often encourage this transformation, particularly by cultivating attentiveness to paradox. This is an attentiveness that Elbow shares—secularly and not necessarily metaphysically—as a means of transforming his contraries into something more reciprocal.

One practice in Hindu-yogic and Zen sitting, for instance, of “watching the breath,” ultimately moves beyond the apparent contradictions of inhalation and exhalation, yielding an awareness in which the perceiving subject is “inside the breath”—so to speak—and is a psychic participant in a reciprocal process rather than an outside observer of dualistic principles. Hindu-yogic emphasis on “mind-body” further attests to the fluidity of apparent contradiction and the fostering of paradox as generative; what the yogi discovers is that mind and body are not separate (but that each influences the other), and he practices attentiveness to this intimate connection, utilizing the interaction of mind and body as a vehicle for liberation from dualistic thinking. Taoism’s *yin* and *yang* (feminine and masculine principles), furthermore, are also complementary rather than contradictory, and Taoism encourages a similar attention to the interplay of opposites as reciprocal, nonhierarchical, and nondualistic (with the *yin* and *yang* visually depicted as a swirl of black and white, respectively, each containing a dot of the other’s color to illustrate their interdependence). Even the practice of Zen *koans* (nonsensical questions such as “What is the sound of one hand clapping?”) are similarly designed to utilize paradox to shatter one’s concept of both question and answer, reorienting the practitioner to the discursive situation in a more intimate, less binary way.

For Elbow, a similar practice of attentiveness to paradox occurs as a means of attaining—what we might call—“discursive liberation,” in which focus on contraries becomes complementary rather than dichotomous, an attentiveness to apparent contradictions (such as doubt and belief or even the “two elements” of cooking), that renders each as fluid, instable, and negotiable. A Peter Elbow “contrary” automatically calls forth its “opposite,” not so much in the Aristotelian tradition of antagonistic dialectics but, rather, in ways more closely aligned in intent with Eastern meditative paradigms where apparent contradictions are complementary and reciprocal, that is, more truly “dialogical.”

Attentiveness to the dialogical interplay of opposites is often the catalyst for “liberation,” what for Elbow might be “insight” or textual luminosity or—for that matter—even just the ability to generate more writing and further thinking.

Consider, for example, Elbow’s ground-breaking work with doubt and belief. His description of each is well-enough known not to warrant detail here; however, for my purposes, it is important to emphasize that Elbow argues that both doubt and belief are present and necessary to some degree in everyone. Furthermore, he makes explicit the crucial apparatus of his investigation, which ultimately becomes metadiscursive—namely, to use one of the poles (doubt) to argue against itself, first, to “grant legitimacy” to the other pole (belief) and, second, to dramatize in a metadiscursive way the importance of remaining attentive to the interaction of what might on the surface be considered contradictory. This is similar to the use of Zen Buddhist *koans* (such as “What is your face before your parents *were* born?” [emphasis added]), whose paradoxical structure serves to sever the question from the answer (and, paradoxically, even from the questioner), reorienting one to a fresh experience of reality. That is, Elbow ultimately uses doubt to *doubt* the doubting game, demonstrating—paradoxically—both its necessity and hindrance:

In a sense this essay is an extended attack on the doubting game. But I make this attack as someone who himself values the doubting game and is committed to it. . . . My goal is to make the doubting game move over and grant legitimacy to the believing game. (*Writing Without Teachers* 149–50)

Elbow forcefully depicts the importance of each while arguing (at least on the surface) *for* one and *against* the other, as a Buddhist might come to doubt the efficacy of the actual question (as opposed to the discursive structure) of her *koan* for achieving the experience of the unspeakable. By using doubt against itself, so to speak, Elbow grants it a legitimacy along with belief (even as he states the latter as his goal), posing problems with doubt yet simultaneously placing it into reciprocal alignment with belief.

As I already discussed, Elbow argues that both doubt and belief are present and necessary in everyone. This is not to suggest a benign relativism in Elbow. We clearly see that he has strong commitments to playing the believing game, for instance, and, through implication, to the doubting game. A further paradox that enhances Elbow’s work with contraries, therefore, is not an abandonment of goals but, rather, a reorientation of one’s relationship to those goals in ways that do not privilege them over the process of remaining attentive to the interplay of apparent contradiction, that is, to a deeper understanding of the reciprocal nature of contraries. A similar reorientation occurs in Eastern wisdom traditions. For the contemplative, there is no “transcendent” reality to

speak of, only the liberation of realizing that transcendence and immanence are, first, the same, and second, only constructs to name a nonconceptual reality that one learns to immerse oneself in by not striving after it but by remaining attentive to the paradox. In other words, the mystic has no goal per se, save for the “goal” of achieving heightened awareness (a goal that can remain elusive, ironically, if focused on directly as a goal, placing one outside the experience of heightened attention). The mystic may desire peace, joy, and greater well-being (by-products of remaining attentive to paradox) but can, paradoxically, experience these in their fullest capacity only by relinquishing desire for them. The *Bhagavad Gita* of Hinduism, for instance, is clear about the importance of performing action in the world—even meditating—without desire for the “fruits” of that action.

Elbow has goals for college writing instruction, to be sure (perhaps his *professional* version of peace and well-being), as can be seen throughout his work and in particular in his relationship to academic discourse (see, as some of several examples, *Writing with Power*, *A Community of Writers*, and “Being a Writer”). Even his *Writing Without Teachers* (perhaps the guidebook to “freewriting” and other seemingly process-dominant approaches) begins with an injunction to “improve your writing” through the practice of freewriting (3). Even when Elbow tries to stave off focus on an “immediate product,” he nonetheless still designs his approaches for “their gradual effect on future writing” (11).

In the midst of these goals, however, the overriding principle Elbow reiterates, the one that acts as a constant ground of being for him, is to “cook,” to “keep writing,” to “[l]earn to stand out of the way and provide the energy or force the words need to find their growth process” (*Writing Without Teachers* 48, 24–25). These processes may certainly lead to results that Elbow acknowledges and even aims for. At the same time, it is clear from Elbow’s contraries that he is a writer first and foremost (see *Writing Without Teachers* and “Being a Writer”). Even when he learns the most about writing from his teaching—a pedagogical approach in which the teacher increasingly becomes less dominant as authority and more present as facilitator—it is the process of writing and the practice of *remaining attentive* to its flow, shifts, and paradoxical play (as with the mystic’s focus on the endless play of the universe) that is both the ultimate guide and, if you will, reward.

Thus, rather than wrongly dichotomize the goals issue, we’d do better to read Elbow through the lens of Eastern wisdom traditions and interpret “goals” in the context of the paradoxical processes Elbow advocates. We might therefore fold goals into this paradoxical play as a desirable, even—as is obvious in Elbow’s case—sought-after, by-product of attentiveness to contraries.

This is, then, to assign greater value to the process of negotiation of opposites than to any product these contraries in themselves may yield, suggesting a dialogical strain in Elbow. Here I am thinking, for example, of Bakhtin's discussion of the dynamic and interdependent aspect of discourses, what he refers to as their "interanimate" and "interilluminating" characteristics (47). This is perhaps most apparent in Elbow's depiction of what he calls "cooking," the "interaction of conflicting elements" (*Embracing Contraries* 40). "Cooking," he tells us,

consists of the process of one piece of material (or one process) being transformed by interacting with another: one piece of material being seen through the lens of another, being dragged through the guts of another, being reoriented or reorganized in terms of the other, being mapped onto the other. (*Embracing Contraries* 40–41)

Hence, the dichotomy between one pole and its "other" diminishes. Otherness ultimately becomes less other if "reoriented or reorganized" in relation to, "dragged through," its counterpoint. Dialogically, contraries "interanimate" and "interilluminate" one another. It is true that Elbow's social orientation remains less obvious at times than Bakhtin's (Berlin, "Rhetoric and Reality" with regard to Elbow and Freire, 486), and there are many instances where Elbow's expressionism predominates (see Berlin's powerful critique of Elbow, for example); thus, I am not arguing that Elbow is a disciple of Bakhtin. At the same time, when interpreted through the lens of the Eastern wisdom traditions, Elbow's contraries emerge as dialogical, his dialogic manifesting primarily in his trust in the endless play of discourses as language *events* that shape and are shaped by other language events, not as a kind of relativistic process to which Elbow remains uncommitted to outcomes. The writerly "self" encounters the textual "other," while textual features interanimate or "cook" until both text and self are reoriented in terms of its other.

This is similar to the understandings of yogis and other Eastern mystics who have been wrongly critiqued as seeking transcendence. For the yogi, the primary paradox of the individual self and the more expansive Self increasingly wanes through practices of attention that serve to bring the meditator into a state of nonconceptual awareness in which contraries reciprocally reside. As I have argued elsewhere, when understood from *inside* the nonconceptual meditative sensibility (rather than from conceptual awareness alone), it becomes clear that the contemplative is not trying to "get out" of anything, since there is nothing, ultimately, to get out of—only the eternal play of reciprocal conditions to which the yogi strives to remain attentive and, thus, merge with in ways that cast self as other and other as self (Kalamaras

186–87). To put this less paradoxically, there is no transcendence without immanence, and the “transcendence” to which Eastern texts sometimes refer is actually a misnomer for a paradoxical condition language has difficulty expressing, in which the perceiving subject becomes so intimate with the object of attention that all division between seer and seen dissolves. As Zen mystic D. T. Suzuki notes, “The doctrine of *sunyata* [the Void of meditative consciousness] is neither an immanentism nor a transcendentalism. . . . ‘Knowing and seeing’ *sunyata* is *sunyata* knowing and seeing itself; there is no outside knower or spectator; it is its own knower and seer” (261–62).

Liberation is therefore “liberating” because the yogi’s paradoxical practices enable him not to seek transcendental experiences but to go deeply into the dynamic interplay of the practices themselves, dissolving (in the process) a separate sense of self and other. When Whitman, echoing Wordsworth, says, “There was a child went forth every day, / And the first object he looked upon . . . that object he became” (138), he echoes this yogic understanding of a consciousness becoming completely identified with itself and, thus, with that which it had previously perceived as “opposite.”

Elbow is certainly no mystic, nor does he claim mystical predilections. In this regard, however, his “opposites” approach the paradoxes of the mystic, and we can better understand the process of his “contraries” through such a reciprocal framework. Elbow demonstrates by virtue of attentiveness that certain contraries are really complements—similar, say, to Taoist concepts of *yin* and *yang*, which continuously change, shape, and reorient one another not only by moving in relation to but *through* the other, or to Hindu-yogic practices of observing the *pan* and *apan* (inhalation and exhalation of breath) “pouring through one another,” as the *Bhagavad Gita* describes. In these traditions neither virtue is superior. Each pole simply “exists” and, indeed, changes through its interplay with its complementary other.

Elbow’s contraries “interanimate” each other, similarly to the manner in which the *pan* pours through the *apan*. How many subatomic particles of one’s exhalation return with the inhalation? How much of ourselves are we, really, without those with whom we interact? If one longs for deeper peace, psychic integration, and well-being, one would do well, Taoism and Hinduism both argue, to mirror this eternal interplay of apparent contradiction and remain attentive to its ever changing complementary nature. If one longs for a deeper experience of the mutability of the writing enterprise and the integration that emerges with involving oneself intimately with the composing process, one would do well, Elbow might similarly argue, to echo in theory *and* practice the endless paradoxicality within language and focus on the reciprocal process of praxis as complementary rather than contradictory.

BORDER CROSSINGS

Earlier I noted that the nondual aspects of yoga, which emphasize the experiential aspect of “Self-realization,” illustrate a metaphysical praxis. I also argued, by implication, that (although not metaphysical) Elbow’s contraries enact a similar praxis, in which theory and practice inform one another in reciprocal, nonhierarchical ways. Now, I want to briefly revisit this notion.

Paradoxically, the critical yet generous quality of Elbow’s theories strangely allows—even invites—one to examine and interact with his theories in ways that ultimately transform them into an increasingly reciprocal vision. The generative nature of his paradoxes invites interaction, in large part because the paradoxes are themselves interactive. His paradoxes are therefore themselves not only dialogical; their framework encourages one to engage it. In this sense, Elbow’s theories embody a sense of Hindu and Buddhist nonattachment, as his contraries invite the reader to work within and against them, demonstrating Elbow’s nonattachment to either pole of his supposed binary framework. That is, what happens when we *doubt* Elbow? In some strange sense we, therefore, enact his principles.

I’m thinking, as one example, of Berlin’s critique of Elbow’s “expressionism,” that for Elbow, “political change can only be considered by individuals and in individual terms” (“Rhetoric and Reality” 486), and of the ways a reader might interact with this critique in coming to her own position. In the context of interpreting Elbow’s contraries through the lens of Eastern wisdom traditions, a reader might rightfully ask whether an “individual” within the framework of a nonoppositional “other” is really an individual at all, as we have come to define that perspective in the West, and therefore whether Elbow’s individual response to political and social impositions is indeed, as Berlin argues, only a “resistance that is always construed in individual terms” and, thus, easily co-opted by the very capitalist forces it opposes” (487). Berlin’s argument is rich and complex, and arguing for or against it (in terms of Elbow) is beyond the scope of this essay. However, my point is twofold: (1) Berlin’s construction of Elbow’s “individual” may not be the same as the individual that emerges from a reciprocal, nonoppositional framework; and, perhaps more importantly, (2) that in doubting Elbow, we enact his principle of contraries that its nonoppositional structure invites, with the result that each apparently separate pole (in this case, perhaps, “individual” and “social”) inhabits the other more fully, becoming more soundly dialogical.

Similarly, we could consider Bartholomae’s arguments regarding Elbow’s position on academic discourse (see “Writing With Teachers”). Without rehashing them here, our focus should be on the dialogic Elbow’s contraries engender. What ultimately occurs in such an exchange as that between

Bartholomae and Elbow is that the exchange itself yields something greater and more complex than either position in isolation. Elbow's theory of "cooking" lays the ground for this realization, illuminating the process:

Two heads are better than one because two heads can make conflicting material interact better than one head usually can. It's why brainstorming works. I say something. You give a response and it constitutes some restructuring or reorienting of what I said. Then *I* see something new on the basis of your restructuring and so I, in turn, can restructure what I first said. The process provides a continual leverage or mechanical advantage: we each successively climb upon the shoulders of the other's restructuring, so that at each climbing up, we can see a little further. (*Embracing Contraries* 41)

In this way, Elbow is truly dialogical, presenting a theory whose very constructs allow for its own critical reflection and transformation. As C. H. Knoblauch discusses in "Rhetorical Constructions: Dialogue and Commitment," a dialogical sensibility—if it is to be truly dialogical—must indeed present opportunities for critical examination of its own position (138). One no doubt can cite numerous dialogical reflections that appear less open to including this mechanism (privileging, perhaps a bit ironically, their own dialogical position over other arguments). How dialogical are these thinkers really? Interestingly—expressionist or not—Elbow's contraries prod us to consider such issues, facilitating, I would argue, the practice of dialogics in ways that keep them more dialogical and truer to their radical intent. First, *within* Elbow's position, his contraries present a critical framework in which each pole must confront (and shape, change, and enhance) its "other" in a noncombative, reciprocal relationship. Second, the reciprocal nature of his contraries presents a position in itself that generously interacts with arguments from *outside* that critical framework (as with Elbow's dialogue with Bartholomae). That is, he points the way for Western dialogics to become more reciprocal than binary.

As nearly all Eastern philosophical texts agree, reading about meditation is not the same as taking it up as a practice. One limitation that yogis and other meditators have faced for centuries, for instance, is how to depict within an inherently binary discourse the experiences of undifferentiated consciousness encountered in nonconceptual (meditative) awareness. This has led to misinterpretations of meditative philosophy and practice as hierarchical, inherently dualistic, transcendental, and mystifying. However, as Western anthropologist, Indo-specialist, and Hindu Swami, Aghananda Bharati, has described in *The Light at the Center: Context and Pretext of Modern Mysticism*, the one aspect that remains after an individual has an experience of nonconceptualization or unitary consciousness and reemerges into the realm of conceptualization "is

the code of speech” (48). That is, as Bharati argues, mystics, in describing their experience, never use language outside their own social, cultural, and linguistic context (48–49). It should not be surprising, then, that Eastern meditative treatises sometimes sound inherently dualistic to the nonpractitioner. These texts may also represent their nondualism in ways which, at the other extreme, are so paradoxical as to appear completely relativistic or, perhaps more deplorable, intentionally mystifying.

However, in the spirit of true reciprocity, Elbow’s “Western” theories can contribute to our understanding of Eastern texts—when read, that is, through the lens of his complementary contraries. Critical reflection upon the reciprocal character of Elbow’s contraries may reorient Western readers’ interpretations of Eastern practices, clarifying (in light of, one might say, a more complex “code of speech”) meditative understandings in ways that more fully account for their generous and complex rendering of reality. That is, given a fresh understanding of the complementary nature of contraries in Elbow, one can bring that insight to bear upon the apparent contradictions within Eastern philosophy. Furthermore, beyond generating understanding of Elbow and the Eastern wisdom traditions, one might even rely upon each to critically examine the other, dialogically that is, in a manner similar to that which Elbow describes as “cooking.”

This, indeed, has been the case with my own grasp of Elbow and Eastern meditative traditions. The complementary nature of Elbow’s contraries has deepened my understanding of the dynamic interplay within Eastern meditative practices. I recall a story that James Moffett once related as respondent to a 1992 CCCC session on “Spiritual Sites of Composing,” in which he echoed a similar reorientation of both Eastern and Western perspectives in light of one another, regarding the relationship between meditation and writing. In warning against an emphasis on only one side of a “contrary”—seeing meditation *as a means* of making better writing—he described one of his earliest meetings with his spiritual teacher, the yogic master Swami Sivalingam. When his teacher asked him what he spent most of his time doing, Moffett replied, “writing.” “That’s good,” Swami Sivalingam responded, adding something to the effect of, “It will help deepen your concentration for meditation.”

In this way, Moffett “turned the sock inside out,” so to speak, demonstrating a radical reorientation of each perspective of writing and meditation in terms of its cultural other. Interestingly, both Elbow and the Eastern wisdom traditions also encourage this kind of dialogue and reorientation in terms of its “other.” Years ago in first reading Elbow—in doubting *and* believing him—I grappled with his contraries, which dynamically sent me more deeply into my practice of yogic meditation in ways that have helped me understand an even

richer rendering of the nonoppositional nature of that practice. Similarly to Elbow's depiction of "cooking," in which "one piece of material . . . [is] seen through the lens of another, . . . dragged through the guts of another, . . . [and] reoriented or reorganized in terms of the other" (*Embracing Contraries* 40–41), this understanding took me, in turn, back to Elbow, enhancing my understanding of reciprocity within his contraries, and then back again to test this perspective within the context of the Eastern wisdom traditions, and so on in a kind of Bakhtinian "mutual cause-and-effect and interillumination" (12).

As a result, I have considered each apparent contradiction in terms of its "other," crossing important philosophical, theoretical, and cultural borders to practice the theory that each encourages. This dialogical praxis has helped me reimagine both Elbow and my own meditative practice through the radical reorientation for which each ultimately calls, shaping each perspective in terms of its "other." Contrary *or* complement? Or contrary *and* complement? The dialogical interplay between Elbow's contraries and those of the Eastern wisdom traditions might very well suggest that neither term, in the final analysis, is sufficient to capture the complexity of this highly fluid, reciprocal "embrace." It is an embrace that can hold onto everything, while at the same time—in light of the generative paradox of meditation's "full emptiness" and the cultivation of an experience of "nonattachment"—hold onto nothing at all.

CLUSTER III
In The Classroom

INTERSECTION

SHERYL I. FONTAINE

Reading the essays in this section of our collection, I was inevitably drawn back to my own experiences in the classroom with Peter. The classroom I shared with him, when we were colleagues at SUNY Stony Brook, took the form of staff meeting rooms, high school classrooms, passenger sections on airplanes, hallways and cafeterias, the department mail room, and Peter's own department office. I learned much during those three years about the same topics that our authors raise: putting teaching theory into practice; the grey, compelling corners of assessment; what can be gained and lost by disciplinary labels; just how full and attentive reader response can be; and the intricacies and conflicts among academic writing, personal writing, and freewriting. But Irene Papoulis, one of the writers included in this section, reminded me of what I learned most from Peter when she confesses "how startled [she] was at Peter's ability to listen so well and to respect the opinions of anyone who gave them" (228). During the years that I worked with Peter, I, too, learned a great deal about being listened to and listening to others. When I arrived on the East coast from graduate school in southern California, I didn't expect that this man, who at that point in my life was nothing less for me than an academic idol turned into a tall, gentle man wearing a green turtleneck sweater and plaid jacket, would open his ears and his mind to what I had to say. In fact, at first I didn't have much to say. But Peter would have none of that. He never allows his students or his colleagues to be silent for too long before he lightly probes for their thoughts. Even when I didn't think I was having any thoughts, he would somehow tease them out of me. Aside from learning about listening by being listened to, I learned about it by watching Peter listen to other faculty, to secretaries who arranged his appointments, to the students he taught and advised, as well as to every writer whose words he read and shared with us. I came to have enormous respect for others' words, for the value of letting their words be in the air where they could be respected and heard. As an exliterature student, I knew a lot about jumping on others' words and pushing them through my analysis ringer; I knew much less about letting words be and letting them be heard.

Although my charge in this interchapter is to introduce its five essays, I am fearful that the genre of "introduction" will lead me to interpret the essays before you have had a chance to hear their words, to let them speak for themselves. And

so I have devised a way to let the authors, Irene Papoulis, Kathleen Blake Yancey, Keith Hjortshoj, Kathleen Cassity, and Jeff Sommers, utter their own words without my interpretative translation. As I read each essay, I used a habit of pen that Peter himself started in me, underlining the sentences and words that somehow caught my attention. I didn't stop to think about why they caught my attention or to write notes in the margin or to draw arrows and stars from one essay to the next. Using only what was underlined, I challenged myself to use another teaching strategy that I learned from Peter, to create a conversation among the lines that I had identified, letting the writers speak for themselves and to one another. My voice appears only when the conversation shifts to set the scene for the next exchange. In reading my draft, Marcia referred to what I have created as a "found conversation." My hope is that it will provide you with a very particular introduction to the essays, one that prepares you for the way these writers resonate with one another and, together, shape a view of Elbow in the classroom.

AN AUTHORS' CONVERSATION

In this first part of the conversation, we hear the author's examining what they have learned about teaching from Elbow's essays and books and, equally important, from Elbow's own classroom instruction. For it is in his own classroom that we see Elbow enacting the voice-centered pedagogy about which he writes, and we feel the dramatic effect that such a pedagogy can have on his students. And yet, as these writers also point out, what Elbow writes about and practices is much more than a way to be personal with students. Rather it's a way to let students experience the relationship between the academic and the personal, between freedom and structure, between reflection and assessment. Once these relationships are better understood, then students can also appreciate the choices that are theirs to make as writers.

Kathleen Yancey: In some ways, it may be that Peter is always telling the teaching story.

Irene Papoulis: Watching Peter work, I realized that attention to pedagogy was crucial for anyone wanting to find ways to effect political change within established classrooms.

Kathleen Cassity: A voice-centered pedagogy tells the students that they matter, that their own experiences and perceptions are worthwhile: worth writing about, worth being read about and heard by others.

Jeff Sommers: [W]hen students learn what their readers are thinking, they are reminded that "their words have effects," and . . . more frequent use of reader response genres could provide . . . an "antidote" to the impersonal nature of end comments by personalizing the comments.

Irene Papoulis: While I do not remember the specific issue, I do remember how startled I was at Peter's ability to listen so well and to respect the opinions of anyone who gave them. In addition to the important lesson about teaching it gave me, Peter's

attitude gave me permission, ultimately, to express my own hesitant views in the study group too; without his generous listening, I may well have remained silent.

Kathleen Cassity: Voice is one of the most important elements in Elbow's pedagogy.

However, the concept of voice Elbow promotes is neither autonomous nor isolated.

Keith Hjortshoj: The writer seems little more than an occasion for writing to happen—or the locus of concepts that keep writing from happening of its own accord. Far from representing any fixed notion of the self, "Writing is, in fact, a transaction with words whereby you *free* yourself from what you presently think, feel, and perceive." . . . Even a term such as "growing" does not refer to "personal growth" but to words, sentences, and ideas themselves. Like "cooking," this concept is relational. It refers to the evolving relations between writers and words, words and other words, ideas and other ideas, writers and other writers. "Believing" and "doubting," introduced at the end of the book, are not personal feelings or matters of opinion; they are intellectual choices and cognitive conditions.

Kathleen Cassity: Interestingly, though Elbow initially achieved recognition for a book entitled *Writing Without Teachers* and though he is often associated in the literature with "de-centered authority" and "student-centered" teaching approaches, Elbow exerts considerable authority and influence in this classroom, but he chooses to exert it over how students *behave* . . . instead of using his authority to "rank" student writing by assigning reductive grades or restricting students to a singular writing style.

Kathleen Yancey: There is an Elbovian legacy to writing assessment: a definition of assessment located firmly within a rhetorical situation of personal interaction, trust, and willingness to learn.

Because Elbow is, perhaps most of all, a teacher, even his interest in assessment grows from his interest in teaching and learning. As the writers in this section indicate, within the process of assessment are inherent contradictions and conflicts that the teacher and student must face. Rather than ignore such contradictions, our challenge as teachers is to create a classroom and design assignments that still promote learning. For ultimately, unless assessment promotes learning, it has no value for Elbow.

Kathleen Yancey: [E]ven when motivated by the same general good intentions, testing and teaching rely on fundamentally different understandings of human behavior. Writing assessment, which both redefines testing and locates it in the specific field of writing, is . . . intend[ed] to bring teaching and testing together, to make them congruent with each other, to open each to the possibility of accommodation between their agents—the testers, the teachers.

Keith Hjortshoj: Writing, in this sense, may be compared to dancing with a new partner. Initially, you do not know your partner's style or experience. There is a fear of stepping on the other person's feet or of trying a daring move. As a result, the dance is stiff and constrained. It is awkward and unnatural.

Kathleen Cassity: Freewriting does not represent an “open” classroom in any static or permanent sense, but instead enables student writers to clear a *temporary* space for generating ideas, a momentary withdrawal from internal and external censors in order to begin the process of getting words onto paper.

Irene Papoulis: To me, such techniques, Peter’s techniques, are more powerful in themselves than theories, because they effect change on a practical, even visceral level.

Kathleen Yancey: Peter’s sense of assessment evokes a different rhetorical situation: one that is fluid, emerging, and personal. It’s a situation embodied in a *felt relationship*, a situation whose primary purpose is to help students learn. If students aren’t being helped, then assessment is superfluous.

Irene Papoulis: My methods, I realized, were preventing me from getting [my student] to experience the pleasure of expressing in writing the ideas he was passionate about. . . . My task now is to find ways, through better and more demanding informal writing assignments and better-structured insistence on extensive revision, to push past my students’ complacency and to encourage them to explore themselves more deeply and at the same time to be increasingly responsible for listening well to others’ views.

Kathleen Yancey: Peter reminds us: “. . . That’s my parable of assessment. It’s not part of teaching—even though we are lulled into assuming it is. It doesn’t really help make people learn.” . . . This is what Peter seems to understand, but not because he’s so interested in assessment. Because he’s interested in teaching.

We all know that just invoking the name “Peter Elbow” can incite a great deal of disagreement and even conflict. In this section of the conversation, the authors attempt to understand and explain the strong, negative reaction that Elbow’s work evokes from others. Yet, as they also point out, even Elbow’s supporters find his refusal to be categorized or take sides, his desire to “embrace contraries,” both compelling and frustrating.

Irene Papoulis: I came to be fascinated . . . by the deeply negative emotional reaction that some people had against what they imagined as Peter’s perspective.

Keith Hjortshoj: Through this pattern of response, Elbow has routinely argued that people misrepresent him by half, and in his tendency to “embrace” whatever critics say he is or is not (along with its opposite), he has embraced expressivism more explicitly than he did at the beginning of his career.

Kathleen Cassity: In a way, that makes [Peter] more free, when he disagrees with something, to say so—to enter into dialogue, converse about the issues at stake, in the hope of bringing hidden assumptions and prejudices to the surface.

Irene Papoulis: I find myself wanting him to be more radical, more brazen in his theories, since for me these theories contain a kind of brazenness that I find exhilarating, even as it scares me.

Keith Hjortshoj: But in his effort to define the personal or expressive side of this false dichotomy, the academic side becomes blurred.

Irene Papoulis: This other side makes me begin to understand those in our field who resist Peter's views and who, consciously or not, see him as a threat to the established order. He *is* a threat to the established order, and that is probably what draws me to him most strongly even as it scares me a bit.

Kathleen Yancey: What's interesting to me here is the utter and complete faith in a system. What's as interesting to me is the lack of faith in either democracy or education that drives one toward a system. What's finally as interesting to me is what happens to students when one's faith is transferred from people to systems.

Keith Hjortshoj: This illusory notion of academic writing creates some of the most common difficulties student writers encounter; it represents the main obstacle Peter Elbow was trying to move beyond in his early work; and it continues to undermine the potential value of this work for academic writers.

Irene Papoulis: Peter seemed to stir up some sort of deep fear in . . . people, fear that often seemed to be based on a cursory reading of some of his work and an irrational judging of it as somehow less than academic.

Kathleen Yancey: Likewise, and more telling, these academics have not joined Peter in thinking about, talking about, and enacting social change in *the one arena where all change finally is estimated*: that is, in assessment circles. This reluctance I cannot understand: that is to say, we can incorporate new pedagogies like collaborative learning, and we can introduce new technologies like computers, and we can specifically enact reform curricula like service learning, but *if we do not provide for these changes to be valued. . . , they cannot effect the promised reform. . .* What Peter has done, then, . . . is to start providing for changes in learning and teaching to be valued—and he's taken this up not as an expert but as a teacher.

Keith Hjortshoj: While this effort to avoid fixed positions annoys Elbow's critics, I should acknowledge that it has often broadened and enriched the field of debate in composition theory and pedagogy.

Irene Papoulis: Why has he become such a figure of contention? Why have so many people felt so passionate in their resistance to his ideas?

Keith Hjortshoj: To a great extent the answers to these questions lie behind closed doors, in realms of academic discourse that undergraduates rarely enter. As a consequence—even for graduate students, even for faculty in some disciplines—these appear to be personal questions about private dimensions of individual lives.

Finally, we hear the authors create an identity pastiche of Peter Elbow. Just as Elbow himself encourages us to embrace contraries, we can easily see the contraries in our perception of who he is: public and private, academic and personal, authority and novice. In Yancey's final word, we find one quality seems constant across the emergent images of Peter Elbow: "trust."

Irene Papoulis: Implied in "my" Peter's work is a strong authority, one that can say "you must freewrite, NOW!"

Kathleen Cassity: [A]s Elbow expressed to me, “My ‘style of teaching’ or ‘my presence in the classroom’ is anything but self-effacing. To put it bluntly, to run a workshop, you tend to have to be very pushy . . . and be a very strong presence in order to clear space.”

Irene Papoulis: “[M]y” Peter is an expressivist, an advocate of a kind of essential self as the source of ideas and feelings. However, the “real” Peter is different. In spite of the fact that he is often categorized as one, the real Peter, I would say, is not an expressivist at all.

Keith Hjortshoj: If expressivism did not exist, social constructionists, among others, would have to construct it.

Irene Papoulis: The real Peter would be the first, I’m sure, to celebrate this desire of mine to take his theories wherever I want, even when he does not necessarily agree with me.

Kathleen Yancey: Trust.

9 RE-IMAGINING “FRONTIER” PEDAGOGY

Inside Peter Elbow’s Composition Classroom

KATHLEEN J. CASSITY

To truly educate in America, then, to reach the full sweep of our citizenry, we need to question received perception, shift continually from the standard lens.

Mike Rose

The scene opens in a frontier classroom. In bursts our lone, logocentric superhero on his galloping steed. Dismounting, he proceeds to preach a rousing, anti-intellectual sermon on the virtues of voice and personal writing. “Throw away your textbooks!” he shouts. “Celebrate *bad* writing! If you’ve ever stopped freewriting in order to correct your grammar, come forward, repent, and be saved! And most important of all: Freewrite! Freewrite! Freewrite!”

The students, all solipsistic and conservative, smile and nod approvingly. This teacher will demand little of them. He will not push them toward excellence. All they will have to do this semester is freewrite and make little collages. They smile, content in their neo-Platonic isolation, happy to be free from the burden of intellectual inquiry. Things haven’t been this good since kindergarten.

A cluster of social-epistemic composition theorists spy through a window, nodding knowingly. “Ahah! There he is—Peter Elbow! Undermining our attempts to promote academic discourse, to critique traditional humanism. Promoting truth as a private vision of an autonomous self. Lowering standards. A threat to the academy and to the nation!”



Cut to a first floor classroom in the University of Hawaii’s Webster Hall, February 1996. The class is divided into noisy groups of four, as all students take turns reading their drafts aloud. Peter has asked his students to note which bits have “life,” are “real,” powerful, strong? Where are the moments of energy?

Today I’m observing Michael, Martin, Megan, and Angela. They’re working on their “descriptive scenes,” helping their readers to see something in vivid detail. Though my friends in the education department might say they are “occasionally off task,” they do seem to be finding plenty of “moments of energy.” Megan is reading.

She's a confident writer, and her essay grows out of a personal experience, her semester abroad in Italy. She reads about a field in Tuscany. "I expected to see waves. How do Italians figure out where they are when they are surrounded by all this land? Everywhere you look, land, as far as you can see. . . ."

"That is so weird," says Angela, "to look as far as you can see and not to see any water. I've never seen that!"

"Yeah, I bet they'd think it was weird if they came here and couldn't see very much land. . . ."

Pretty soon they're off task, Megan's essay having led to a lively discussion about how people in Hawaii are perceived by people elsewhere. "People are so stupid, they actually think we live in grass shacks." "Yeah, one time somebody from the mainland asked me, 'What kind of money do you use?'" "This tourist comes up to me and goes, 'Do you speak English?'" "Yeah, and you go somewhere, and when people hear you're from Hawaii, they think all you do is surf. You tell them you go to the University of Hawaii, and they're, like, surprised that people in Hawaii even study."

Terms from my seminar in colonialism circulate through my mind—core/periphery, marginalization, Orientalism, exoticizing. Just because these freshmen aren't using those terms doesn't mean they don't understand the dynamics; they live them every day of their lives. These issues have certainly led to a moment of energy for this group. Though student discussion has moved off their papers, I change my notes—these students are not off task at all.



The discursively constructed "Peter Elbow" of my opening scene is a caricature, created characterizations made by several of Elbow's most vocal critics. I. Hashimoto has characterized Elbow as an "evangelist," calling him "zealous," "overemotional," and "anti-intellectual" (73–83). David Bartholomae has dubbed Elbow's classroom a "frontier classroom" and has called his teaching "logocentric," "conservative," and "retrograde" (70–71). James Berlin has typed Elbow as a Thoreau-like solitary figure, "isolated" and "cut off from community," a teacher whose pedagogy is "Neo-Platonic" and "solipsistic" (146). And Lester Faigley calls Elbow "Romantic," with a capital R (530). The image of Peter Elbow that emerges in contemporary composition literature is a mixture of iconic figures ranging from John Wayne and Newt Gingrich to Thoreau, Plato, Sigmund Freud, Jimmy Swaggart, and Billy Graham. Those who have directly experienced Elbow's teaching, however, feel a dissonance between the discursive Peter Elbow that emerges in composition literature and the actual Peter Elbow who is their teacher. After taking graduate classes from Elbow when he was visiting Citizens Chair at the University of Hawaii from 1995 to 1996, I myself experienced such a sense of dissonance. This led me to observe

the freshman English composition course Elbow taught at UH in spring 1996, in order to discern what his classroom practice actually entailed.

Two things emerge when observing Elbow's teaching. First, his classroom practice is rhetorically complex, emphasizing at various points all elements of the rhetorical situation—writer, reader, language, and subject matter—through an ongoing, dynamic process that actively shifts among the various interacting elements. Second, Elbow's teaching is *voice-centered* rather than textually centered. That is not to say that Elbow construes voice as singular, "authentic," or as issuing from an "autonomous" and "genuine" "self." Though some assume that voice-centered approaches to composition pedagogy must be philosophically naive and politically retrograde, the implications of a voice-centered pedagogy—that is, a teaching approach that places *people* rather than words at the center—hold the potential to be *more* potentially radical and transformative than discourse-focused pedagogy, which places *language* at the center.



It's a sunny Tuesday in January, a little before noon. Peter arranges the chairs into a circle as students filter in. Most appear to be local Hawaii students of mixed Asian and/or Polynesian ethnicity, and there are a couple of Caucasians, slightly more males than females. It's still early in the semester, and there's not a lot of chatter before class begins.

Class begins with students calling one another's names. "I'm Linda, and that's Peter." "Sue, Linda, and Peter." "Kimo, Sue, Linda . . ."

After six years in college, I've been through class introductions more times than I can count. What makes today different is that it's not the first day of the class; it's the fourth. And from my experience as Peter's student, I already know what these students will soon learn: almost every class begins with students calling one another by name, from now until the end of the term. Peter explains his philosophy: "This is something we're going to do at the beginning of every class. . . . It seems to me, you're not really present until you've been named. And we want you to be present. Good news, anybody?"

Another Elbow ritual. Whether you're an eighteen-year-old freshman or a forty-something Ph.D. candidate, Peter wants to know who you are. And he doesn't just want us to talk—the listening is even more important. In Hawaii, it's called "talking story." Kimo tells us he went surfing over the weekend. Martin has landed a role in a university play. Peter heard from his children in college.

Jenny walks in—she's late. "Give us some good news," Peter says. "That's your penalty."

"I got my assignment done on time!" Laughter.

Peter gives today's assignment, a freewrite on names. He passes out copies of the Cree naming poems, "Rain Straight Down" and "Quiet Before the Thaw," and reads them out loud before students freewrite about their own names for ten minutes. Students share in pairs, then Peter gives his minilecture of the day. Today's subject: Private versus public writing. He elucidates the debate in the composition field, without using professional jargon. "Some people think that everything we write, even when it's supposed to be private, is really in a sense public. And they make a good point, since language is a social phenomenon, and our languages come to us from our cultures . . . but for now, let's just assume there are times where we're really writing just for ourselves, even if we decide to share it later. Is there some way to turn that private writing into public writing?"

Peter relates this issue to the way the course is structured. Students keep journals, and he checks periodically to see that they are filling the pages. But he won't read them. Some teachers, he explains, require journals and call them "private"—then proceed to read them, sometimes even grade them. In this class, he tells students, your journals will be private—but you might sometimes want to look at them, think about the issues you raise to yourself—and think about ways to turn those concerns into public writing. Public writing is more formal, more geared toward the needs of an audience—but that doesn't mean it can't still have its roots in the personal.



The one believable element in my imagined "frontier classroom" scene is the command to "Freewrite! Freewrite! Freewrite!" Elbow admits to being "something of a cheerleader" on this score, and anyone who has studied with him at any level knows she will write, write, and write some more, sometimes freely, but at other times not so freely. Elbow constantly pushes his students, not simply toward *more* writing—though he does do that—but toward increasingly *better* writing. Moreover, Elbow's reader-responses to students demonstrate that he takes their texts seriously, reading them as carefully as a literary scholar would read a published text. Freewriting does not represent an "open" classroom in any static or permanent sense, but instead enables student writers to clear a *temporary* space for generating ideas, a momentary withdrawal from internal and external censors in order to begin the process of getting words onto paper. This clearly is the point where Elbow chooses to start, though it is not where he stops.

Elbow uses personal topics in the same manner—as a point of entry rather than as a point of rest. For, to a considerable degree, Elbow's pedagogy also emphasizes *audience*. One important audience for students, of course, was Elbow himself, who provided reader-response feedback by taking students'

texts seriously. Meanings between writers and audiences were also negotiated through the use of groups and class publications, and students were encouraged both to make use of peer responses when undertaking revisions and to enter into the minds of others by listening actively and attentively to the writing of their fellow students.

Interestingly, though Elbow initially achieved recognition for a book entitled *Writing Without Teachers* and though he is often associated in the literature with “de-centered authority” and “student-centered” teaching approaches, Elbow exerts considerable authority and influence in this classroom, but he chooses to exert it over how students *behave* (for example, by enforcing punctuality and putting full effort into revisions) instead of using his authority to “rank” student writing by assigning reductive grades or restricting students to a singular writing style. Elbow graded this course by entering into a contract with students, which guaranteed certain letter grades for specific tasks, rather than by making subjective assessments of quality. But, as Elbow expressed to me, “My ‘style of teaching’ or ‘my presence in the classroom’ is anything but self-effacing. To put it bluntly, to run a workshop, you tend to have to be very pushy . . . and be a very strong presence in order to clear space.” (Personal correspondence—Elbow) Paradoxically, for a teacher to distribute power in the classroom in the way Elbow does suggests that the teacher is actually exercising *more* authority, not less—a paradox further convoluted when the teacher in question is most well known for a book called *Writing Without Teachers*.



I'm thinking about Elbow's own comments on “authority” while reading through some of his detailed written comments to students. To Sue: “My definition of a good essay is one that figures stuff out and gets somewhere. (Lively voice is not the main thing—despite my interest in it.) I like especially the way your essay ends up somewhere different from where it started; you see there was something wrong with your initial feelings. That gives a kind of drama to it—something actually going on before our eyes.”

To Dave: “It's great to see how much you did in revising. Lots of thinking here. . . . You are continuing to THINK, WONDER, turn the gears. Try to remember the feeling and how you got yourself to do that. That will be the key to writing you have to do at the university (and after): just trying to have more thoughts, figure out more things, explore more.”

To Dave and Brad: “When you talk about the rise in wages for women compared to men, you forget to mention one little fact: that women still get paid MUCH LESS than men for the same work!”

To Karen and Gary: “My main reaction in reading. There’s something quite weird about your paper. EVERY EXAMPLE of racism that you talk about is an example of thinking or behavior by members of a targeted group, blacks or Hawaiians. NOWHERE IN YOUR PAPER do you ever give an example or seem to acknowledge the more pervasive racism of groups with more power. In short, you are making the point Y, and it seems a valid point—except that by failing to make the more obvious point X, you end up sounding very racist yourself. It’s as though you think that only blacks and Hawaiians are racist. Did you mean to do that?”

To Adam and Mark: “You make a bunch of statements that are kind of illogical—that no one you know is gay. (You better not be so sure.) That everyone you know who is gay is messed up. (I thought you didn’t know anyone.) That once someone is gay you can’t see them the same. (Well how can you trust your perception when you know you go into this gear?)”

Students often write things that are uncomfortable to read—and maybe there’s more risk of that when they know they won’t be graded on what they say.

On the other hand, if students harbor these thoughts and feelings, perhaps it’s better to get them out on the table where they can be addressed directly. Peter asks them to think through things more deeply. Would this be happening if instead, they had told him what they thought he wanted to hear, because they knew their grades depended on his opinion of what they were saying? Can students hear the teacher’s opinions more clearly when they don’t come with a grade attached?

At least students won’t be able to complain that Peter graded them down because he didn’t like what they were saying. In a way, that makes him more free, when he disagrees with something, to say so—to enter into dialogue, converse about the issues at stake, in the hope of bringing hidden assumptions and prejudices to the surface.

Grades, on the other hand, have more of a silencing effect: “This is a C paper; I’m the teacher, and you’re the student. End of discussion.”



Though Elbow exercises his own authority as teacher to encourage writing habits and classroom behaviors that he finds most effective, “authority” in the sense of *authorship* clearly remains in the hands of students. And, Elbow clearly retains allegiance to the idea of authorship, which has opened him to criticism by compositionists of the social-epistemic school such as David Bartholomae, who asks, “Should we promote the notion of authorship in their classrooms at a time when the whole concept of authorship is under attack in every other realm of the university?” (70). It is important to note, however, that while Elbow believes in authorship, he does not define “author” as singular, static, isolated, autonomous, and uniquely gifted. Elbow makes clear to his

students that he believes no one functions autonomously, and no one writes in a vacuum. What emerges in Elbow's classroom is a revised notion of authorship as plural and dynamic, allowing for *more* people, from all walks of life, to develop their authorial potential. Elbow works toward authorizing more voices and in more linguistic registers (such as Hawaii Creole English), a move that challenges elitist notions of authorship. The space Elbow makes for students' home languages, multiple linguistic registers, and discursive alternatives can be conceived in Bakhtinian terms as encouraging both the centripetal, unifying forces of standard English and the centrifugal, disruptive forces of heteroglossia. It is the dynamic tension between the two that keeps language alive, enriching ongoing conversations through the participation of as many voices as possible and facilitating the possibility of social change. For writing students, encouraging the discovery of their voice(s) helps them develop the power to enter into society's conversations, moving among the full range of multiple voices and linguistic registers available to them, "taking the word and making it [their] own."



On a Thursday in February, Peter asks students to discuss their reactions to the first class publication, a collection of the students' "self-as-writer" collages. At first there's the usual quiet, feet shuffling, papers rustling. Mark breaks the silence. "The thing I noticed is how lots of people complain they can't write, but their papers are pretty good."

Karen adds, "There was so much funny stuff. Like the pidgin—it sounded like the person, you could just hear the person saying it."

Now they're jumping in eagerly, talking faster, overlapping. "Yeah, it's like gossip, I like to hear what's in other people's minds." "I like the way Kerry thanks her mother for helping to teach her there's times and places for different kinds of language."

"Well, it's not just the pidgin, it's other kinds of street talk. Like Robert, it's not pidgin, but when he's in the factory with those Polish workers, it's not like standard English, it's street talk, it sounds really real." "And Karen's is funny and sarcastic." "I liked where Megan said she'd have made an excellent beatnik." I feel as though I'm in a theatre lobby at intermission, immersed in an electric buzz. Peter has to raise his voice, like a judge calling for "order in the court," so he can give the assignment for next Tuesday.

In Kerry's "self-as-writer" collage, she moves back and forth between standard English and pidgin, which she describes as her "natural" language. "It is not that different from standard English," she says, "but some people have a hard time understanding that dialect. Being here at Manoa, I have become a better English speaker. When I return to my home on the Island of Kauai, the pidgin-English

language flows naturally out of my mouth. It's actually so weird, I write standard English better than I speak it." She writes about her mother in the language she most associates with mother, family, home. "Mom, you teach me dat dea times when propa foa speak pidgin and times foa speak propa English." To her favorite high school teacher, she writes in standard English: "I didn't enjoy writing before I had you. I want to thank you for opening up my eyes. Your compassion has brought many students to believe they can write." To her mother she writes again, "Oh, ma, I wish I was back home foa speak my natural language."

Jenny writes in a process letter about having an "on-off" switch. "Pidgin for your friends and family, English for your teachers." Peter writes in his feedback, "I agree, it doesn't have to be this either/or thing."



Voice is one of the most important elements in Elbow's pedagogy. However, the concept of voice Elbow promotes is neither autonomous nor isolated. With his emphasis on group work, reading aloud, and responding to the work of others, Elbow's concept of voice comports easily with Bakhtin's concept of dialogism:

The idea *lives* not in one person's *isolated* individual consciousness—if it remains there only, it degenerates and dies. The idea begins to live, that is, to take shape, to develop, to find and renew its verbal expression, to give birth to new ideas, only when it enters into genuine dialogic relationships with other ideas, with the ideas of *others*. (In Morris 98)

While Bakhtin does not view utterances as emanating *from* individuals, he grants that utterances are issued *through* individuals. Thus, a Bakhtinian view of voice acknowledges both the human dimension of language and the social processes by which knowledge and meaning are created. Judging by my observations of Elbow's English 100 course, "dialogic interaction" is an excellent characterization of the classroom dynamics that result from his teaching. Listening to others was as important as writing and reading one's own work. In group work, for instance, students spent seventy-five percent of their time listening to others and only twenty-five percent reading their own work. The small groups never proceeded to assess any writer's "authenticity" or "sincerity"; instead, the techniques of showing, summarizing, pointing, and relating "movies of the mind" allowed for reader response and negotiation of meaning between readers and writers. The collaborative writing assignment provided for meanings to be negotiated between *writers* (often with contradictory viewpoints) as well. Once again, Elbow's extensive oral and written feedback allowed writers to consider readers' reactions in more detail than would have been provided with mere letter grades.

Elbow further encouraged dialogic interaction through his emphasis on using voice to engage in public discourse. Those wishing to earn an "A" in the class had to submit class publications and write one explicitly public piece of writing, and most assignments asked students to consider how their private writing might be reshaped into public writing geared for an audience—once again demonstrating that the personal and autobiographical was a starting point, not an ending point. Personal narratives allowed students to position their own subjectivities, while feedback groups enabled them to consider the subjectivities of others. One assignment called for students to engage with group identities explicitly, and all assignments fostered increased student awareness of their own social positions. As a result, the students' writing teemed with issues regarding how differences play out in the cultural and ethnic landscape of Hawaii, a place where the legacy of colonial conquest and domination is still very much alive. Extensive abstract theorizing was hardly necessary, given the depth of the students' own perceptions and experiences of their complex multicultural location.



A Thursday afternoon in March. We're inside Peter's office on the sixth floor of Kuykendall Hall, waiting for the first student to arrive for her biweekly fifteen-minute conference. By the end of the semester, each student will have had about eight conferences.

The main purpose, Peter tells me, is for the students to read their drafts out loud; it helps if a piece of writing is heard, not just read. As students read their own work, they can often hear mistakes for themselves. And when teachers listen without reading along, they can temporarily put aside copyediting concerns and hear the total "shape" of a piece.

Today, students will be reading about identities. This assignment started with an in-class freewrite about "any aspect of any of your group identities," then carried over into a collaborative research essay written with a partner. But before students get together with their partners or start poring through the library, Peter thinks it's important for them to explore their own thinking and experience.

Sue, a somewhat shy eighteen-year-old, is first. As I listen, I think of the cliché that "still waters run deep"; her writing has a lively voice, considerable energy, undertones of anger. She writes about attending private school, about being a girl—how public school kids assume she's a rich snob, how her parents give more privileges to her brother. She writes of being second-generation Chinese-American, of traveling in China for the first time, of finding that the Chinese people she met didn't consider her Chinese at all: "They were insulted when I said I was Chinese. I'd never felt more American." She discusses the slurs used against

those of Chinese descent in Hawaii and recites one of the derogatory rhymes she heard other kids chanting when she was little, feeding into the stereotype that the Chinese are “cheap.” Breaking away from her text, she tells Peter, “I don’t really believe it, you know.”

“Right,” says Peter. “But it’s sort of like some of the rhymes black kids have had to hear, some of the slurs—nowadays it’s outlawed, but you’ve still heard it. It’s still in there.”

“Yeah,” Sue agrees, returning to her essay. She reads about being Catholic. It’s part of her identity, part of her family heritage, and though she’s not sure how much of the church doctrine she believes, she intends to keep practicing. “The Lord knows I’m not a great Catholic,” she reads—a breezy statement that could be read either as slangy and humorous or as a serious religious admission. Peter points out the nice potential double meaning: “Did you do that on purpose?”

Sue laughs. “I don’t know . . . maybe I did!”



In *Pedagogy and the Politics of Hope*, Henry Giroux draws upon Bakhtinian theory to formulate his own concept of pedagogy that questions the status quo and works toward what he terms “radical democracy.” The element that Giroux identifies as missing from most pedagogies, whether ostensibly conservative or liberal, is voice: “Both radical and conservative ideologies generally fail to engage the politics of voice and representation—the forms of narrative and dialogue—around which students make sense of their lives and schools.” He further points out: “While this is an understandable position for conservatives or for those whose logic of instrumentalism and social control is at odds with an emancipatory notion of human agency, it represents a serious theoretical and political failing on the part of radical educators” (120). Voice, then, is a concept that need not be limited to a conservative pedagogical agenda; it is a tool that can and should be used in the service of a radical, liberatory pedagogy as well. A voice-centered approach allows for differences, such as gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, to come to the forefront; accordingly, Giroux calls for the “discourse of lived experience” to be brought into the classroom as a way of challenging the orthodoxy represented by academic discourse. This is exactly what Elbow accomplishes.

A voice-centered pedagogy tells the students that they matter, that their own experiences and perceptions are worthwhile: worth writing about, worth being read about and heard by others. In Giroux’s terms, Elbow’s students encounter a pedagogy that engages “the forms of narrative and dialogue around which students make sense of their lives and schools” (120). “In this class, you are not a number but a student,” says one of Elbow’s students in her end-of-semester review. Elbow provided each student with considerable individualized attention

in the form of conferences and written feedback. Small group interaction and collaborative writing projects also contributed to a classroom in which students got to know each other, as well as their teacher. Even Elbow's policy of beginning every class by having students call on one another by name contributed to this sense of student engagement, presence, and investment; Elbow insists on student presence, and his students sense his own presence and investment in their narratives and respond accordingly. End-of-semester evaluations included comments such as "He cares a lot about his students," and "He is a sympathetic man who shows great concern for us."

Giroux calls for a "border pedagogy" that empowers students to "cross over into borders of meaning, maps of knowledge, social relations, and values that are increasingly being negotiated and rewritten" (147). His ambitious goal, education in service of "radical democracy," empowers people across various boundaries, such as race and gender, without obliterating differences. While Giroux identifies himself as a culturally left critic, he also notes a current tendency toward defeatism in culturally left criticism: "Radical education theory has abandoned the language of possibility for the language of critique" (120). Giroux proposes that those with an interest in transformative pedagogy rediscover what he calls "the language of possibility"; it is crucial, he says, to "create conditions within particular institutions that allow students to locate themselves and others in histories that mobilize rather than destroy their hopes for the future" (161). After a full semester of observing Elbow's classroom methods and individual conferences, reviewing student papers, and reading Elbow's written feedback, I concluded that Elbow's pedagogy is exactly what Giroux is calling for: an education that empowers students to make connections between their lives and the world around them, to expand their own critical powers, to "locate themselves and others" in narratives that are still unfolding, and not least of all, to give students a sense of hope, possibility, and individual agency through the process of becoming more powerful writers with more control over both their writing process and their written products.

"Frontier" may be associated with tropes of gunslinging cowboys in the Wild West, but it is also a synonym for "border." If we reconceptualize what kind of frontier we are talking about, Peter Elbow's classroom is indeed a "frontier classroom"—not the caricature classroom of our gunslinging cowboy evangelist, but a site for "border pedagogy" in Giroux's sense. The freshman English course I observed in spring 1996 helped students to learn and implement "the language of possibility," to write "with power" and "without teachers," in the process "mobiliz[ing] rather than destroy[ing] their hopes for the future." This was a "frontier pedagogy" that the academy needs more of if we are ever to work toward the "radical democracy" of which Giroux speaks.

10 DISSOLVING CONTRARIES

KEITH HJORTSHOJ

No one can be blamed for associating Peter Elbow's work first with antiestablishment movements in higher education and then with expressionist pedagogy in composition. These were real historical implications of Elbow's writing and teaching, supported by strands, at least, of intention. Appearing in the midst of challenges to institutional authority of all kinds, even the title of *Writing Without Teachers* suggested that teachers and their institutional roles were the central problems writers faced. If teachers represent the constraints of academic discourse, writing without them must be nonacademic. Freewriting, without these rhetorical constraints, suggests that other kinds of writing are *not* free. And if we are not writing to tell others what we have to say, we must be writing to tell ourselves what we have to say. It is only a short step, then, to conclude that the value of freewriting must reside in this discovery and to call it *self-discovery*, *self-realization*, and *self-expression*.

Through a patchwork of quotations and inferences along these lines, James Berlin thus distinguished Peter Elbow as the central proponent of "expressionistic epistemology," which, according to Berlin, "locates all truth within a personal construct arising from one's unique selfhood that prevents these expressionists from becoming genuinely epistemic in their approach, despite their use of activities—such as the editorial group—that on the surface are social in nature" (53). In Berlin's reading of *Writing Without Teachers*, even "cooking"—interaction and exchange—serves the purpose "of discovering the nonverbal reality of the self." (*Rhetoric* 154).

Nearly thirty years after the publication of *Writing Without Teachers*, most of Elbow's critics and many of his followers continue to view his work through this "expressionistic" lens. On his side of a "Conversation" with Elbow, in the February 1995 issue of CCC, for example, David Bartholomae characterized "free writing" as a nonacademic genre: "a first-person, narrative or expressive genre whose goal is to reproduce the ideology of sentimental realism" ("Writing" 69). Because they fail to acknowledge that this *is* a genre, Bartholomae argued, Elbow and others in his camp create illusions of freedom, through a naive "desire for an institutional space free from institutional pressures, a cultural process free from the influence of culture, an historical moment outside of history, an academic

setting free from academic writing” (64). By identifying writing with individual psychology, leaders of expressionist and cognitive trends in the 1970s derailed composition studies, in Bartholomae’s view, from more productive attention to the social, rhetorical contexts in which academic writing occurs.

If Peter Elbow’s reputation alone were at stake in this unresolved argument, I would let him speak entirely for himself, as he has done on many occasions, with considerable annoyance. In his 1991 review of Jeannette Harris’ book *Expressive Discourse*, for example, Elbow revealed both his desire to disentangle himself from the category of expressivism and the difficulty he faces in doing so:

When I first discovered, thumbing through the book, that she wanted to get rid of expressive discourse as a category in our discipline, I was intrigued—even attracted. Not just because I don’t find the word “expressive” particularly central to my own lexicon, not just because I too wonder what the word means, but most of all, quite frankly, because I find these days that the term is mostly used as a stick to beat me over the head with. My hopes were dashed, however, when I found that she is only trying to get rid of the term “expressive discourse” but that she wants to keep the terms “expressive pedagogy” and “expressive theory” and “rhetorical expressionism” for people like me—for the general school of thought that Berlin gave that label to. Unfortunately, she seems to want to hang onto the term “expressive” so that she too can continue to beat “expressivists” about the head and shoulders. (84)

There is something odd, as Elbow implies in the passage above, about the persistence with which his critics preserve the category of “expressive writing” while denying its relevance to writing and teaching in the university. There is also something odd about the narrow, extreme rendition of expressivism that Bartholomae attaches to Elbow’s work, even though he knows that Elbow avoids such fixed, one-dimensional positions. As the anthropologist Mary Douglas observed in *Purity and Danger*, categories of order, power, and inclusion depend upon categories of disorder, weakness, and exclusion. This observation suggests that, as an excluded, denigrated category, “personal expression” is essential for maintaining certain institutionalized conceptions of “academic discourse.” If expressivism did not exist, social constructionists, among others, would have to construct it. Elbow therefore has good reasons to suspect that theorists who wish to maintain narrow conceptions of academic writing need “expressivists” like him to kick around—ones willing to represent the positions they need to exclude.

To the extent that Elbow and Bartholomae agree to maintain the distinction between personal expression and academic discourse, we can think of them as allies, even when, as in the CCC debate, they intend to disagree. *Abandoning* this distinction, as I’ll propose, would genuinely challenge ideas

about academic writing that represent an institutionalized illusion. This illusory notion of academic writing creates some of the most common difficulties student writers encounter; it represents the main obstacle Peter Elbow was trying to move beyond in his early work; and it continues to undermine the potential value of this work for academic writers.

The institutionalized illusion I have in mind is a conception of the university as a place of accomplished performance. In this view of the university, high status results from *being* knowledgeable, original, and eloquent on demand. After all, scholars are known and rewarded not for work in progress but for their performances: their publications, teaching skills, public lectures, awards, and grants. Students succeed through strong performances on writing assignments, exams, and presentations, exchanged for the currency of grades. In this kind of institution, we can think of “academic discourse” as a large category of textual performances—accomplished writing and speech—that includes the books and articles scholars publish, the readings they assign in their courses, prepared lectures, and the assigned papers students submit for evaluation.

These products of academic work are indeed forms of academic discourse, and there is nothing illusory about the values, rewards, and imperatives attached to them. Writing, teaching, and learning are ultimately performing arts. The goal of an academic writer or teacher, like that of an actor or musician, is to deliver a convincing, polished performance that demonstrates mastery of the medium. And this performance should create for the audience an illusion of ease that conceals the messy, experimental process of rehearsal, the long ordeal of *becoming* accomplished. When such an artist is on stage, behind the lectern or in print, we don’t want to observe the hesitation, confusion, and labor from which fine performances gradually emerge.

But the university is an educational institution, not just a theater of accomplishment, and in some respects we conceal the process of becoming accomplished entirely too well—especially from our students. “My history professor talks just like a book!” a freshman told me with admiration, and he seemed disillusioned when I raised the possibility that this professor was talking *from* his book, or delivering lectures he had rehearsed and performed many times. Real teachers of the performing arts know that in order to create the illusion of ease in fine performance their students need to be *disillusioned* in precisely this way. Students need to spend most of their time learning the arduous process through which actors, dancers, or musicians bring work to the stage. They must be aware that professional actors, for example, are people who have learned not just how to perform but how to rehearse: ways of developing characters, coordinating their roles with others, and making productive use of performance anxiety. This is what they teach their students.

For the sake of comparison, therefore, imagine a school of theater arts in which students are supposed to become accomplished actors by watching brilliant performances. Imagine that they are then asked to produce similar performances on stage, before critical audiences, without rehearsals, without formal training in voice and movement, without direction in the development of their characters. Imagine that assessment of their ability is based entirely on the strengths or weaknesses of those makeshift performances and that the whole process of preparing to be on stage is considered an individual, personal enterprise, not the focus of instruction in theater arts. Imagine that students in this school are allowed to believe that truly accomplished, professional actors can perform brilliantly without preparation and rehearsal.

This is the kind of place David Bartholomae best described in his essay “Inventing the University”: a place where student writers are routinely put on stage and asked to perform roles for which they are unrehearsed and, as often as not, miscast. In these performances, they are supposed to imitate the daunting figure of accomplishment: the “professor of English” (as Bartholomae casts himself), who already knows everything the student writer is struggling to learn.

If my students are going to write for me by knowing who I am—and if this means more than knowing my prejudices, psyching me out—it means knowing what I know; it means having the knowledge of a professor of English. They have, then, to know what I know, and how I know what I know (the interpretive schemes that define the way I would work out the problems I set for them); they have to learn to write what I would write or to offer up some approximation of that discourse. (140)

As Bartholomae says elsewhere in the essay, they have “to assume privilege without having any”—to write as though they were people they have not yet become, with kinds of authority they do not possess. And from Bartholomae’s perspective, this struggle occurs on stage, in the papers they have written which, along with the professional literature they read, constitute “academic discourse.” Through the window of the completed text, the teacher can see precisely what the writer was doing, because “A written text, too, can be a compelling model of the ‘composing process’ once we conceive of a writer at work in a text and simultaneously, then, within a society, a history, a culture.” (162)

Bartholomae’s account of the university closely mirrors the ways in which my students describe the challenges of academic writing. And while Bartholomae attributes these problems to “basic writers,” I’ve found that the difficulty of assuming privilege you do not have increases, in some ways, as tasks become more complex and as standards rise. When I ask students in an advanced writing class to explain what makes writing difficult, the majority include papers they write for unfamiliar, authoritative teachers as examples,

and they tend to describe this ordeal as a kind of performance for which they are unprepared. One student observed that writing the first paper for a teacher was like trying to make intelligent conversation on a blind date. Another concluded, "It is impressing others which cramps my thought processor." This junior imagined herself on the dance floor with a stranger:

Writing is most difficult for me when I am unsure to whom I am writing. I torture myself as I attempt to strike a balance between delivering to the audience what I think it wants to hear, and what I want to say. . . . Writing, in this sense, may be compared to dancing with a new partner. Initially, you do not know your partner's style or experience. There is a fear of stepping on the other person's feet or of trying a daring move. As a result, the dance is stiff and constrained. It is awkward and unnatural.

And this sophomore's description of writing for teachers corresponds very closely with the rhetorical conundrum Bartholomae poses, of trying "to assume privilege without having any." She also describes her effort to meet this academic challenge as a personal, emotional struggle, in terms of insecurity and self-consciousness:

Since the majority of my writing is for professors, whom I regard in the beginning as impersonal entities—strangers—I am very insecure about my writing ability. I am constantly conscious of my need to hide my insecurity by writing to meet their approval. Thus, I feel my writing should be coherent, intelligently composed, and interesting in order to reflect some of my nonexistent characteristics.

Like Bartholomae, all of these students are referring to their "writing" entirely as the product of their effort, not the process. One exception is this junior, who describes his struggle to move beyond what Bartholomae calls the "imitation or parody" of the teacher's accomplishment:

I have the most trouble using language . . . when I am trying to write about something that a professor has discussed in one of my classes. I feel controlled by his words, somehow imprisoned by his thought, unable to reshape his ideas into my own. I have so much trouble taking the leap from my professor's framework to my own interpretation of the ideas that the process of writing is like vomiting all night long, over and over again. I have to hammer out every sentence at least three times before I will accept it, and by the time I finish a paragraph, I already hate the first sentence all over again. But then I will think of something (usually in the middle of the night), a new slant—my own direction—and the paper will be redeemed. This is the most difficult writing, but probably the writing from which I learn the most.

Yet even this writer, one of the best in the class, was trying to produce the finished paper at every utterance, in a single draft. Like the other students, therefore,

he could not clearly distinguish the product from the process, the performance from the rehearsal. And like all of the students who wrote about their difficulties, he assumed full responsibility for figuring out how to get this writing done. In more than a hundred papers on this subject, I can't recall a single writer who viewed the process of completing papers as an object of instruction—something one should expect to learn from teachers outside a process-based writing class such as mine. In other classes they were on their own, taking personal responsibility for their awkward efforts to reflect their nonexistent characteristics or to dance with strangers. If they were more accomplished like their professors, they assumed, they wouldn't face these difficulties.

For teachers and for administrators, this is a very convenient view of academic performance and academic discourse. Placing the means to the ends of accomplishment in excluded categories of personal experience and personal responsibility relieves teachers from the most complex, time-consuming types of instruction and allows the institution to run more efficiently. It also allows scholars to maintain the appearance of being wholly accomplished, in departments where admissions of confusion or ignorance can be hazardous. In the chapter she wrote for Howard Becker's book *Writing for Social Scientists*, sociologist Pamela Richards described the risks of showing early drafts to colleagues:

If you give someone a working draft to read, what you're asking them to do is pass judgment on your ability to think sociologically. You're asking them to decide whether you are smart or not and whether you are a real sociologist. If there are no flashes of insight, no riveting ideas, what will they conclude? That you're stupid. If she tells that to anyone else, it's the kiss of death. (114–15)

If faculty are not showing this work to their colleagues, they are unlikely to use it for purposes of instruction. Very few of my students, even at advanced levels of undergraduate study, have ever seen rough drafts of their professors' publications, research notes, rejected manuscripts, peer reviews, or other artifacts of work in progress. Because they are barely aware that such documents exist, students tend to assume that professional academic writing, like their own, is the accomplished thing itself, not the way that thing came about.

How do people and texts become accomplished? How do successful scholars acquire knowledge, prepare lectures, produce books and articles, and pass tenure reviews? How do undergraduates and graduate students become scholars and other kinds of professionals? How do "Student Writers," in the title of Nancy Sommers's 1980 study of revision, become "Experienced Adult Writers"? How do the unprivileged acquire privilege? How can writing come to reflect characteristics the writer did not possess at the beginning of the process?

To a great extent the answers to these questions lie behind closed doors, in realms of academic discourse that undergraduates rarely enter. As a consequence—even for graduate students, even for faculty in some disciplines—these appear to be personal questions about private dimensions of individual lives.

Yet these are really questions about academic work and academic writing, and they are the kinds of questions from which *Writing Without Teachers* emerged. In this initial form, Elbow's work was simply an effort to demystify the process of getting things written, and I focus on this first book because it precedes the entangled theoretical arguments through which Elbow half became, as I'll illustrate later, the expressivist his critics needed him to be.

As Elbow explained in an interview in *Writing on the Edge* in 1992, he knew very little about the field of composition when he published *Writing Without Teachers*, and he did not develop freewriting to celebrate personal expression or to renounce academics. His version of freewriting began, instead, as the last-ditch survival strategy of a young scholar, prone to writing blocks, who wanted very much to become an academic and has remained one ever since. As he explained in that interview, "The main attraction" of Williams and Oxford, where he was an undergraduate, "was the sophistication, learning to 'pass'" even though these places made him feel unsophisticated, awkward, and inarticulate ("An Interview" 15). The challenge for him, as for the sophomore I quoted above, was to figure out how to produce writing that "reflected [his] nonexistent characteristics." As a graduate student at Harvard and Brandeis, he said, "I was very self-conscious about writing, scared I couldn't do it" (10). *Writing Without Teachers* emerged from the spontaneous notes he wrote to himself about his struggles, when writing seemed otherwise impossible. These were the tormented explorations he had in mind, no doubt, when he made this remarkable statement about authority in the preface:

The authority I call upon in writing a book about writing is my own long-standing difficulty in writing. It has always seemed to me as though people who wrote without turmoil and torture were in a completely different universe. And yet advice about writing always seemed to come from them and therefore to bear no relation to us who struggled and usually failed to write. But in the last few years I have struggled more successfully to get things written and make them work for at least some readers, and in watching myself do this I have developed the conviction I can give advice that speaks more directly to the experience of having a hard time writing. I have also reached the conviction that if you have special difficulty in writing, you are not necessarily further from writing well than someone who writes more easily (viii).

This "completely different universe" where people seem to write "without turmoil and torture" was the kind of university Bartholomae describes, where

performance is all that really seems to count and where performance anxiety is therefore a way of life. And we can think of *Writing Without Teachers* as an attempt to develop a strategy for survival in this place. Through his own effort to recover from the performance anxieties this environment tends to induce, Elbow developed a phenomenology of writing as a productive activity. Writing “without” teachers simply means that to examine what we are actually doing in this process, we have to put the still illusory figure of accomplishment in parentheses, along with the illusion that brilliant products tumble effortlessly from the minds of brilliant writers. The “teacherless classroom” is the kind of place in which this investigation can occur, with or without teachers, much as lessons and rehearsals occur before a performance of music or theater. *Writing Without Teachers* examines what happens in the practice of writing, before the product of this effort reaches an intended audience.

Presented in the “tell it like it is” style of the period, the language of this analysis is conversational, often self-referential, but seldom expressivist. Elbow rarely describes writing as a means to “self-discovery” or “self-expression” in the terms Berlin attributed to the book. Instead, he continually uses the language of perception, cognition, physical movement, and physics, often to construct metaphors or models for understanding how writing itself comes about, takes direction, and transforms, or to explain how ways of thinking interfere with this process. In reference to “summing-up” what one has already written, for example, he uses terms of movement and energy to explain a common misconception:

The essence of this approach is to change your notion of what it means to *try* or *attempt* or *work on* a piece of writing. To most people it means pushing as hard as they can against a weight that is heavier than they can budge—hoping eventually to move it. Whereas of course you merely get tired. You must create mechanical advantage so that “trying” means pushing against a weight that you *can* move even if that only moves the main weight a small distance (20).

Even a term such as “growing” does not refer to “personal growth” but to words, sentences, and ideas themselves. Like “cooking,” this concept is relational. It refers to the evolving relations between writers and words, words and other words, ideas and other ideas, writers and other writers. “Believing” and “doubting,” introduced at the end of the book, are not personal feelings or matters of opinion; they are intellectual choices and cognitive conditions. In *Writing Without Teachers* there is very little sense of the writer as a unique individual, and conceptions of the “self,” to the extent that they appear in the book at all, seem insubstantial—certainly not romanticized or reified. The writer seems little more than an occasion for writing to happen—or the locus of concepts that keep

writing from happening of its own accord. Far from representing any fixed notion of the self, "Writing is, in fact, a transaction with words whereby you *free* yourself from what you presently think, feel, and perceive." (15)

More than any other book I know about, *Writing Without Teachers* examines what happens in the writer's reference frame. Within this reference frame, freewriting is not a variety of personal expression. Instead, this exercise demonstrates the point of departure for *all* writing—in a kind of coordinated movement both physical and intellectual, which Elbow has often described as the use of a writing "muscle." This account of writing as an embodied activity—a matter of knowing where you are in the process and what you are doing—directly addresses the sense of disembodiment, dislocation, and stage fright my students describe. Elbow's work has also been enormously helpful in my work with graduate students afflicted by writing blocks, which the university encourages them to perceive, as Mike Rose observed, "as a mysterious, amorphous emotional difficulty." *Writing Without Teachers* illuminates the nature of these obstacles as patterned features of the writing process that all writers encounter and can move beyond.

Elbow formalized, expanded, and in some ways clarified these ideas in *Writing With Power*, which also precedes Berlin's taxonomy of rhetoric and the debates that followed. In the index to *Writing With Power*, terms such as "expression," "discovery," and "personal" do not appear at all. The word "self" occurs only in a few references to "self-evaluation."

If in his first two books Elbow was not the expressivist Berlin imagined him to be, how and to what extent did he become such a figure in composition theory?

In the *Writing on the Edge* interview, Elbow acknowledged that his view of writing, especially his own struggle with writing, is in some ways psychological, "in the sense of figuring out how my life works." He added that "When *Writing Without Teachers* came out, a lot of people said, 'Well, this is too therapeutic. This is too much about feelings.' So in a way I was always trying to prove it was all academic, not too psychological" (25).

To this extent, perhaps, Elbow does maintain expressivist interpretations of his own experiences as a writer, and the fact that he views his early difficulties as emerging from personal problems explains in part why he has never entirely refuted charges that freewriting and other kinds of exploratory writing are forms of personal expression.

But there is another reason, rooted in the intellectual foundations of Elbow's contributions to composition theory. Elsewhere in the *Writing on the Edge* interview, Elbow described the best candidate for a central theme that runs throughout his work: not expressivism, but "embracing contraries." "I want to

define it as one of my life's works," he said, "to work out an intellectual justification for going in two directions at once, for maintaining things that look irreconcilable to be—if not reconcilable, at least both true, both deserving one hundred percent affirmation" (16). Even in this strong statement of purpose he said "*one* of my life's works," leaving room for other goals, other positions—what we might call Elbow-room. When he notices that one perspective has become dominant, he usually promotes the opposite, not *instead* but *as well*.

As a consequence, it is almost impossible either to pin Elbow to any single position or to exclude him entirely from any position. Because he hates exclusion and hates being "pigeonholed," as he often says, there is an underlying pattern to the way he responds to criticism or to characterizations of his work, even when we can't predict exactly what he will say. Told that he is or is not A, he will reply vigorously that he *is* A, but also B, its opposite. Told that this kind of thinking makes a virtue of ambivalence, he would probably reply, *Yes, but I don't want to be just ambivalent. I also want to be very definite!*

Through this pattern of response, Elbow has routinely argued that people misrepresent him by half, and in his tendency to "embrace" whatever critics say he is or is not (along with its opposite), he has embraced expressivism more explicitly than he did at the beginning of his career. To understand why Elbow has been engaged in this unresolved argument for so many years, we have to acknowledge the extent to which he has agreed to represent "personal expression" against the rigors of "academic discourse," the figure of "the writer" against that of "the academic," and the "private" domain of writing against the "public" domain of texts that have reached an intended audience. In his arguments against his critics, Elbow partly adopts the roles he has been assigned and stubbornly refuses, as often as not, to say what I want him to say.

On his side of the "Conversation" with Bartholomae in *CCC*, for example, I wanted Elbow to say "No, David, you've missed the point altogether. There is nothing essentially personal or nonacademic about freewriting, and a dimension of the writing process is not in itself a genre."

But Elbow did not challenge Bartholomae's notion that exploratory writing represents a genre of first-person narration or argue that most academic writing is initially exploratory. Instead, he set up an opposition, "Being a Writer vs. Being an Academic," and defended the open, exploratory role of the writer against a narrow, ambiguous conception of the academic. Students must learn to be writers first, he argued, *before* they become academics, and meanwhile, especially in the freshman year, teachers should maintain the illusion of context-free discovery that Bartholomae criticized: "Indeed," Elbow said, "much of my behavior is an invitation for them to *pretend* that no authorities have ever written about their subject before" ("Being a Writer" 79).

In his essay “Reflections on Academic Discourse,” Elbow maintained similar distinctions between the writer and the academic, nonacademic and academic varieties of discourse *within* academic contexts. He argued, for example, “for one *kind* of nonacademic discourse . . . that tries to render experience rather than explain it. To render experience is to convey what I see when I look out the window, what it feels like to walk down the street or fall down—to tell what it’s like to be me or to live my life” (136). In this passage he referred to types of writing, more or less literary: “autobiographical stories, moments, sketches—perhaps even a piece of fiction or poetry now and then” (137). In the next paragraph he argued that “we need nonacademic discourse even for the sake of helping students produce good academic discourse”—now referring to the kinds of exploratory writing that lead to finished essays or reports.

What is “nonacademic” about writing used to develop understandings or positions for course assignments? For that matter, if teachers assign autobiographical narratives, fiction, or poetry, isn’t that writing, in that context, academic? We could understand these distinctions more clearly, perhaps, if we knew what Elbow meant, exactly, by “academic discourse.” But in his effort to define the personal or expressive side of this false dichotomy, the academic side becomes blurred. In different parts of the “Reflections” essay, Elbow defines academic discourse as writing based on “reasons and evidence rather than just opinions, feelings, experiences” (140) or as “the discourse academics use when they publish for other academics” (135). Although he refers to many general features of academic writing (such as “detachment,” “explicitness,” and also “inexplicitness”), he argues in turn that “we can’t teach academic discourse because there’s no such thing to teach” (138). If genres of academic discourse are too diverse to distinguish as a category of writing, as he then argues, how can we distinguish “nonacademic” writing from them? And what is the point of doing so?

In the same fashion, Elbow has become an advocate for the types of writing readers associated with his work. *Writing Without Teachers* did not promote personal writing as an expressive genre, in opposition to academic discourse. Nor did *Writing With Power*. Yet in 1990 he edited an issue of *Pre/Text* devoted to “expressive writing,” represented in this issue as a loose assortment of narratives, letters, dialogues, and essays with little in common beyond a casual, self-referential style and a tendency to refer to others by their first names. In his foreword to the issue, however, Elbow did not just present this work on its merits. He used the occasion to argue that this kind of “personal expressive writing can do the work of academic discourse.” (“Foreword: About Personal” 13).

Considering that *Pre/Text* is an academic “Journal of Rhetorical Theory,” we might assume that the pieces contained in the issue are *already* doing the work of academic discourse. It is difficult to imagine, when reading them, what

other kinds of academic work they might be doing in other contexts, or what, exactly, this kind of writing has been excluded from. In the following passage from his preface, Elbow's sense of opposition and exclusion appears to serve the main purpose of supplying contraries for him to embrace, an excluded position he can defend in the interest of restoring balance between opposites:

Thus, I constantly read passages that simply assume without any argument that since Elbow is interested in the personal, private, and individual dimension, he must be working against what is social, against the idea of the social construction of meaning and reality. With this comes, of course, the assumption that if the social is good, then personal and private must be bad: that people who stick up for what is personal and private must be advocating the cause of solipsism. (13)

With one hand, therefore, Elbow proudly points to the label he tries with the other hand to remove.

While this effort to avoid fixed positions annoys Elbow's critics, I should acknowledge that it has often broadened and enriched the field of debate in composition theory and pedagogy. The brilliant distinction between the "doubting game" and the "believing game" has helped to resolve crippling dilemmas for teachers who feel they must choose between opposite values and roles in the classroom. By alerting us to the uneven "war" between reading and writing, Elbow has encouraged us to balance these distinct yet related dimensions of learning. As a rule, I greatly appreciate the kind of binary thinking that has led Elbow to these insights.

Some contraries, however, are more useful than others, and the effort to embrace a false dichotomy creates more confusion than it resolves. To the extent that Elbow has agreed to defend personal expression against academic discourse, he has helped to keep essential dimensions of academic writing in the closet of expressive discourse and individual psychology.

"What's at stake here?" Elbow often asks, and in conclusion I should explain why I consider it so important to dissolve, not embrace, this dichotomy between the personal and the academic.

One reason is primarily conceptual: an inclination, very different from Elbow's, to make single kinds of sense out of ideas I find useful. Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae are among very few composition theorists who have closely examined what student writers are actually doing, along with the ways in which teachers and institutions are implicated in the problems these writers encounter. Yet it is very difficult for readers in our teacher training programs, for example, to see that Elbow and Bartholomae are describing different dimensions of the same phenomena, the same kinds of writing problems in academic work. The impression that Elbow defends personal writing, while

Bartholomae describes academic writing obscures the complementary values of their insights into the ways in which writing comes about and into the broader rhetorical contexts in which writing occurs. Because both theorists create these impressions to some extent, I find that I need to make their work mutually useful through selective interpretation.

Other reasons are pedagogical. As I noted above, I often use principles and passages from Elbow's work to give blocked writers alternatives to the hopeless conclusion that their problems result from personality disorders, irrational fears, and other personal or emotional factors best understood through psychotherapy. The emphasis on embodied movement and direction in *Writing Without Teachers* and *Writing With Power* directly addresses blocked writers' sense that they are *paralyzed*, as they often say, or *mired*, *derailed*, *disengaged*, or *lost*. These conditions arise in the contexts of their academic work, not just in their minds. Most of the obstacles they encounter result from misconceptions of the writing process (including the idea that it is "psychological"), ineffective methods, or rhetorical and social factors that make writing virtually impossible, such as graduate committee members who have conflicting expectations. I do not want composition theorists to tell these writers that their problems or the solutions are "personal" after all.

Freewriting exercises also hold very limited value in a writing class if my students think of this kind of writing as personal expression, as opposed to academic writing. These contraries correspond entirely too well with categorical distinctions my students bring with them to college, find reinforced when they arrive, and apply to the types of writing their teachers assign. Because they have been led to believe that the formal, impersonal essays they submit to teachers fully represent academic writing, they assume that informal writing they do not submit to teachers is personal and "expressive." If they are not writing for teachers, they assume they are writing about themselves, even when they are not. Like Bartholomae, and like Elbow himself on some occasions, my students also tend to identify all spontaneous, exploratory writing with genres of autobiographical writing and literary description. Without help, they cannot find a bridge across this divide, between the material they generate in freewriting and the papers they turn in to teachers. Many of my colleagues run into similar obstacles when they assign "reflective journals," which their students imagine to be a distinct variety of personal expression akin to a diary, even when their entries about course material include wonderful observations they could expand in assigned papers.

When we encourage students to place exploratory writing in a nonacademic category of personal expression, they also become blind to the real foundations of academic writing and research, and this is my main concern. For

scholars in English, who have the most direct influence on students' conceptions of writing, academic texts are about other texts and are therefore implicitly about reading. Writing based on direct experience and observation, memory, perception, or dialogue represents the genres of fiction and nonfiction scholars in literary studies write about and therefore seems nonacademic. This distinction appears to draw a clear line between academic writing and writing based on personal experience, and it is possibly one reason for which Elbow distinguishes "the writer" from "the academic."

But the line is not so clear in other fields, which include most of the ones my students choose as majors. In my collaborative work with teachers throughout the disciplines, I continually encounter varieties of academic writing based on direct experience, observation, description, and memory. Some of these forms represent essential stages of investigation or phases of the writing process. Some are narrative or descriptive or contain dialogue. Yet the terms "personal writing" or "expressive discourse" would misrepresent them completely. Laboratory notebooks, for example, include extensive narration and description based on direct observation in the process of doing research, yet for professional scientists these are also public, legal documents. A botanist's field journals consist largely of descriptive writing, often supplemented with drawings. In many other fields, too, direct experience can be another word for "data." Both in research notes and in publications, psychological or sociological case studies include extensive writing based on first-hand experience, often with interview material presented in dialogue. "Writing from experience" does not necessarily mean literary nonfiction. Nor does it necessarily "reproduce," in Bartholomae's terms, "the ideology of sentimental realism."

Many ethnographers, for example, depend on a version of freewriting in their research. To record as much as possible of what people are doing or saying or to recall this information before memory fades, they write continuously without pausing to think about what they are writing. For similar purposes, in a course on social research I often assigned what I called "descriptive freewriting." I asked students to situate themselves in any kind of social context and describe what was going on, by writing continuously for at least five pages. Is this kind of writing personal or academic, private or public, subjective or objective? Analysis of this descriptive writing helped to illustrate that such dichotomies obscure more complex, useful questions about the relations between the observer and observed and about the choices observers make in writing—questions essential to research and writing in the social sciences.

When they become involved with our writing programs, teachers in the disciplines develop a wide range of assignments of this sort: assignments that engage undergraduates in varieties of academic discourse that occur prior to

the completion of published literature in their fields. This work is often informal, exploratory, or collaborative. In some cases teachers read and evaluate this work; in other cases they do not. Sometimes students work on these projects in groups, exchanging drafted material and suggestions for the next move before teachers see what they have done. In an ecology class, for example, students spend an afternoon writing down dozens of questions during field observation near a pond. During the next class, they work in groups to sort through these questions and identify the most interesting ones they might be able to answer through research. When they have selected questions for further study, they begin to design research methods, conduct literature searches, and exchange drafts of research proposals. Teachers remain on the edges of these activities, which closely resemble those Elbow described in the “teacherless classroom.”

Teachers involved with interdisciplinary writing programs develop these assignments because they represent versions of disciplinary practices, acknowledged forms of academic discourse. When disciplinary practices become instructional practices, as they should be, students begin to understand the otherwise hidden, mysterious ways in which knowledge, accomplishment, and finished writing evolve from confusion, exploration, collaboration, false trails, repeated experiments, and hard work. They can experience the process through which observation of social phenomena, for example, becomes the literature and knowledge of sociology. Engaged with their teachers in these kinds of academic discourse, students no longer feel that as writers they must assume privilege and authority they do not possess.

In this respect, Peter Elbow’s early work on the evolution of texts holds the greatest potential value among writing-intensive courses in the disciplines where teachers are often predisposed to think of exploratory, observational, and collaborative writing as essential forms of academic discourse. His work will not reach these teachers and students outside English, however, if composition theorists, writing program administrators, and Elbow himself continue to associate this work with literary genres and processes of “personal expression.”

11 PLEASURE, POLITICS, FEAR, AND THE FIELD OF COMPOSITION

Elbow's Influence on My Theorizing and Teaching

IRENE PAPOULIS

Peter Elbow the person was my first introduction to the field of composition. It was in the early 1980s; I was a few years into my graduate degree in literature at SUNY Stony Brook; and Peter took over our writing program. I had barely, if at all, been aware of a field called Composition, but I taught first-year composition regularly, usually by lecturing on how to write arguments. Fascinated by literary theory, especially feminist theory, I was feeling somewhat resistant to the field of literature, because of my growing awareness of the discrepancy between what I thought of as my political consciousness and what seemed to me to be the pseudopolitics I was learning in literary studies.

I got to know Peter through his books, which I began to read after attending his first meeting with graduate students (where, in a sequence of prompts that has since become second nature to me, he introduced us skeptical graduate students to freewriting, focused freewriting, and process writing), through the study group on composition theory he convened, and, not least, through the calm but relentlessly insistent way he imposed his views on the graduate students and his colleagues at Stony Brook. Many years later I still learn from Peter, and I want here to describe how my own thinking about teaching composition has evolved as a result of my exposure to his ideas and also speculate about the strong reactions he tends to evoke in people in our field.

Peter's approach—kind, willing to listen, often appearing to be a bit undecided, yet in fact totally unshakable in terms of the things he really believes in—deeply interested and delighted me from the start. For example, I remember how he dealt with one first- or second-year graduate student, very earnest but uninformed, who had found her way into our composition theory study group, which was made up mostly of faculty and more experienced graduate students. Her understanding of the subject at hand—it was collaborative learning, I remember; we were reading Ken Bruffee—seemed to me limited and useless to our group discussion. I did not know much about the issue either, but therefore I felt obligated to keep my mouth shut. I seethed inside, listening to my fellow student speak in a hesitant and querulous way. I barely

refrained from rolling my eyes, willing her to finish what she was saying so the group could go on with what I was sure was a much more sophisticated discussion than she could appreciate. However, Peter listened to her very carefully and kindly and said something in response that revealed a very interesting and provocative question in what she was saying. From within her struggle at articulation he pinpointed the deepest insight and made the group see that she was actually raising an issue that was very engaging for all of us.

While I do not remember the specific issue, I do remember how startled I was at Peter's ability to listen so well and to respect the opinions of anyone who gave them. In addition to the important lesson about teaching it gave me, Peter's attitude gave me permission, ultimately, to express my own hesitant views in the study group too; without his generous listening, I may well have remained silent. I have seen Peter attend gracefully and productively to many seeming-at-first-to-be-insignificant perspectives since then; such attention is an intrinsic part of the way he approaches the world and by giving it he expands his own perspective and others', immeasurably. To me, it is a political act, in the sense that Peter uses his position of authority to bring out the views of people whom others might not otherwise listen to. He never does it in a patronizing way—his action grows out of a deep and genuine curiosity and out of the knowledge that people inevitably, no matter who they are, do in fact have something useful to tell him and others.

As a result of having the wonderful luck of being in a position to think with Peter about teaching writing, I ended up all but abandoning my field of literary studies and redefining myself as a composition person. Watching Peter work, I realized that attention to pedagogy was crucial for anyone wanting to find ways to effect political change within established classrooms. While I rarely heard Peter talk overtly about politics, his ideas answered a yearning in me to have a practical grounding for the theoretical framework I was developing, a framework that grew out of feminist and postmodern theories, resistance to hierarchies, concern with fairness, championing of the marginalized, and attention to women's experience. The kind of classrooms Peter urged us graduate students to create, I realized, was the kind in which such ideas were enacted in practice.

For example, our classrooms resisted the view that writing classes should mold students into exactly the kinds of writers that faculty in other departments wanted them to be. While I did instruct students to an extent in meeting the requirements of specific discourse communities, my overall interest was in getting them to articulate their unique responses to their subjects. Teaching writing came to seem to me to be political work in that if I refused to impose a way of thinking or writing on students, I felt I was allowing them to resist established hierarchies and power structures and gain access to their own

unique ideas. Those ideas, I thought, should be brought from the margins of the classroom to the center, and they would ultimately enable students to assert their own power in the world at large. It was a feminist act, I reasoned, to require that my classes open up time and space to listen well to each view, particularly those of quiet women students, whose voices ordinarily were silenced. I now understand the naiveté in my thinking; systems, of course, are more entrenched than any individual. Nevertheless, I still believe that encouraging individuals to speak from their own convictions enables them to get along better within systems and to be in a position to effect profound change. In his abiding interest in finding ways to allow students, and everyone, to speak for themselves, I think, is the heart of Peter's political power and is also the threat he represents to the established order, even the academic established order.

It was only after getting my first full-time teaching job, as a lecturer in the composition program at the University of California, Santa Barbara, that I came to discover that Peter did not define the field of composition as I had hoped he had. Though ubiquitous in his influence, I realized, he served, as many of the essays in this book attest, as an object for many very mixed and complicated emotions in the field at large. I found that colleagues referred, and some continue to refer, to people like me as "Peter-Elbow-people," which meant to them that I was out of touch with the hard realities of the real academic world, naive about the nature of institutional power, and "touchy-feely" in the sense of wishing to serve as a therapist of sorts to students. Many people, I found, could not get past this stereotypical view and could not take me, or my perspective on writing, seriously. To me and to many others, the field of composition in the late 1980s was a place where one had to take sides in what we now tend to see as false dichotomies—personal vs. social, expressivist vs. social constructionist, etc. I had many debates about teaching writing in those days, but they tended not to be fruitful on either side because, as I came to see later, I too falsely stereotyped the "other side" as being overly and blindly obsessed with a rejection of the "personal" in the name of the "social" and as being too cowed by the idea of "academic discourse" to be able to effect real change.

I came to be fascinated, though, by the deeply negative emotional reaction that some people had against what they imagined as Peter's perspective. At UCSB, and in the field at large, I encountered many people whose emotion toward Peter was enthusiastic appreciation and gratitude, of course, but there seemed also to be a critical mass of people whose reaction went the other way, toward passionate negativity. Peter seemed to stir up some sort of deep fear in the latter people, fear that often seemed to be based on a cursory reading of some of his work and an irrational judging of it as somehow less than academic. At the time I did not understand that reaction, as I knew Peter was nothing if

not rigorous and philosophical, but at the same time I myself came to feel surprisingly ambivalent about those who spoke so strongly against Peter.

While my peers always saw me as representing the “Peter Elbow” side, my teaching was in fact deeply affected by the strong arguments of my “opponents.” Though in theory I believed that “empowering” students, in the sense of “helping them gain access to their unique opinions,” was to their greater benefit in the long run than “teaching them how to write academic discourse” in a more didactic way, in practice, in spite of myself, I began to change. This happened out of the sense of guilt I felt when I listened to people I respected, who disdained what they saw as Peter’s views. They convinced me that perhaps I was in fact doing my students a disservice when I simply invited them to explore their own ideas. Perhaps my methods were naive and not rigorous enough, I worried; perhaps I would do better to initiate students into the harsh realities of academic discourse, by requiring that they write the way that I, in my role as a representative of the university, considered most academically effective. After all, my training in literary studies had given me an abiding appreciation for academic discourse in the strictest sense, the sense of being based, always, on texts and on clearly structured arguments questioning and probing those texts. I began to worry that perhaps freewriting and other unbound explorations of students’ own ideas were simply too pleasurable, and the part of me that was worried about rigor was deeply suspicious of pleasure. Didn’t I want students, I asked myself, to take their place as members of an academic discourse community? How could I do them such a disservice as to engage them in “fun” writing that blinded them to the harsh realities of the academic world?

In answer, I turned away from assignments that invited students’ unique responses, began to use *The World of Ideas* and then *Ways of Reading* as texts, and began to require academic argument in my composition classes. I even stopped, for a few quarters of teaching English 1, inviting students to do any freewriting. I returned to the sort of teaching I had done before I met Peter, focusing on argumentation, except that I retained what I had learned about peer groups and let students read and respond to each others’ essays. My students would read a selection of relatively difficult academic essays, and I, like countless other first-year composition teachers everywhere, would assign writing based on the assignments given in the book.

This teaching practice put me in line with what many of my colleagues were doing and assuaged the part of me that, in spite of my theories to the contrary, bought into the “Peter Elbow is a naive idealist” argument. Yet I was not at all content. Another part of me, the “if Peter Elbow is a naive idealist then I am too, and besides, the only way to effect real change is to push for the perspective I believe in” part felt extremely uncomfortable. I was undecided and conflicted; I

told myself that teaching students—and at the time I was teaching in a voluntary program of composition classes for students considered “at risk,” in addition to my work with “mainstream” students—to write academic discourse was perhaps in fact more powerful politically than doing otherwise. Yet my doubts and hesitations grew. I found that I did not relish going to class as much as I had when I had required writing that was more centered in the students’ own experiences, and I was alarmed to find that I was bored reading much of my students’ writing. At the same time, inevitably, the students seemed bored too. It was clear that they were dutifully, with varying degrees of effectiveness, obeying rules and doing what they were supposed to do, but their hearts did not seem engaged. Instead of the joyful desire to share their work with others that I had noticed in students assigned writing about issues growing out of their own thoughts and feelings, I noticed a weary seriousness that did not seem fruitful. I remember one student in particular, a very friendly, thoughtful, outgoing, opinionated first-year student, struggling in my office to shape his ideas into a clear essay. Writing, for him, was agonizing, completely unrelated to his natural gregariousness. He had so much to say in class, but when he wrote, his sentences were inevitably pinched and awkward. I sat with him in conference many times, suggesting ways that he could restructure and revise in order to formulate a clearer argument, but as I did so the conviction grew in me: he needs freewriting, he needs to choose his own topics. Those things alone would cause him to blossom as a writer, because they would connect the fluency he had in speaking with his writing. Instead, he saw writing as unrelated to talking; he struggled to construct and reconstruct each sentence, and he was stifled. My methods, I realized, were preventing me from getting him to experience the pleasure of expressing in writing the ideas he was passionate about. I knew I could help him experience that pleasure if I taught more in the “Peter Elbow” way that I had put aside. Yet I was constrained by my syllabus and by my stated goal that the course involved writing essays on the academic texts I had chosen and on the issues I had provided. I felt trapped, too. Could this possibly be the best way to empower the student? I wondered, and my answer was “no.” I imagined him having the same clenched experiences writing for other classes, even as he tried so hard to do well. His fate, it seemed to me, would be to finish college—if he did finish—with a mediocre record at best, in spite of his considerable intellectual energy and enthusiasm. Instead, though, if he learned to connect his own lively thinking and opinions with his writing, his fate could be very different. Painstakingly showing him how academic essays should work, I felt, was not the way to help him make that connection.

As I thought further about this, acknowledging my sense of what that student and many others really needed from a composition class, I gradually realized, for

the second time, that teaching analytic arguing in a way that did not engage students' personal interests simply did not work for me. My expressivist inclination, my belief that the best thing I could teach first-year writers was to develop the confidence and skill to articulate their own deepest insights, took over again. At first I tried to combine Elbow-type approaches with more argumentative ones. I began requiring that students buy *Writing With Power* in addition to their text of readings, I had students focus-freewrite before essay-writing, and I put more time and energy into making peer-responding more serious and effective. In spite of my worry about not being rigorous enough, I began to think about how methods aimed at getting to students' personal reactions were necessary to the most powerful academic work.

Peter's philosophy had led me to think about the fact that effective professional academics do tend, while constructing their arguments, to write out of genuine personal interest in the material. Before my students can really argue in their chosen fields then, I decided, I needed to help them get a sense of pleasure and confidence in their own ideas. The pleasure needed to come first; it would propel them to write in a more engaged way. This meant that if I wanted them to analyze academic texts, I would assign not fixed questions from the book, but, say, a series of informal responses designed to help them to come up with their own particular angles on the material.

From there, they could construct theoretical essays that were much more personal in the sense that they were heartfelt. As the semesters went by, I came to assign fewer texts to read and more writing that grew out of students' interests. I came to work in class with raw drafts of students' writing, focusing on helping them find ways to create clear and formal structures from within their informal writings, instead of making use of already established structures.

Meanwhile, I had a chance to experience Peter's style of work from the perspective of a participant in a group led by a student-centered teacher, when I got involved with the National Writing Project in Santa Barbara. I experienced the great pleasure and growth that occurs when students (who in this case were all teachers as well) get to write together, work in groups, and use writing as an intrinsic part of group discussions. Realizing firsthand what a pleasure it could be to work with peers in such a community energized my teaching, as it made me see that I was creating ways for my students to experience the same thing. The pleasure was also a large part of my reason for becoming an Associate of the Institute for Writing and Thinking at Bard College, in 1991 when I moved back to the east coast.

Peter started the latter institute in 1980 as a three-week summer program, taught primarily by faculty from other colleges, for students about to enter Bard College. Invited to do so by Bard's president, Peter developed a program

in which faculty and students wrote together frequently and where faculty—each in charge of a class of about twelve students that met for about five hours daily for the three weeks—lived together in a dormitory, away from their families, and collaborated intensively on theoretical frameworks as well as on class planning. The way he started this institute—gathering friends and associates from all over the country, who he felt would be effective and interesting collaborators and asking them to recommend others in a grassroots way—is vintage Peter, as is the way he led the institute, always open to anyone's feedback, but insistent on certain parameters, like his rule that everyone write together in the dining hall before breakfast.

By the time I got to the institute in 1991 (Peter actually worked there for only two years, and the institute has evolved since, but it remains true to many of his founding principles) it had become a well established place for faculty development for teachers from all over the country, as well as continuing to house the three-week program for entering first-year students. As a faculty member there for the student summer program as well as the teacher workshops, I worked intensively in teaching groups that grew out of Peter's philosophy of teaching. When associates of the institute get together, at meetings that last anywhere from an hour to an intensive weekend, with groups ranging from a handful of people working on a particular issue to the larger group of about fifty associates, we inevitably write together and hear our writing around the table, as a way of beginning or continuing our discussion.

Writing together, I found, through these experiences with peers, is a profoundly fruitful experience for practically any group of people. Having experienced it so intensely and repeatedly, I now try to get people to write, with varying degrees of success, whenever I am at any meeting with colleagues. When I do so, I remember Peter's gentle but firm insistence on writing; often colleagues, like students, grumble when they have to write on demand, but they usually are pleased after they have done so. It is amazing how quickly people can get to know each other when they write together and how present people feel in a group once they have read their writing aloud around the table without feedback until everyone is heard. This practice—requiring, say, that all participants write their thinking on a particular question and listen to all the others before talking—can seem unnecessary and ponderous for those who have not experienced it. Someone will usually say “can't we just all talk?” But once people write and are forced to listen to everyone before talking, they begin to realize that the process not only allows views to come forth that otherwise could easily be swept aside, but also saves time because it forces everyone to articulate a position briefly. It decreases the instances of tiresome filibusters by people wanting to get their opinions heard. Further, it helps people figure

out what their positions are more productively than talking can. Seeing the transformative effect of writing in practice on a regular basis with my peers confirmed for me that requiring my students to write and share informal writing together was crucial to my own teaching. Peter's work on freewriting has immeasurably helped me and countless others define our classes around writing more than texts. I came to see that the more deeply personal people could be in writing, the more alive their writing in any genre became, because they had access to the scariest and thus usually most interesting parts of their ideas.

If one purpose of this book is to encourage people to delineate "their" Peter, in the way reader response critics might talk about "their" *Pride and Prejudice* or "their" *Beloved*, "my" Peter is a strong believer in the self, while the "real" Peter is perhaps more hesitant about the primacy of the personal, as seen by his discomfort about the way he has been pigeonholed as an expressivist (see Elizabeth Flynn's article in this book). At times, I wish that Peter would enact more of "my" sense of him, which, I realize, contradicts in some ways what I am calling the "real" him. Knowing this, I find that I want to push harder for some of the things that Peter is thought of as advocating, even, sometimes, when he himself does not necessarily wish to advocate them.

The real Peter would be the first, I'm sure, to celebrate this desire of mine to take his theories wherever I want, even if he does not necessarily agree with me. In fact, the real Peter has always given me, as well as so many others, the permission, and the tools, to articulate my own most unique ideas. When it is working best, freewriting gets us in touch with our scariest and most interesting thoughts, and even very experienced freewriters need to be reminded regularly of this. How many times in the last almost two decades have I sat with my writing and said "I have nothing left to say; I don't know what I have to say" and then, remembering Peter's techniques, stopped that useless train of thought and said, "no, go with it, keep writing, close your eyes, don't worry about audience, just articulate what's there." How many times have any of us done so and taught our students to do so and heard students say "wow, this really works"?

So, having freewritten about it, I will describe some of my current thinking about teaching first-year composition as it takes up, moves beyond, and comes back to Peter's ideas. Though I define myself without reservation as an expressivist, I am beginning to take another turn, one that questions student-centered learning even as it continues to embrace it. I find that sometimes—especially working, as I am now, with mostly economically privileged students—students do not necessarily seem as enlivened as I would want them to be by the opportunity to explore their own ideas in writing and to share them with others. After I had introduced freewriting to a class on the first day one recent semester at Trinity, for example, a student came to me and said, "I had freewriting in high

school, so I really don't think I need this course," as though such writing is yet another task to do for the teacher, instead of an ongoing practice for self-knowledge and communication! Many of my students see school as a place for doing what the teacher wants and meeting specific conditions; they understand the teacher's requirement that they "think for themselves" as simply another thing they should do for the teacher. "Okay, I'll think of more feelings to add to the essay; where should I put them in?" was a response a student made recently to a comment I made on his essay that I wanted to know more about his views.

So what happens to student-centered learning when the students do not, cannot, or simply do not wish to serve as the center? What happens to my desire to effect some sort of political change through my classroom practices? Faced with the kind of students I have now, I still sometimes wonder if the techniques associated with social constructionist composition pedagogy might be the best ones to push students out of their complacent attitudes. Yet I resist teaching theoretical critique in my composition class, as that seems best suited for sociology or political science classes. What I have to offer as a composition teacher in particular, still, is an experience of using writing both to better experience self and, a necessary corollary, to become, in parallel, better able to listen well to others. My task now is to find ways, through better and more demanding informal writing assignments and better-structured insistence on extensive revision, to push past my students' complacency and to encourage them to explore themselves more deeply and at the same time to be increasingly responsible for listening well to others' views. I have also been thinking again about argumentation, about how to encourage students to argue well by pushing against the traditional parameters of argument—for example, by using emotions in their arguments instead of putting them aside in the name of rationality.

In short, there is a paradox here, and, of course, the man who embraces contraries invites such things. I want students to think for themselves, but, if they don't want to, I want to use writing to force them to think for themselves and to move beyond their initial thoughts and discover more. Implied in "my" Peter's work is a strong authority, one that can say "you must freewrite, NOW!" and I want to be very explicit about that authority. Yet faced with students like the ones at Trinity, my temptation nevertheless is still strong, I find, to capitulate and tell them what to do. They are excellent obeyers of rules, and most are at least fairly competent, so if I just require that they read academic essays and give them some good instruction on established forms, they will leave my classes satisfied and, if all goes according to plan, well equipped to write essays in their other courses. So why don't I just do that? Why do I bother with trying to free the students from something they may well have no wish to be freed from?

My answer is that my political beliefs force me to resist the status quo and to teach in a genuinely student-centered way. And I cannot simply create the structure and let the students do the rest, as I may be able to do in other contexts—for example, when working with engaged teachers. With my undergraduates, I have to be much more forceful about what “student centered” means. Paradoxically, I want to compel students to let their own unique ideas out, to listen well to others’ ideas, and to let their essays take forms that grow out of their thinking. “Student-centered” can thus not really mean what it initially meant—i.e., growing out of the interests and desires that the students bring to class with them. As I said, the desire many students bring is to be told what to do. So my current sense of “student-centered” means that I must first cajole students into allowing themselves to gain access to their intellectual desires and deep interests and then find ways to help them cultivate those. If they are not interested in those desires, they have not looked deeply enough into themselves, and I need to find ways to help them do so. This, to me, is political work, in that it actively resists complacency and pushes for change, growth, and awareness.

I need, then, to take a much more authoritative stance than I used to, in my gentle and perhaps overly nice encouragement that students explore their own ideas. I now put forth a more judgmental or critical stance, one that can seem different from Peter’s, as it attempts to chasten students, for example, with messages like “you’re not writing what you really think: shame on you!” The imposition of such a stance in the classroom, for me, lies in the systematic and insistent use of certain well known techniques. To me, such techniques, Peter’s techniques, are more powerful in themselves than theories, because they effect change on a practical, even visceral level. The most important of these is focused-freewriting, which I am coming to insist on ever more stringently. In the midst of class discussion, say, I ask students to stop and write regularly, interrupting our talking, and afterwards I force everyone to read out loud at least something from their writing, to get a range of views out and then to ask the class to consider all the conflicting views. The more students write together and share, paradoxically, the more they realize that informal writing is not merely an exercise for the teacher, it is a practice for life, a way to sort out and deepen their tangled ideas and communicate them. The key to making informal writing work effectively is in the prompts, which must cause students to probe and question. One of my favorite kinds of informal writing assignments in class, though, is very simple—the question “what did you hear” after students have heard a diverse collection of their classmates’ views. It obliges them to listen carefully and to consider and pinpoint other views. From there comes the prompt “how has your thinking changed, even if only a little, as a result of our discussion?” When it is time to write an essay, students always have plenty

of notes and informal writings to draw on, and from there they can construct a more nuanced essay—one that actually grows out of their own changing thinking—than they would have otherwise. I used to simply say “look at your notes and write a draft,” but now, again, I have a much more engaged approach, which involves having the class look together at a few students’ informal writing and talking extensively about what potential structures emerge, followed by peer group work that has strict rules to encourage students to help each other find the essay structures that work best with each writer’s ideas. While I used to demonstrate responding to writing and then let peer groups find their own way, I now give them response sheets and require them to be much more accountable for their work. This move toward explicit demands, I have found, enables more growth on the part of the students than does greater freedom.

These ideas are familiar to many composition teachers; they are quite simple. To me, they seem more powerful lately because of my newfound approaches to them. I no longer smile understandingly when students want to talk from their writing instead of reading it aloud or when they refuse to write; I am more insistent. That insistence enables me to require that students explore their ideas and discover their own structures.

Intrinsic to the expressivist view, I would say, is a welcoming of essay structures that grow out of writers’ ideas, and a resistance to the belief in instructing students in explicit structures. Even though theoretically I know this, I find at the same time that part of me, still, is scared of my own methods. In spite of Peter and of all I believe, I still have the impulse within me toward a more traditional way of teaching composition. It’s odd—I still struggle a bit, on some level, in spite of my strong belief to the contrary, with the idea that I am supposed to be requiring extensive readings in first-year composition, leading class discussion about them, and assigning specific essay questions that grow out of issues in them. After all, that is still what most of my colleagues continue to do. In spite of this lingering worry, of course, the part of me that actually writes my syllabi is moving farther and farther away from such assignments. I want more and more to force the students to write out of their own interests, not mine, and to allow those interests to shift and change as a result of others’ views. That, to me, is real academic work. As a result of the fact that my students’ reading skills, even at a relatively elite college, are often quite poor, I feel that I can’t take a great deal of time in a writing class to work extensively with them on how they read. I differ with my colleagues who say that learning to write and learning to read are inseparable, and I think the composition classroom, while I make use of readings at times, is a place to focus on writing. So I find myself making use of assignments that call upon the student to chose

something with significance to them—"I-search papers," interviews with a faculty member, analyses of some issue they are thinking about—in short, the kind of essays that Peter has assigned all along in his composition classes. I converge with Peter here, in my view that while students will write academic essays in many courses, what a composition course is especially equipped to give them is a sense of pleasure in their own ideas, as well as many ways of accessing and articulating those ideas.

Of course, the dichotomy I have set up throughout this essay, between traditional teaching and "Peter Elbow teaching" is a false one. Those who explicitly teach academic discourse may well use informal writing and peer groups in their classrooms; and, of course, expressivists, myself very much included, ultimately do help students write academic essays. I would not teach the way I do if I did not believe that my aim of encouraging students to take pleasure in their own ideas and in writing those ideas enables them to write better in any context.

Yet, like Peter, I like to think of both sides of a dichotomy as distinct, sometimes, because it helps me clarify my ideas. As I look back on the nearly two decades that I have been teaching first-year composition, I see that the conversation within me about methods has been formulated as one between the side of me that feels completely connected to Peter's theories and the side of me that is skeptical and cynical in the face of them. This other side makes me begin to understand those in our field who resist Peter's views and who, consciously or not, see him as a threat to the established order. He *is* a threat to the established order, and that is probably what draws me to him most strongly even as it scares me a bit. Implied in Peter's work is the old feminist dictum that "the personal is political," and, to me, his methods too are feminist in nature, in that they honor some of the traits and values traditionally associated with women, like listening, nurturing, and attending to feelings. Those traits can be very dangerous in the academic world.

I have noticed a resistance in composition theory to our association with women's work. To make our field more "legitimate," it seems to me, and less "womanly," some of us, including, paradoxically, some who have a feminist theoretical perspective, attempt to make composition more rigorous and theoretical in the traditional sense of the word. Thus we feel moved to work in abstractions and to do so in a way that resists the practical, womanly reality of looking at each student, seeing who they are and where and how they are sitting, and insisting that they speak their truths. I, too, feel this pull toward abstraction, even as my practice counteracts it.

By insisting on what I am calling the womanly realities, Peter serves as an object of fear to many people in our field. I have been trying, lately, to understand why it is that some people react so deeply against Peter's ideas. With my

psychological orientation, I cannot help but think that his attempts really to come to terms with, as well as question, academic discourse and other matters simply are too threatening to some people. While I have a conscious delight in Peter's ideas and a less conscious resistance, for others the conscious reaction is aversion, due, perhaps, to unexamined fears that are not all that different from mine because they are a function of a fear of not being rigorous enough or not playing by the rules. I am especially struck by the fact that many of the people who are so averse to Peter's ideas believe in the theoretical perspective underpinning them. They might say, for example, that classrooms are politically charged, and they work to find ways to instruct students in the nature of power and in attempts to overcome that power. Meanwhile, Peter's ideas help countless people deal with their own powerlessness, yet he gets criticized on theoretical grounds for being less than political. Is the threat he poses to the academy simply too great? Do his ideas necessarily undermine the status quo? Is the action-oriented nature of his politics too scary?

The "real" Peter, I would say, has great respect for academic discourse and has written about that respect. He seems to me not to want to push hard and ask why, for example, we need to hold on at all to any definitions of such discourse. I find myself wanting him to be more radical, more brazen in his theories, since for me his theories contain a kind of brazenness that I find exhilarating, even as it scares me. I suppose the best way for me to apply what I have learned from him, then, is to try to be a bit more brazen myself.

12 SPOKEN RESPONSE

Space, Time, And Movies of The Mind

JEFF SOMMERS

TEACHER COMMENTARY AND READER RESPONSE

As I write this opening paragraph, I have just completed another academic term. I have spent approximately 150 hours in class, meeting with four composition sections. Using my grade book and a calculator, I realize that I have also spent 143 hours outside of class responding to my students' drafts and portfolios. This semester has been typical; the numbers merely quantify what all composition instructors are always acutely aware of: responding to student writing is one of the most important—if not *the* most important—activities in which we engage when we teach writing. Has it always been this way?

Robert J. Connors and Andrea A. Lunsford have traced the history of teacher commentary on student writing, pointing to the 1950s as the earliest moment when teachers began to respond as “rhetorical audiences” (201) for their first-year students. Prior to the 1950s, teachers' comments were predominantly focused on rating the students' writing. In fact, Connors and Lunsford note that teachers seemed “conditioned *not* to engage with student writing in personal or polemical ways” (214).

With the rise of the process movement, the nature of responding to student writing clearly assumed a greater importance because writing teachers began to view themselves in roles other than just as judges of written products. Responding as a reader rather than as a judge became an alternative approach for teachers. Robert E. Probst suggests that “teachers might profitably reflect on the roles they adopt in reading papers and might consciously try to conceive of their role as that of the common reader” (74). Summer Smith's research into the genre of the end comment reveals how small a role, however, reading as a “common reader” apparently plays for most instructors. Of sixteen genres of end comments, Smith's two reader-response genres ranked tenth and fifteenth in terms of frequency (253). Despite the infrequency of these genres, Smith praises them, pointing out that when students learn what their readers are thinking, they are reminded that “their words have effects,” and she counsels teachers that more frequent use of reader-response genres could provide

what she terms an “antidote” to the impersonal nature of end comments by personalizing the comments (258).

But Peter Elbow told us about the worth of reader response comments in the early 1970s in *Writing Without Teachers*. Elbow addresses would-be writers directly, bypassing the traditional classroom, envisioning a teacherless writing situation where peers would work together in reading-writing groups. He tells his readers that “to improve your writing you don’t need advice about what changes to make: you don’t need theories of what is good and bad writing. You need movies of people’s minds while they read your words” (77). He elaborates a bit later on what he means by “movies of the mind”: “As a reader giving your reactions, keep in mind that you are not answering a timeless, theoretical question about the objective qualities of those words on that page. You are answering a time-bound subjective but *factual* question: what happened in *you* when you read the words *this time*” (85).

Elbow has expatiated on reader response more recently, noting that such response fits into a “solid *tradition* of trying to describe texts rather than judge their quality.” (“Taking Time Out,” 16). He argues that the “most bluntly simple, obvious, and frequently asked question about a text” is “as a reader, what are my thoughts on the topic?” and asserts that answering that question is a way to remove the commentary from the realm of judgment. That removal, he concludes, can assist both students and teachers in seeing the complexity of a text in all its “multivalent implications” because the conversation moves away from the “limiting, one-dimensional lens of good versus bad.” (18). And he notes how often students respond by saying that they have never had a teacher take the time to engage seriously with their ideas rather than with the quality of their writing (17).

As a participant in a research project focused on responding to student writing, Elbow demonstrated the kind of reader response commentary he had been advocating for over two decades. Richard Straub analyzed the responses of several compositionists to student essays (“Concept of Control”); his analysis of Elbow’s response is revealing. He notes that Elbow primarily acts as a “sounding board for the writing,” and Straub describes the comments as “what [Elbow] himself might call ‘movies-of-the-reader’s-mind’” (243). Elbow’s comments are roughly 300 words in length; by my count, 175 of those words constitute movies of the mind. Straub continues by referring to the movies-of-the-mind portion as “a kind of summary transcript,” the “least controlling” mode of response because it does little more than “dramatize how the words are being understood by an individual reader, not by someone in charge of judging, criticizing, or improving the writing” (243), and he concludes that “to a large extent, . . . [Elbow’s] comments are geared to the student behind the text” (245).

TIME AND SPACE IN TEACHER COMMENTARY

In a review of the research done by Straub and his partner Ronald Lunsford, Bennett A. Rafoth focuses on the length of the comments made by the participating instructors. He notes a range of 44 to 786 words, with Elbow's 300+ in the upper half of that range. He cites these numbers because he wishes to advance a critique of the research: "Taking time may be the single most important variable in this study, but it is never measured and rarely mentioned" (206). He asks his readers to consider the amount of time it must have taken for the teachers to write their responses. Rafoth concludes that the so-called "Hawthorne effect" most likely influenced their response; that is, because the teachers knew their responses would be read by the researchers and other members of the profession, they may very well have departed from their usual practice in order to produce exemplary response, often, he argues, much more detailed, and thus more time-consuming, than any teacher could expect to replicate during the course of a normal teaching day (206).

Rafoth thus explicitly introduces the concept of time into teacher response (which I consciously did in my opening paragraph to this essay). "How much time?" is the question he wants to raise. Connors and Lunsford's statistics demonstrate how brief most comments are; even though longer responses are probably more valuable, they report only 5 percent of the comments they examined were longer than 100 words (207). To provide as extensive a movies-of-the-mind response as Elbow does obviously requires more time than most instructors can spare.

Tucked away in Rafoth's review is another important statistical note, however. He points out that the most "prolific responder" in the Straub-Lunsford study was Chris Anson, who, he observes, used a tape recorder. The link between response and time is changed in significant ways when teachers use tape recorders to provide their response. At this point, I want to make two arguments about the use of tape-recorded response, both in terms of time, not space, one practical and one theoretical:

- 1) tape-recorded comments are more time-efficient than written comments, allowing teachers to expand their responses and thus more easily to offer movies-of-the-mind.

- 2) tape-recorded comments themselves emphasize the temporality of reading and responding in ways that written comments do not, which is particularly useful in conveying reader-response commentary.

As a practical matter, movies-of-the-mind responses simply require many words, as Elbow's commentary in the Straub research indicates. Recording those responses is one way to be time-efficient. Gary A. Olsen asks, "Have you ever written on a student's composition *everything* you wished to say?" (122),

arguing that tape-recorded response is more efficient. While I will not argue that any teacher should overload a student with everything on her mind, Olsen's question is a very good one, implying that most teachers recognize the time constraints of response. In my own research, a case study of one student working through five drafts of a single project and my tape-recorded responses to the drafts, I have found that a teacher speaking at a conversational pace for two minutes produces one page of double-spaced text if transcribed. In all, I spoke to the student on the tapes five times for a total of twenty minutes; the resulting transcripts of the tapes added up to ten pages of writing, each 250 words in length ("Effects," 54). Thus, Elbow's 175 words of movies of the mind in Straub's study would have required him less than two minutes to record. It is hard to conceive that anyone could compose and type or write 175 words in two minutes; that would be an excellent pace for a typist simply transcribing an already composed text.

But why would movies-of-the-mind comments require more words? Because they are more a temporal response than a spatial one, as Elbow reminds us (*Writing Without Teachers*, 85). Russell Hunt was the first to note that written comments exist as "spatial display," while taped comments exist as "temporal display" (583). What Hunt has noticed is that written comments can be observed in some position on the written text, whether in margins or at the end of the text, but taped comments cannot be observed spatially at all. A student listens to them and becomes cognizant of time passing. In fact, it makes more sense to refer to the length of taped-comments in elapsed time than in word counts (the twenty minutes I recorded for my case study is a more meaningful number than the ten pages of transcript because ordinarily there would be no transcript).¹

Another thread of language used by writers about response could very well point the way to tape-recorded response, the language of speech. Here is a paragraph from an influential article by Knoblauch and Brannon (emphasis added):

A single comment on a single essay is too local and contingent a phenomenon to yield general conclusions about the quality of the *conversation* of which it is a part. Any *remark* on a student essay, whatever its form, finally owes its meaning and impact to the governing *dialogue* that influences some student's reaction to it. Remarks taken out of this context can appear more restrictive or open-ended, more facilitative or judgmental, than they really are in light of a teacher's overall communicative habits. (2)

Words like "conversation," "remark," "dialogue" appear frequently in discussions of written comments. In addition to evoking speech, they also suggest the

temporal nature of the response process by implying a give-and-take between student and teacher, one that obviously can only happen through the passage of time. But not only does the language of response research hint at speech, it even at times suggests tape-recorded response. Straub describes Elbow's movies-of-the-mind responses as a "sounding board" but also describes what Elbow is doing as "*playing back* the text" (emphasis added) (244).

If we create a taxonomy of response that divides it into two modes—written and spoken—tape-recorded response is more akin to conferencing with a student than it is to writing a response. One advantage of spoken response is that it not only allows teachers to share more of their responses, but it also emphasizes the temporal nature of reading in the first place. Whereas "end" comments and "marginal" comments are spatial designations useful in describing written response, with spoken response the analogous phrases would be "terminal" comments, those occurring at the conclusion of the reading, and "asides," those taking place during the actual reading.

If teachers are persuaded that movies-of-the-mind reader responses have value, tape-recorded response offers a more time-efficient method for providing it, grants a glimpse to students of a reader involved in the act of reading as time passes, and provides, unlike conferencing, the other form of spoken response, a lasting record of that act of reading. Movies-of-the-mind responses also emphasize the temporal nature of response because as the teacher unspools those movies, the student becomes increasingly conscious of the impact of her words on a reader reading. Marrying movies of the mind to tape-recorded response begins to seem a logical blending. In the remaining pages of my essay, I would like to illustrate how tape-recorded response can provide movies of the mind to a student writer by examining my interaction with one of my composition students.

A RECORD OF A MOVIES-OF-THE-MIND RESPONSE

The student, whom I will call Shelli, is a twenty-year-old, first-semester college student. Shelli's first draft in English 111, College Composition, the first of two required composition courses, tells a story about an experience she had had in high school English. The unit of the course had been focusing on educational issues and in particular analyzing what makes teachers effective; the assignment required students to narrate a story about a significant interaction with a teacher.

Shelli wrote her draft and workshopped it with three of her classmates, took it home and revised it, and then submitted her work to me along with a blank tape cassette and a Writer's Memo (see Sommers, "The Writer's Memo"). Here is part of Shelli's memo:

The ideal reader for my paper would be anyone. Of course, it would probably mean more to those with some type of classroom experience, and it would probably mean the most to a teacher. It gives a first hand, student perspective of an “unfair” teaching style. . . .

Do you think it’s necessary to develop my characters further? If so, which ones and how? Jackson needs no development, but some insight into Mr. Reed’s teaching style is needed.

Is my story clear? Does it flow? Are there any specific parts you had trouble with? Some of the dialogue between me and Mr. Reed was confusing. . . .

Is my paper clear? (I’m very concerned with clarity). What do you get out of this? As a teacher, do you sympathize with me or Mr. Reed?

After reading Shelli’s memo, I began taping my response, even before reading her text, by saying, “Shelli, I’m looking at your first paper of the term. I’ve read your memo, which I found pretty helpful, especially in terms of the questions and comments that you make. . . .” I told her that I found her explanation of her ideal reader thoughtful and that I noticed by the end of the memo, she explicitly viewed me as her intended reader. In effect, she had not only begun our dialogue, but authorized me to provide movies of my mind as I read. And that’s just what I did in my comments. As I read each portion of her draft, I would record my asides, sharing my ongoing response and stopping the tape when it was time to continue reading. I explained to her that what I was going to do was take her “on a walking tour of my reactions to the story as I go through it.”

Here is Shelli’s first draft:

I don’t recall the date exactly, it was sometime during the first semester of my senior year at Loudon High School; I was bombarded with homework, projects, tests, and assignments. My goal to graduate a year early was proving to be a bit more challenging than I had anticipated. Taking driver’s education after school for six weeks simply to attain that vital one half credit seemed like quite the hassle, especially since I’d had my driver’s license for over a year. I was doing quite well with all my classes and my 4.0 grade point average reflected this, but honors English was a thorn in my side. Thankfully this was a weighted course, so my B’s were actually A’s, but for my perfectionist attitude, this was just not good enough. Every essay, every paper, I poured out ideas, beliefs, correlations, and interpretations. I expounded, rewrote, revised and edited, to no avail. No matter what I did a B was as good as I could get. I never thought Mr. Reed an unfair teacher, never even suspected so, but the moment of truth was hidden around the corner.

It was a school day like any other. I endured first period, Child Development, second period, Government, third period Spanish III, then fourth period Honors English. Mr. Reed began the class in his usual manner, instructing the class to produce

the vocabulary assignment that was due. Mr. Reed always seemed to me to be a man of leisure. Although he did get some excitement from literature, he would never jump up and down over it. He was the type of teacher that would work with you if you needed any help, but had no patience for slackers. Mr. Reed began to walk around the room grading the assignment on a ten-point scale. I waited for my turn to receive yet another B, chatting with Jackson Croft about last night's soccer game. Mr. Reed was finally at my desk, judging how well I could define ten words. A simple enough task this seems. Look in the dictionary and write down the definition. This method seemed inadequate for Mr. Reed. He wanted a "good" definition. I could respect this, but a seven out of ten was simply unacceptable.

Upon receipt of my seven, I turned to Jackson to exchange conversation regarding the grades we had received. Jackson revealed his grade to be a nine out of ten. I requested to review Jackson's paper, assuming these definitions would be so powerful, so in depth, that perhaps this could be a model for my next attempt. I was very excited at the thought of finding a way to please this man. I studied Jackson's paper and to my dismay found ordinary, run of the mill definitions that are found in the glossary of any English book. One of the words wasn't even finished, just hanging there, lonely, last on the page feeling incomplete and dissatisfied. I began to feel somewhat enraged. My face felt hot, I could hear my heartbeat in my skull. I had spent forty minutes looking these words up in the best unabridged dictionary I could find, then relating these words back to the story from which they came, then creating the definitions I could, only to receive a seven. Jackson, on the other hand, spent ten minutes looking words up in our textbook glossary, writing verbatim the definition. His incomplete assignment received a nine.

Being the loud mouth that I am, I saw no reason in delaying the inevitable conversation. I raised my hand and waited for some acknowledgement. Mr. Reed granted me permission to speak. I explained the differences between Jackson's and my paper, and questioned why the grades did not reflect this. I stayed pretty calm, despite my obvious aggravation. Mr. Reed hopped around the question, stating he had his reasons and this conversation should be continued after class. I sat silently for the remainder of the class. After what felt like hours of gritting my teeth, hungry for an explanation, the moment of truth was at hand. The bell rang, students flocked to lunch, and I to Mr. Reed's desk. I stood there without saying a word, just staring expectantly.

Mr. Reed began our conversation with compliments, mentioning my intelligence, quality work and visible effort. I interrupted and requested that he get to the point. I was about to get my answer.

"Shelli you have more potential than many of my other students, so truthfully I grade you a bit differently."

Once this sentence left Mr. Reed's lips I jumped all over it. I questioned his ethics, his judgment, and asked why he was trying to sabotage my grade point average. I stated very clearly that Mr. Reed needed to stop this practice. That was all I said and I did not care for a response. I walked away feeling a bit enraged, and proceeded to lunch.

I refused to speak to Mr. Reed for two weeks, but after these two weeks, I received my first A in the class. Proof that Mr. Reed heeded my advise.

Upon reflection I see Mr. Reed's actions more as a compliment and less as a sabotage to my grade point average. However, I was very excited to finally be graded fairly and have an accurate perspective of my capabilities.

My taped comments took approximately six minutes, or roughly 750 words. I will only excerpt those comments to illustrate the kinds of movies I was projecting for Shelli. I read the opening paragraph, turned on the tape player, and began speaking:

In the opening paragraph, there were a couple of things that caught my attention. One was the last sentence, the idea that you had not found him unfair and that there's a moment of truth coming. So I know you're creating some suspense here. I do want to read on to find out what the moment of truth was. I get a pretty clear sense of your character here particularly in terms of all the effort you're putting into this class [at this point, I read aloud three sentences from the first paragraph]. Those sentences gave me a real feeling of how much effort you had expended on this course. At the same time, . . . I have to also confess that the opening paragraph was somewhat slow moving for me. It seemed to be a lot of telling, not a lot of showing. [I read aloud some of the sentences about drivers' ed]. . . . I have to say that I was interested in going on without being terribly engaged by what's happening.

While my comments were certainly not devoid of judgment, I presented them as my responses to the developing text, pointing to what attracted and lost my interest, rather than directing Shelli to change or modify specific portions of the text. In these opening comments, and throughout the tape, I was consistently situating agency for the paper with Shelli herself. I continued to read the draft, noting my progress (" . . . I'm having no trouble following. It's clear enough to me. . . . I can get a sense of your attitude [about the grade of seven].") I then stumbled over her use of the phrase "man of leisure" to describe Mr. Reed and devoted 25 seconds to explaining how I interpreted that phrase to mean someone with an excess of wealth and spare time to spend, suggesting Hugh Hefner as a model who came to mind. I actually chuckled on the tape and expressed my doubts, as a teacher myself, that Mr. Reed could really be a "man of leisure" in that sense.

By then, I had moved ahead to her third page. My comments continued,

Moving on . . . on page three what jumped off the page and struck me as really memorable was your description of your growing rage. I particularly found vivid the physiological descriptions [I read aloud her sentences about her face and her heartbeat pounding in her skull]. . . . I know those feelings when I've been angry too. I sense the sarcasm in the reference to the "lonely word."

I made the passage of time in my reading clear when I informed Shelli that I was physically moving my eyes to the next unit of her text. My tone of voice suggested that I enjoyed these parts of Shelli's paper, but most important, I think, is that she could judge for herself if my reactions were the ones she would like her readers to have. I continued my comments by focusing on one of her memo questions to me; she had asked me to focus on her characterization of the players in her drama.

In terms of characterization, this struck me as an interesting page because it's a silent page. Now what I mean is that you tell us that you're a "loudmouth," you tell us that Mr. Reed "hopped around the question" . . . but we don't get to hear any of that. What I wondered is whether some dialogue might not allow you to show us what you and Mr. Reed were like during this important interaction.

It is rather obvious at this point that I was offering her advice or perhaps even directions about what to do, but I was doing so both in the context of following her agenda for me as a reader by answering one of her questions and also in the context of how I responded as a common reader, not so much as the teacher of the course. I concluded my movies of the mind as I finished reading her text. My next set of responses focused on her final page, her interaction with Mr. Reed.

You do let him speak in his own words, and I was glad to see that as a reader because I thought this is what the whole paper's moving towards, an explanation of his behavior. And here he gets to offer it himself. I again felt that it might be worth hearing what he said and what you said rather than telling us about it.

You asked where my sympathies lie, and I think they're divided. I can relate to and identify with your position as a student because I was once an honors English student myself and a very diligent kind of perfectionist high school student. On the other hand, I'm a teacher myself and I can understand what Mr. Reed was trying to do, but I think when you raise the question of ethics with him, I certainly wanted to hear more about it because I do think there's an ethical issue here.

And I found particularly interesting the last paragraph where you reflect back. It turns out that all of this happened some time ago, and perhaps your outlook has changed? I wonder. So that really did catch my attention. There are issues here about grading and equity in grading: what's the purpose of grades—to motivate? to evaluate? What does a teacher do that's appropriate and ethical to try to motivate and evaluate? It seemed to me that perhaps that's part of what you've been reflecting on since you're now willing to see this more as a compliment than sabotage. So I was quite interested by the end, and I certainly did get a clear sense of how the moment of truth came to be. You delivered on the promise of the opening paragraph.

Having finished my reading and my "walking tour" of responses, I recorded a "terminal comment." It appeared at the end because my reading process was

complete, not because I wanted to sum things up: “That’s it! That’s my walking tour. I tried to describe for you what I was feeling and what I was thinking about in hopes that you’ll want to revise the paper, and when you do, I’ll be glad to look at it again.”

Because this paper was the first assignment of the term, when I returned the students’ tapes, I decided to play my comments in class; I wanted students to get a sense of what to expect. With Shelli’s consent, I played the tape on the day I returned the papers, so she heard the comments for the first time along with her classmates. I asked the class to listen carefully and identify when they heard me offering praise, criticism, questions, and suggestions. We then discussed what they had heard. While some students read my reservations about the “silent” page and the “man of leisure” as critical, most agreed that if “criticism” were the right word, it was constructive not negative in tone. (I acknowledged in class that I had spent far too much time on the brief phrase “man of leisure.”) Many construed words like “jumped off the page” and “interesting” as praise; some interpreted the requests for dialogue as suggestions; they all heard my observations about ethics as questions. In a required follow-up letter to me, Shelli continued our dialogue by sharing her reactions to hearing the tape:

Dear Jeff,

Class has been going well for me lately. . . . I was pleased with how playing my tape went in class. . . . I found it to be not only a painless experience, but a very helpful one.

I didn’t feel a bit discouraged by the experience, only encouraged. . . . The most important thing I need to revise in my paper is the last paragraph. I took the tape home and listened again, and I decided that expounding upon my feelings of this 3 years later is even more interesting than the actual story. This would also give my paper a more important purpose that is a bit more applicable to many more individuals (types of readers). I thought your tape was very clear, of course I also got to hear you expound a bit more in class, and I agreed with you when you said that you went on too much about the “man of leisure” bit. But we can’t all be perfect. . . .

Shelli

Perhaps, however, the best way to assess the effects of these tape-recorded movies of the mind is to examine Shelli’s revision, excerpts of which follow:

Perspectives

“Mr. Reed?” I whispered aloud to myself. I was sure it was him, but I could only see the back of his head. I saw the same short, curly, brown hair I remembered. He appeared to hold himself in the same manner, gentle, and calm. I asked myself if I should interrupt this man, dining at the Olive Garden with at least twenty other guests. After all, they were in the middle of a discussion and I had six tables to wait on.

. . . Upon receipt of my seven I turned to Jackson.

"So, what's the verdict?" I asked sarcastically.

"I got a nine," Jackson answered nonchalantly.

"You got a what?" I half yelled, "Let me see it." . . .

Admittedly, I am a bit of a loud mouth, so I saw no reason in delaying the inevitable conversation. I raised my hand and waited for some acknowledgement. Mr. Reed granted me permission to speak.

"Mr. Reed, what is with this? Jackson got a nine on his work, and you gave me a seven. Jackson didn't even finish all ten words!" I blurted this out and the whole class quite quiet. I could feel a wave of tension crash over the class. Mr. Reed stood there for a moment before speaking.

"Shelli, I have my reasons and this conversation will be continued after class." . . .

Mr. Reed began our conversation with compliments.

"Shelli, you have such great intelligence, you display this with your quality work and visible effort."

"Come on, Mr. Reed, please get to the point." I was about to get my answer.

"Shelli, you have more potential than many of my other students, so truthfully I grade you a bit differently."

Once this sentence left Mr. Reed's lips, I jumped all over it.

"But what about your ethics? Do you really think it's ethical to sabotage my grade point average? What kind of a teacher are you? Stop, just stop." This was all I said, and I did not care for further response. I walked away feeling a bit enraged and proceeded to lunch. . . .

Oh, what the hell, I thought to myself, I might never see this man again. I slowly walked to the table, gave Mr. Reed a soft tap on the shoulder.

"I thought that was you! How have you been doing?" I knew as soon as I saw the profile, just when Mr. Reed was turning his head to look at the instigator of the tap. Mr. Reed saw who I was, immediately recognized me, and rose to his feet.

"Well, Shelli," he said calmly, "how have you been? I know you're going to school, right?"

Mr. Reed's demeanor was exactly as I remember it. Some things never change.

Some things do. I carried on a wonderful conversation with this man, exchanging updates on our family, work, and school lives. At the time of Mr. Reed's and my explosive confrontation, I recall the anger I felt. I remember seeing myself as a victim of discrimination. Upon seeing this man I did not feel any of these things. I saw Mr. Reed as a caring educator trying to motivate me to reach my highest potential. I felt not only complimented, but also lucky to be in receipt of the compliment.

Shelli's revision shows evidence of independent decision-making: she has created a dramatic frame for the piece, presumably to give it a faster, more attention-getting start, something I had indirectly asked for; however, she has found a way to do so that also emphasizes the piece's reflective nature, which she had told me in her class letter now interested her more than the story itself.

She adds dialogue in several places, in response to my comments about the silence of the piece and the tendency to tell readers things she might have shown them. Her new conclusion completes the frame and allows her to focus on how her perspective on the story has changed. Her final words praise Mr. Reed. Has she done so to appease her current teacher, me, who told her he identified with Mr. Reed? I don't think so. Shelli has already criticized me directly (in her letter when she writes about the "man of leisure bit") and ignored one of my implied criticisms (she kept the drivers' ed example in her revision). I think she has simply continued to think about her current perspective, as she said she would in her letter, using the movies of my mind to explore her own thinking in more depth and with more sophistication than she had in her original draft.

CONCLUSIONS

For more than two decades, Peter Elbow has argued that what student writers, indeed what all writers, need most is honest response. Yet, providing that response is a time-consuming activity, whether the instructor holds conferences with students, as many writing "gurus" have counseled, or writes comments on drafts, as most writing teachers have done. Using spoken response in the form of tape-recorded commentary offers an excellent and practical way to use Elbow's advice because it can be a time-efficient mode of responding to students.

However, this essay isn't primarily about being practical. It is intended to demonstrate the value of a mode of response that is probably still underutilized. Comments I have collected from students through course surveys and research projects over the past nineteen years have created for me a meaningful picture of how students react to teacher commentary. While the surveys have asked for student opinion about taped comments, the students' responses have also been revealing in what they say about written response. They used verbs such as "decipher" to describe reading their teachers' comments; they referred to "sloppy handwriting" and "vague illegible scribbles in the margins." One student explained her preference for taped responses by noting "I liked it [taped response]. . . . you were able to expound on what you meant by a comment without little editor marks or trying to fit a ¶ into a margin." This student articulated a common theme in student opinion about taped response: it is more expansive; it "covers more ground" than written comments. As one student phrased it, "I have found that teachers have more comments when using a tape rather than simply writing them down."

Students have constructed written comment as *handwritten* responses, making legibility an issue. When a student is "deciphering" her teacher's response, she is not actually engaged in the kind of meaningful reading act the instructor envisions. The tape-recorded mode of response can stimulate a

“reading” act that focuses more on substantial issues, rather than merely decoding handwriting or editorial symbols. Aside from frequent praise for the sheer volume of teacher response generated on tape, students also regularly reported their heightened awareness of a reader reading their texts. Note how the following comments from a recent anonymous course evaluation suggest that the students are quite conscious of the reader speaking directly to them:

- “Also we can hear the expression in your voice to tell us if you really didn’t like something or just didn’t understand it.”
- “I think the advantages are my papers are not marked all over with errors. I was able to think for myself on what needed [to be] revised from the suggestions you gave me.”
- “Because you can take your paper and follow along with the tape on what things you need to change or add, it is like having a workshop.”

This sampling of comments explains why students prefer the “personal” nature of taped responses. They are aware that someone has read their writing and are engaged in trying to read that reader’s response.

In one research project, a student listened to her teacher’s taped response and spoke aloud her reactions as she listened. In this excerpt from the student’s speak-aloud protocol, we glimpse how she “read” her teacher’s movies of the mind: “When she describes her reactions back to me, I know that I got the point across I wanted to get across. . . . I was [also] trying to bring in another little aspect . . . since she read it back to me and explained how it isn’t working I can understand. I can see it myself too.” This student’s careful reading of her teacher’s responses allowed her to begin making decisions about which parts of her text to revise and which to leave alone, based on her own sense of the text’s impact on her reader, paralleling Shelli’s process in revising her teacher narrative.

This student echoes the comments about “feedback,” about hearing what the instructor is “thinking . . . exactly,” about “having a workshop.” In all these cases, the student/writer/listener takes an active role in interpreting the teacher’s taped comments. Of course, the process is complex, and some students have articulated their concerns with taped response: “Students get *very* discouraged when they hear the instructor’s negative comments.” And others expressed disappointment that they were not afforded an opportunity to “explain or defend” their writing, as they would be in a conference situation. But even these criticisms suggest that the students are reading the taped response actively: *hearing* a reader’s negative response evidently has a very strong impact on some students. Can we conjecture that the familiar voice of the classroom instructor makes that instructor somehow more present as a reader than his/her handwriting might? Comparing a tape-recorded commentary unfavorably with a conference, a valid enough critique, still emphasizes

that the student envisions the response as part of a dialogue, a disappointingly truncated one. However, the disappointment arises because students are so aware of their reader's response that they wish to respond in kind.

My point is that tape-recorded response encourages students to become more cognizant of an actual reader engaged in the act of reading their writing. Whether the instructor offers movies-of-the-mind commentary, simple observations of fact, or even directives, students are, it seems, more focused on the instructor as a reader than when they are "deciphering" written comments. Students thus not only engage in an act of "reading" their reader's response but also engage in a dialogue with that reader, with their own texts, with themselves. They may still end up with a draft that has scribbles all over it, but the scribbles are in their own handwriting, the product of their own interpretation of what they have heard.

Obviously, tape-recorded response comes with its own set of problems, as any response methodology does. One complication is student access to the technology, because students must use a tape player in order to hear the responses. My practice has been to require students to try the tape-recorded approach with their first submitted draft, but to allow them the option of asking for written comments instead on later drafts. The students report that they use their own tape players, borrow tape players from friends and relatives, listen in the campus media center, or play the tapes on their car stereos. In the past twenty years, no more than a dozen students have requested that I switch to written comments, either because of personal preference or access problems. My experience has been that the students find the tapes helpful and are willing to overcome obstacles and inconveniences in locating a tape player to use.

Another complication is editing. If a teacher wishes to make a change in a written comment, she uses an eraser or a quick cross-out, but the teacher who wishes to change a taped comment must work a bit harder. Several times each term, I have to rewind and re-record an entire commentary I sense is too unclear or vague or harsh. More often, I rewind a tape and record over a small portion where I have not expressed myself as I had intended. The students seem willing to accept that my commentary will not be a seamlessly smooth, polished performance; the starts and stops of a reader reading and reflecting are apparently embodied in the somewhat messy text of the taped response without undercutting the credibility or authority of the teacher.

What happens to that authority of the teacher when she uses tape-recorded response? I can certainly imagine a taped commentary that would be a verbal analogue of a red-pen-written response that issues terse directions and chastises errors. Such a response would underscore the teacher's power, but it would not constitute movies of the mind as Elbow has described. The movies-of-the-mind approach foregrounds the teacher as reader. One student's comment, however,

points out that the teacher's identity as teacher remains intact as well: "The largest advantage was that I could see directly how to start revising my paper. The comments were often very helpful in this regard. They told me what the professor as a reader was having trouble understanding." It is the "professor as a reader" that the students hear. As I have pointed out earlier, Richard Straub describes movies of the mind as a "a kind of summary transcript," the "least controlling" mode of response because it does little more than "dramatize how the words are being understood by an individual reader, not by someone in charge of judging, criticizing, or improving the writing" (243). The voice of the instructor, however, is still the familiar voice the students hear in class twice or more weekly, and I suspect they never lose sight of the teacher's role in "judging [and] criticizing."

Inherent in a movies-of-the-mind approach, whether spoken or written, is the complication caused by the teacher's obligation to assign grades eventually. But if the movies-of-the-mind approach has value as one method of response, as Elbow persuasively argues, then the complications that come with the territory are ones with which we must deal. My argument has been that reader-response reading and spoken response make a good fit. The expansiveness and personal nature of the taped response approach make movies-of-the-mind a powerful model of response. Clearly, there is a place for both written and spoken response in working with student writing. A substantial literature expounding on the value of conferencing, the other form of spoken response, already exists. I hope here to contribute to a growing literature advancing the value of the "other" form of spoken response—tape-recorded commentary. When a teacher determines that what she wants to provide to her students is a personal response in some detail, a "walking tour" or movies-of-her mind, tape-recorded response can prove quite beneficial. By adding this mode of response to their repertoire, teachers can put into practice Peter Elbow's sage advice and answer for students that most significant question: "what happened in *you* when you read the words *this time*?" (*Writing Without Teachers* 85).

NOTES

Contemporary software such as Word 2000 allows instructors to embed comments in the text in floating boxes that appear on demand as the student moves the mouse over the text, thus exploding the notion of space in rather useful ways. However, these comments still require time to compose and type, more time than speaking the same remarks would take.

13 AN INQUIRY INTO WRITING ASSESSMENT

Defining the Elbovian Legacy

KATHLEEN BLAKE YANCEY

So the most important point, then,
is that I am not arguing against judgment or evaluation.
I'm just arguing against that crude, simple way of represent-
ing judgment—distorting it, really—into a single number,
which means ranking people along a single continuum.

Peter Elbow

*But if we drop the SAT,
by what means should we allot membership in the nation's elite?*

John Cloud

*What really, as opposed to rhetorically,
transfixed late-twentieth-century America was
the precise calibration of a systematic national reward system,
which was what the testing and education regime had
become over half a century.*

Nicholas Lemann

For Christmas last year, I asked for a copy of Nicholas Lemann's recent book *The Big Test*. In that volume, Lemann, a staff writer for the *New Yorker*, details the founding and growth of ETS, the Educational Testing Service. Perhaps more than any single institution this century, ETS has shaped the very American culture of testing. In fact, one might argue that it's not only shaped it, but also determined it—and therefore determined as well the education that tends to follow the test. Interestingly, as Lemann demonstrates, both ETS's original purposes and its later developments were ideologically driven, often in surprising and explicit terms. Basically, the founders of ETS designed a program that in retrospect seems almost benign. They hoped to replace a system of advancement that in this country was based on inherited wealth and corporate and state connections with a simpler and—they believed—more equitable one driven by intellectual talent. Their vehicle for making change?

Testing.



Assessment is a large and technical area,
and I'm not a professional. *

You have to wonder how it is that Peter Elbow got involved in an enterprise like writing assessment anyway. His graduate work is in Chaucer, much of his scholarly work explores topics like voice and freewriting, and as he says himself, he prefers to dissociate himself from claims made about his assessment expertise. In spite of these facts (or as we'll see, perhaps because of them), Peter Elbow has become over the last fifteen years a leading figure in collegiate and university writing assessment—challenging the historic sorting function of assessment, advocating portfolios, and developing and advocating new ways to grade student work. In spite of reservations about writing assessment, he participated in the creation of the CCCC “Statement on Writing Assessment.” In spite of reservations about outcomes assessment, he is working with leaders of the WPA Outcomes Group, even if it is to help them consider reasons why we might *not* want a national statement of outcomes. His vehicle for making change?

Teaching.



Embracing [New?] Contraries

There are certain terms that don't permit dialogue; it may be that *testing* and *teaching* comprise such a pair. Or: even when motivated by the same general good intentions, testing and teaching rely on fundamentally different understandings of human behavior. Writing assessment, which both redefines testing and locates it in the specific field of writing (Yancey, “Looking Back”), is likewise benign, intending to bring teaching and testing together, to make them congruent with each other, to open each to the possibility of accommodation between their agents: the testers, the teachers. As a teacher, as someone who practices assessment, I hope and work for such accommodation. But as I think about the different ways writing assessment is constructed by these parties, I wonder if such accommodation can be created, much less sustained. And as you'll see, I conclude this chapter still wondering.

Besides, even if we can create and sustain such accommodations, we will encounter yet another problem. Even the assessments linked to *teaching and learning*—like the ones offered by Peter Elbow—can produce *consequences that contradict their intents, can produce effects that are at odds with learning and teaching both.*

Grading and evaluation are not bad in themselves,
but they are bad in their effects when they monopolize the scene of
teaching and learning.

Aware of this frequent disjunction between intent and effect, however, we can compensate, first, by identifying such distortions of intent and, second, by undertaking to learn about and correct them.

Is there a claim in this text, after all? I think so, but it's a caution as much as a claim. Writing assessment has benefited from Peter Elbow's work, to be sure. It is now understood through a new lens, located firmly within a *new* rhetorical situation, one defined by personal interaction, by connections, by willingness to learn—a situation familiar to teachers, new to testers. If this legacy is to survive, these attributes must locate both teaching and assessment. As Peter Elbow argues, they are intimately connected.

To put my larger point in key terms: I suggested above that *testing* was one, *teaching* another. But as I've written this chapter, taught classes and partnered with faculty at a new university, and worked with K-12 teachers from Virginia Beach to southern California, a third, definitive term has emerged, one that distinguishes teaching from testing, that brings perspective to this history and this interpretation of our work as faculty and Peter's contribution to that work.

Trusting.



I hear more voice in these passages;
something rich and useful and interesting
is going on there; can you get more of that?

In 1992, I decided that I would edit a collection on voice in writing, which became the NCTE collection *Voices on Voice*. Although I didn't know Peter, I'd written him a letter inviting him to participate, he'd said yes, and he'd been helping me think about the form the collection might take and the kinds of offerings—like an annotated bibliography—that might make the volume valuable to readers. As part of developing the proposal for the book, I again wrote Peter, this time to ask him to review my draft of the introductory essay, although I use the term draft here—as they say—advisedly. What I sent him was a set of scribbled notes that wandered in a stream of consciousness mode around a topic I found intimidating. My central question was not, as one might expect, what will the reader encounter in this text?—but rather, by what authority am I doing this collection?

Foolishly, bravely, I sent the draft to Peter.

Quickly, helpfully, he replied, circling one idea, "I like this."

It was an *assessment moment*.



Validity was the SAT's weaker point, but nobody within the testing world questioned the test's reliability.

An emphasis on testing, from an ETS perspective, was what assured fairness. In fact, testing assured more than fairness; it effected social justice. What the ETS founders—people like ETS President Henry Chauncey and Harvard President James Bryant Conant—saw prior to 1945 was a country that claimed democracy as a central value while practicing an elitism predicated on the advancement of the mandarin classes: those who were born into wealth, who then gathered at the Ivies (which functioned more as country clubs than as sites of intellectual inquiry), and who then “naturally” progressed into positions of leadership and influence. What Chauncey in particular saw—and Lemann’s argument in *The Big Test* is that the story of ETS is the story of Henry Chauncey—was that democracy would be better served by grooming leaders who had native talent and intelligence. How this process of meritocratic selection was congruent with democracy is an unanswered question for Chauncey, but what *was* clearly answered was the means by which leadership for a democracy would be created: *through a system*.

Last year [2000] 44% of the kids who graduated from high school took it [the SAT], up from 41% in 1995. In all, more than 2 million students took the SAT in 2000. The second-biggest admissions test, the ACT, has 1.8 million takers.

(Cloud [online])

This is what Henry Chauncey wants to do in . . . postwar America: he wants to mount a vast scientific project that will categorize, sort, and route the entire population. It will be accomplished by administering a series of multiple-choice mental tests to everyone, and then by suggesting, on the basis of the scores, what each person's role in society should be. . . . It will accomplish something not very different from what Chauncey's Puritan ancestors came to the New World wanting to do—engender systematic moral grace in the place of wrong and disorder—but via twentieth century technical means. The vehicle through which he hopes to achieve all this is an aborning organization called the Educational Testing Service, purveyor of a test called the SAT. (Lemann 5)

According to Lemann, Chauncey’s quest embodied the quintessential and paradoxical American promise: parity for all, rewards for the quick and the smart. Chauncey’s contribution to the realization of the American dream, of course, was the system that would make that potential real, a system that engendered complete faith. Ironically, what’s as interesting is the absence of faith—in either democracy or education—that drives one toward a system.



Let's do as little ranking and grading as we can.
They are never fair and they undermine teaching and learning.

I said earlier that the terms *testing* and *teaching* seem to talk past each other; and it is the latter that underlies an Elbovian view of assessment. Listen to some of Peter's most famous lines, particularly as they counterpoint the assessment-as-system engineered by ETS:

- Imagine the absurdity of trying to score a person with a single number. (Black et al. 53)
- In fact, portfolios may now finally give us the leverage we have needed to dislodge our overreliance on holistic scoring in general: our habit of using single numbers to rank complex performances along a single dimension. ("Will the Virtues" 46)
- In the end, then, I conclude that the least interesting questions we can ask of any text—by students or published authors—are questions of quality or evaluation. The most intellectually interesting work comes from asking and answering many of our most common analytic and academic questions—questions that invite us (though they do not require us) to step outside the mentality of evaluation. ("Taking Time Out" 17)
- Surely, most of us have learned that we don't so much help people improve as persons by giving them constant diagnosis of strengths and weaknesses. We help them by engaging with them in serious and felt relationship. ("Will the Virtues" 54)

When Peter's contribution to writing assessment is summarized, what appears obvious is less the vehicle most closely associated with his name—portfolio—and more the new rhetorical situation he seems to be defining here. In the classic assessment situation, a student, a test-taker, is assumed to be a given, to produce that which can be measured scientifically, and then, on the basis of that product, to be sorted. It's a fixed set, a static situation. In contrast to this, Peter's sense of assessment evokes a different rhetorical situation: one that is fluid, emerging, and personal. It's a situation embodied in a *felt relationship*, a situation whose primary purpose is to help students learn. If students aren't being helped, then assessment is superfluous, as Peter reminds us:

This brings up a metaphor or parable that always returns to mind. In my last year of college, I had an old beat up car; it worked but not well. Then, a few years later; same kind of thing. Then my third car came a

number of years later when I first had a full time teaching job. It was a VW bug in pretty good shape.

When I first got it and discovered it didn't have a radiator, I was amazed and then gradually got a feeling of having been cheated. All my troubles with my two earlier cars had been with the radiator—and here, suddenly, I was discovering that a radiator wasn't *necessary* for a car. It didn't help make it go backwards or forwards. It was just something that most designs *built in as if essential*. That's my parable of assessment. It's not part of teaching—even though we are lulled into assuming it is. It doesn't really help make people learn. (Elbow and Yancey 105)

Several points here are worth noting. First, the priority belongs to teaching, not to assessment. If assessment cannot aid in the teaching enterprise, then its value is limited. Second, Peter draws his evidence not from sophisticated scientific theories or complicated theoretical applications, but from everyday experience, in this case from the experience of *owning a VW*. Third, the experience is conveyed in the form of a *parable*, that is, in the form of a narrative that pretends to truth, a literary form familiar to English teachers.

Finally, Peter is quite clear about the fundamental purpose of assessment: to help students learn.



In only twenty years or so, we have twice changed the world of assessment, and we did it by resisting conventional practices of the testing community and setting an example of sound practices.

Peter is often described as the academic who is overly personal, who doesn't understand politics, who focuses overmuch on the individual. Perhaps unwittingly, these critiques have always sounded an ironic note to me. On the one hand, of course, there's the ring of truth about them: Peter's gaze does seem to cast on the individual rather consistently. On the other hand, the idea that such focus isn't itself another kind of political act is itself surprisingly naive.

The critique of Peter for his allegedly apolitical rhetorical stance fails to consider both some of the tenets of reformers at the same time it fails to understand the history of writing assessment in the last thirty years. The academics making the critique, for instance, are typically the first to observe that the personal is always political; is this not also so in this case? Likewise, and more telling, these academics have not joined Peter in thinking about, talking about, and enacting social change in *the one arena where all change finally is estimated*: that is, in the rhetorical situation of assessment. And I have to say—have to jump out of this text at this precise moment, much as a Victorian narrator to say—how completely baffled I am by this reluctance. In

my view, we can incorporate new pedagogies like collaborative learning, and we can introduce new technologies like computers, and we can specifically enact reform curricula like service learning, but *if we do not provide for these changes to be valued in appropriate terms, they cannot effect the promised reform*. Instead, the new is held hostage to the old, and reform is defeated. What Peter has done, then, in speaking a kind of truth to assessment power is to *begin changing the very terms* by which learning and teaching are valued—and he's taken this up not as an expert, but as a teacher. Why?

[W]e nonprofessionals can and should work on it because professionals have not reached definitive conclusions about the problem of how to assess writing (or anything else, I'd say). Also, decisions about assessment are often made by people even less professional than we, namely legislators.

From one view, most of the major crises in composition studies in the last half of the twentieth century—from the continuing disputes about CUNY admissions to the banishment of remediation in the California State System—have hinged on assessment. Put differently, assessment has been used as the (political) vehicle to exclude and even preclude certain students, and more particularly, certain kinds of students. If we do not engage in these terms, we are powerless to influence even the potential conditions that govern our students' academic lives. Speaking from the rhetorical situation of his own experience and his own classroom, Peter assumes that he has power, even in assessment matters, and he seeks to use it judiciously.

Not because he is especially interested in assessment, but rather, because he's interested in teaching.



Portfolios have kicked back at testing itself—
helping people rethink some central assumptions and practices.

Should the Elbovian legacy survive, particularly the legacy represented in portfolios, two major problems must be addressed: first, what I'll call, borrowing from Catharine Lucas, distortion of effect, for both students and teachers; second, a kind of naiveté about how what we teachers do will be used, will in fact be systematized by a culture that worships ranking. Or: is it ever possible to get outside the system? Alternatively, could we work both outside and inside the system?

One difficulty with any kind of change that people are drawn to is that no change is directly replicable. Rather, people learn about something new—in the case of teachers, they learn about new ways of teaching like collaborative

learning, or new ways of assessing like portfolios—and *they interpret the new within their own ways of being*, and then apply the new just so, using the new to suit their needs, their sense of their students' needs.

It's a messy, asystematic process, this kind of change. At the same time, the new application can be fundamentally at odds with the design of the original. The controversies surrounding whole language illustrate this principle fairly well. In general, whole language advocates, like Yetta Goodman, don't advise getting rid of phonemic or context clues altogether, although they do advocate inviting students to read real and whole texts. But my son's first grade teacher—a woman devoted to whole language, she said—wouldn't allow a phonics lesson or a spelling rule, with the predictable result that my son spelled worse at the end of the year than he did at the beginning. Was I in favor of abolishing whole language? No. Was I in favor of its being judiciously applied? Yes.

It's the same story with portfolios, I'm afraid. The intent, as Peter says, is to promote both better teaching and learning, not to create a new maze to puzzle (or defeat) students—and not to create yet another exercise for them to complete as mindlessly as possible. And yet . . . there's anecdotal evidence, at least, that sometimes, perhaps more often than we'd like, portfolio-as-exercise is what gets implemented. Elizabeth Metzger and Lizbeth Bryant report a student, for example, who claims to have beaten a portfolio system privileging revision, more specifically to "have botched a paper so it looked like I revised." (7) Inviting students to underachieve (or worse, to misrepresent their talents) was not the intent of the portfolio, but it can be the effect.

Question: given that our intents and our effects don't always match, what might we do to prevent such misapplications?

A second issue concerns the value students assign to portfolios even when the implementation "works." Liz Spalding and Gail Cummins's study of first-year students at the University of Kentucky points us toward some answers. The students in the study had all completed Kentucky's compulsory twelfth-grade portfolio; what Spalding and Cummins wanted to know was how students understood both the portfolio and the processes that contributed to its composition—and regardless of how you parse them, the results discourage. For instance, "some two-thirds of the students stated that compiling the portfolio was not a useful activity." (191) As disturbing were the comments that students articulated:

Students get the curricula of their institutions through the agency of particular teachers, some of whom are enthusiastic, some muddled. . . . Students will understand portfolio assessment in the way their teacher represents it to them.

(Nelson 248)

I actually only had two pieces that could be used in my portfolio when time neared to turn them in. So the week before, I wrote three pieces off the top of my head just to turn something in. I don't consider myself a good writer, but I did get a "proficient" [score]. I feel everything was a waste of time. (182)

Another commented,

I think it was helpful to an extent, but there was just too much emphasis placed on it. Many times we took time out of class to do and discuss portfolio pieces. This took away from valuable class time and while we should've been learning something to help further our education, we were discussing how to make a better portfolio (184).

The concern suggested in these comments is not that they emerge from a mandated program. If that were the problem, then we could work toward eliminating, or at least minimizing, the effects of a *forced* portfolio. I wish, in fact, that the problem could be solved that easily, as un-easy as it may sound.

I think, instead, that the problem here is multiple.

One problem: *the curriculum doesn't always support the portfolio*. If a colleague wants to introduce portfolios, do you require that a curriculum be in place first? Let's reverse the question: doesn't implementing portfolios and then reviewing them provide a collective and textured way to learn about curriculum and to talk about it? At the same time, the student may have a point: while we are in *the process of learning*—which itself is part of both teaching and assessing—will students find that the gap between intent and effect, between curriculum and assessment produces nothing more *than a waste of time*? Is there a way to avoid this problem?

Another problem: *many students want the very education that portfolios are attempting to replace*. They don't want *discussions of portfolio pieces*; they don't want their *valuable class time wasted* this way. For them, class time is valuable only when the teacher talks, when the teacher directs them, when the teacher identifies knowledge, when lines are clear and ambiguity is erased. Given this situation, what can we do to help students understand not only the contents of portfolios, but also their design and their subtexts?

A final problem, not unrelated: *what's true of students can also be true of teachers*. Just as students cannot be simply given portfolios as guaranteed vehicle-of-learning, neither can teachers be given them as guaranteed vehicle-of-teaching. Wendy Bishop makes this point in her discussion of using portfolios with new TAs. One of them reflects on whether he'll use them again—once he can control what he does in his own classroom:

I don't know. I don't think that the Portfolio thing is a total disaster. It just didn't do anything for me this time around. If I wanted it to work for me, I guess I would have to re-structure my entire class plan. ("Going" 225)

Like the student above, this teacher finds that portfolios call for a *re-structuring*, a new way of understanding teaching and learning. Is there a way to help the teacher begin the re-structuring? What would motivate such a teacher? And for all teachers: isn't re-structuring a dynamic fundamental to the teaching enterprise? Or, is it rather re-structuring as dynamic fundamental to the *learning* enterprise?



("Ten," mutter the guys when they see a pretty woman.)

Still, I want to argue, as I did in a recent CCC article, that speaking in the language of the assessment experts can also be useful. In other words, if we know that language, we can use numbers strategically. It's not either/or: we need to model best practices, yes: that's one means of accomplishing change. But perhaps we need as well, now and again, to link our work to the numbers the culture loves. To illustrate this, I want to cite some work that is currently taking place in Virginia Beach. Chris Jennings, a faculty member at Tidewater Community College and a former high school teacher in Virginia Beach City Schools, is directing a FIPSE project that we might want to consider as a model of both/and: fostering better teaching and learning, and using numbers as one kind of confirmational evidence. Here's a basic outline of problem and new practice and results.

Assessment . . . defines our work to outsiders and . . . to ourselves and locates us within the faculty as well as within the larger culture.
(White 307)

The problem: students from Virginia Beach high schools enroll in very high numbers at Tidewater Community College; the writing courses there fall into three categories: 003; 001; and 101. English 101 is where we'd want all students placed, since it's the entry-level course; typically, 67% of the students enter into 003 or 001. Seems to be a problem, the folks there said.

The new practice: Teachers in a specific Virginia Beach high school, Salem High School, learn about and begin to use portfolios. The student population excludes AP students: it's a general track. The teachers aren't writers, nor do they practice a rich curriculum. But they volunteer to work with portfolios, and like dominoes falling one to the next, the teachers develop a writing process approach with their students; they begin to use reflection; they respond to writing differently. Useful as a defining concept, the portfolios become an afterthought. At the end of a year, portfolios are collected and scored according to a scoring guide created collaboratively by teachers at both Salem and Tidewater.

The preliminary results: The numbers flip: 67% of the students are placed into 101. These same students score better than their peers do on the Virginia “Standards of Learning” (SOL) state twelfth grade test. These students enroll in higher numbers in both 4-year and 2-year colleges. They stay in college longer than Tidewater students ordinarily do.

Could this effort have failed? Yes. Might it still? Yes. It’s preliminary, but it’s promising. The numbers above speak to the first year. The second year, different students, some new teachers, but the same results. This way of learning “works.”

Is the effort being held hostage to these numbers—the percentage who place into non-basic first-year comp, the number who scored well on the Virginia state test, the number who go to college? No. (Not yet.) The SOLs, for instance, weren’t intended to be part of the research. But the students have to take the test, so we checked the scores—just to see. The scores were good, better than anyone would have predicted, suggesting that if the curriculum is rich, the students’ work will be as well. That’s okay. In other words, the numbers do tell a story, and we shouldn’t be afraid to see what that story is and how it compares with the story we think we are seeing. This is especially so when the numbers don’t drive learning, but are used to *back up* what we’ve seen as we’ve reviewed the portfolios: new curriculum, new students’ voices, new genres.

(Dare I say it? New selves.)

At the same time: do I like numbers? No, not much. You don’t work with portfolios—as Peter’s work suggests—because you’re a fan of numbers. But numbers we’re probably going to be living with for awhile yet. I’m not willing to tailor the curriculum to the test and its numbers, no, but if I have to tolerate the numbers anyway, I’m willing to use them to verify a curriculum that encourages and rewards and helps students learn. And part of being able to do this is knowing enough about numbers—being enough of a psychometrician as well as a rhetorician—to be able to use them to foster good.

In the best case scenario, you see, we can use them to show that they aren’t needed, after all.



It’s the mark of good writers to like their writing.

In thinking about the issues here, in reading Peter’s writings, in continuing to work in both teaching and assessment, I’m struck by some contraries, some oppositions, some assumptions. I’m reading the *Greenville News*, where a letter to the editor comments on the SAT and how it *cannot* be other than undemocratic. The letter’s point is that (1) high achievement by all students is a laudable goal and (2) the SAT as a measure is fundamentally unable to show this (much less reward it), given its intent of showing quite the reverse. In other words,

because the SAT yields norm-referenced scores, “high-achievement” means above-average performance *on the test*. The letter, thus, rightly concludes that by definition “all students in all states could never realize [high achievement].”

This, then, is what Peter, like this reader, has understood all along. In teaching, we have a choice. We can teach students; if we do this, it’s possible that *all* students can achieve. We can sort students; if we do this, we apparently have two options. We can agree, on the one hand, to sum the numbers as Garrison Keillor does, so that all students are above average. We can understand, on the other hand, that we’ll find half of those students, regardless of context—background, development, classroom conditions, you name it—recorded as below average. More to the point, it’s highly unlikely that this recording will in any way alter their chances to learn in the future—except perhaps negatively.



Not least, in reviewing Peter’s writings on assessment, one word appears and re-appears.

Trust.

Something at odds with a system.

Because something that is personal, intuitive, human.

Something we bring to and take from our own teaching and learning.

Something we want to be for and to each other.



I’m observing an instructor this term as a part of a personnel procedure. It’s pretty formulaic: like many places, we don’t pay much, so the instructor is probably with us for the life of the contract. Still, I enjoy watching teachers, and I enjoy watching students, and in each observation I learn something.

Today, late November, it’s sunny, the students ready to put the term to rest. They are working on cases for a technical communication class; the instructor has brought in several samples. She passes them around. She asks the students to read them. She explains each one, carefully walking the students through first one case, then a second, finally a third. The cases: they aren’t difficult. The students like her personality: it’s engaging. But I observe as well: *they aren’t engaged*. Concluded, the class concludes—15 minutes early.

I’m walking out the door, wondering (as I always do when the full time isn’t used) what isn’t quite working here. I can’t seem to put my finger on it. The students seem interested. The teacher’s very articulate. The cases illustrated well. Suddenly: but the students, they weren’t *trusted*, *were they*? Why didn’t *they* read the cases? Think about them? Try to figure out what in them was illustrative?

Couldn't they have performed the readings?

Trust cuts in many directions.



Of course, all this—it's not really about the SAT, you know? It's about the relationship between and among testing, teaching, learning, and democracy. It is about the SAT as exemplar, and not quite as (single) villain. To see the SAT as villain is to *fail to see* that it merely represents what can go wrong, even when one's intentions are worthy. It was a worthy thing to find a substitute for wealth as the ticket to success in America. The problem is that the alternative means—the SAT—hasn't altered that fundamental reality. Because it's designed to produce winners and losers, the SAT has simply produced substi-

For example, in Chicago, the Consortium on Chicago School Research concluded that "Chicago's regular year and summer school curricula were so closely geared to the Iowa test that it was impossible to distinguish real subject matter mastery for passing this particular test." These findings are backed up by a recent poll in Texas which showed that only 27% of teachers in Texas felt that increased test scores reflected increased learning and higher quality teaching. 85% of teachers said that they neglected subjects not covered by the TAAS exam.

(Wellstone [online])

that are predictably deleterious. The tests become the curriculum, especially as teacher salaries and student promotion become contingent upon them. Or perhaps it's a variation on this theme of a nightmare connection between assessment and the classroom, as, increasingly, the curriculum is devoted to ways of taking these tests and passing them.

What we can do, Peter reminds us, is to do what we do well:

help students learn to communicate

work together to design assessments that capture what they do, not what they don't do

speak to our own experience, and, not least,

trust



tutions, new winners and losers, most of whom (by the way) look *remarkably* like the originals. Likewise, when constructed as tests, good classroom practices can go equally awry: portfolios become less vehicles for learning, more a means of sorting and ranking of students and of surveillance of teachers. Not least, testing itself—regardless of type—continues unabated into every nook and cranny of education, with results

In short, portfolio assessment invites us to ask the real assessment questions: “What do we really want in successful students? What are we trying to produce?”

To say that a common teaching theme emerges in Peter’s assessment writing is to understate badly: Peter’s interest in assessment both begins and ends in the classroom. This point, I think, is not sufficiently understood. It’s not only that teaching *per se* interests Peter, even after all these years; it’s also that he understands teaching both to provide a common defense against testing and to permit a way to change testing. It’s also that he plotted this change *largely* against a culture invested in testing, simply by returning again and again—and yet one more time—to what we know best: *teaching*. In other words, he identified a set of incongruences—between what we say we want, like achievement, and our own practices, and he spoke about those as a teacher. This approach provided one way of reforming writing assessment in America.

My focus is on pedagogy and practice.
My approach is not methodologically sophisticated;
I am simply trying to think through my own evaluative practices.

What’s also not so well understood is that in his teaching concerns, Peter not only shares, but also anticipates the concerns of assessment specialists. They talk in the language of consequential validity as they focus on the link between assessment and curriculum; he talks about the importance of helping students improve. They mean the same.

[T]he least interesting and useful question
to ask about any piece of writing is how good it is.

To observe this similarity, however, is not to suggest that they share much beyond this singular concern for effect. Motivated by divergent values, they call upon different apparatuses to enact their agendas. As important, despite/because of his outsider status, Peter’s agenda has changed assessment practice: Foucault can mean multiply, it seems. Still, precisely because Peter’s changes inform our teaching, it behooves all of us to do what Peter’s assessment work has reiterated: trust ourselves, trust our students, and speak to that trust.

NOTE

* The quotes from Peter Elbow are indicated by a consistent font style and size, and they appear without page references, for two reasons. First, many of the quotes

are layered into the text, and including citations will disrupt the tenor of the text, so it's in part a move to preserve the alternate feeling of the chapter. Second, and as important, since I'm including quotes from across the Elbow canon, using them without citation emphasizes the fullness of the canon and the gestalt of the work.

CLUSTER IV
Voice and the Personal

INTERSECTION

Making it Personal

MARCIA DICKSON

I woke up more than one morning thinking about this piece of writing. It's a new genre to me, this commenting between sections of a collection of essays. I'm not even sure what to call these words between: Intersections? Transitions? Commentary? From an esthetic point of view, I like the idea of editorial presence throughout the collection, but the purpose of that presence eludes me a bit. On the one hand, these interjections could add to the discussion. On the other hand, perhaps they should simply introduce the essays that follow or tie together their various themes, place them in a larger academic framework.

Hmmmm. Here goes.

It's dangerously personal, this section. Personal but academic as well. These writers are breaking the spirit if not the rules—unstated, of course—of today's academic discourse: be direct; be thorough; be objective. Being direct entails getting enough information and a thesis of sorts in the first few paragraphs of the essay and then not digressing from the main path that leads to a conclusion. Being thorough involves being almost legalistic in arguments and viewing a topic in as many ways as possible, once again, without digressing. Finally, being objective demands that authors retain an almost scientific distance from the subject of their analysis. Sometimes, however, as Pat reminds me, subjects are better gotten at by being indirect—or at least by appearing to be so. These authors are direct without seeming to be so, thorough but in a manner that suggests the humanities rather than the social sciences, and while not objective, they are not at all locked into individual perspective. Each essayist tackles some aspect of “Elbowism” and worries with it, applies it to their own theory and practice, takes it apart with a curiosity born from a need to know and to understand, and makes it new.

It is the needing to know and understand that form the impetus for all scholarship. Generally, however, just toying with an idea isn't considered to be enough. Most academics insist that one needs a critical lens to view the subject through, a philosophical underpinning, a theoretical position from which to pontificate.

I'm being unfair. *Pontificate* is the wrong word. In most cases.

However, in the academy, writers tend to privilege the difficult and the abstract. The scholarship becomes suspect when the critical lens one looks

through is primarily personal experience, especially an experience that goes from what my folklorist friend calls “the particular experience.” The suspicion is no less when scholars refuse to force a theoretical frame on either the work, the process, or the person being examined. In fact, when “who we are” becomes the starting point for academic analysis, all sorts of people get nervous.

Some of the authors in this section push the borders of what is academic and what isn’t almost to the point of breaking. As you read, you will see that each essay moves a step away from the safe territory of academic discourse as we have come to know it. Yet I would argue, all of the essays perform the work of scholarship and perform it well.

Ronald and Roskelly’s “Embodied Voice: Peter Elbow’s Physical Rhetoric” is the most conventional of the essays. They offer a straightforward examination of metaphor—the stuff of English studies since literature became a legitimate endeavor for professors of philosophy. Something happens in this essay, however, that is more within the purview of the creative writer than the scholar: these two researchers discuss their early attempts to construct a physical representation of Peter Elbow. Like school girls (or graduate students desperate for release from stress) they tried to imagine the author of a book. They assembled, if not a living breathing creature, a sort of *reflection* of a man from his discourse. Was this revelation a necessary element in their arguments about Peter’s use of what Audre Lourde calls “the erotic” to express the connection between the body and the mind, between thought and feeling? In this essay, yes, because the writing demonstrates the same sort of body/mind, thought/feeling that the scholar is examining. It’s also a reflection of the type of scholarship to which they are responding. Peter invites readers to construct him because he constructs himself as an accessible writer—a teacher who will consider and answer questions, no matter how dumb they might be. Many composition theorists remain only words on the page, theories that are unassailable by the uninitiated, rather than people who invite you to observe their struggle with ideas and think along with them as they work those ideas out.

“Gone Fishin’: Rendering and the Uses of Personal Experience in Writing,” Anne Herrington’s essay, moves a bit further into the personal. Before she begins her intellectual discussion of the possibilities of rendering personal experience as a natural part of research, she lets us see the moment when she began to question not only her practice but also the theories she was introduced to as a graduate student. Next, rather suddenly, she switches font, tone, and genre, and inserts a short interior dialogue—there are too many voices to call it an interior monologue—that expands upon the thinking that goes on when a writer starts to take on a new task. Anne lets us in on her problems with the essay, her hesitancy to write on a topic that has already received a great

deal of attention in the literature of composition and rhetoric, and the fact that her association with Peter and his works helped her move to legitimate her position. Isn't this contrary to the stance academics are supposed to take? Shouldn't our ideas come from a deep felt sense of the way things work rather than from a need to defend ourselves? Shouldn't we hide the fact that we are unsure of ourselves, our ideas, and the need for both in the academy?

That last question was slightly sarcastic, but as long as I'm in the mode, shouldn't scholars avoid metaphors from childhood? Aren't those images reserved for creative writers? (On occasion it does seem that *creative* and *academic* are polar opposites.) Wendy Bishop obviously doesn't think so. In "My Favorite Balancing Act," she compares Peter to the amazing plate spinners who frequently appeared on the Ed Sullivan show. Like those remarkable performers, Peter sets one idea after another spinning and—while balancing all of them on the intellectual equivalent of tall and spindly sticks—manages somehow to create one rather sturdy set of ideas for our consideration. The fascination with the real plate spinner rests upon the fact that no one ever thinks that he or she will manage more than two plates, or at the most, three plates at a time. Spectators are held in thrall because the really good spinners can manage to keep anywhere from five to ten plates whirling at the same time. In a similar manner, no one ever quite believes that Peter can bring together all the images, ideas, and their inherent contraries at once, either. But as Wendy points out by juxtaposing his words and writing prompts with her own musing, he manages to do it. And while some Ed Sullivan watchers preferred Joan Sutherland, the opera singer, and some preferred Red Skelton, and others screamed for Elvis or the Beatles, no one could fail to be a little in awe of the dexterity of the man who spun the plates.

Sondra Perl continues to work in the personal—indeed expands upon the personal nature of the essays that precede hers—by sharing both her friendship and professional relationship with all of us in "Dear Peter: A Collage in Several Voices." But like the previous essayists, she does more than tell a tale of "my friend Peter." Through a collage of conversations, speculations, stories, and even a Christmas letter, she explores the intersections between her teaching and Peter's, as well as discusses his viewpoints on process, agency, and even the sexual nature of teaching. The *personal* controls this collage, takes it to the very edge of the academic, and leaves it dangling there, half in the academic arena and half about to float into a sort of new space where who Sondra is, who Peter is, and ultimately who her readers are, come together. The movement between subject, voice, and audience isn't always smooth. Elements of a collage tend to overlap, exist side by side, or push against one another, but the piece of writing Sondra has created has a cohesion that at first glance would

seem impossible. By the time I read the final draft, I was amazed at the composition she had managed to create, and the courage—or bravado—that it took to create outside the norm, to turn what is generally thought of only as a freshman writing exercise into a method for exploring professional issues.

Finally, “A Collage: A Coda,” the collage that completes not only this section but also the book itself, mixes voices from a number of Peter’s former students, demonstrating what we all should know: that learning comes from personal interaction as well as from books. The creator of the collage, Pat Belanoff, makes no claims at all that the collage meets the requirements for academic discourse. One after another, she lets the writers couch the lessons they have learned about composition in the experiences they have had with Peter as mentor and as friend. As they reflect upon classes, students, their own experiences, they produce not only poetic language but also at least one poem. Do they add to the knowledge base of our discipline? Perhaps, or perhaps not. It all depends upon what we consider a contribution.

I’d call all of these pieces contributions to the discipline. The goal of studying, writing, and publishing is to instruct and delight—and from my particular perspective I give *delight* equal emphasis with *instruction*. One of my former graduate school professors—not Peter this time, but Rose Zimbardo—used to bring huge linzer tortes to class, insisting that learning went down easier when associated with pleasure. She didn’t mean that academic discourse should be mixed with personal experience and expression—it wasn’t something they did at Harvard in her day or in her career. She did, however, mean that love of learning should be cultivated and enhanced by any means possible. For me, as for others, the only thing that justifies scholarship in the academic sphere is the fact that it brings scholars and teachers closer to understanding the world about them. To instruct themselves as well as others. Adding the personal increases the delight. While not all essays can or should be personal in nature, it is a delight for us to see the scholar at work, reflecting on personal experience in a manner that scientific reasoning does not. It is not an easy task to write an academic piece and still maintain your humanity. There’s danger that your work will be dismissed as personal speculation. There’s danger that the metaphors you choose will seem too slight to support the work of scholarship. There’s danger that people who operate in other discourses and with other critical lenses won’t think you—or your work—are worth bothering with. You may be perceived as being not too smart. Or too popular. Or amateur. Or sentimental.

In a talk at my campus, Charles Cooper once allowed that personal writing should never be the first thing you teach a student. It’s too hard to write a good personal essay that means something, that shows readers how the individual experience might apply to the experiences of a far wider community. I don’t

know that he's right, but I suspect that when it comes to using the personal in academic writing, he's on target. It's too easy to dismiss what seems simple, like a personal story, in favor of what seems difficult, like a reasoned argument with lots of theoretical references. The two are not mutually exclusive; in fact, they can be mutually beneficial. The simple in art and in science is usually an illusion. The simple is always complex.

14 EMBODIED VOICE

Peter Elbow's Physical Rhetoric

KATE RONALD

HEPHZIBAH ROSKELLY

There are many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. . . . We have been taught to suppress this resource, vilified, abused and devalued within western society.

Audre Lorde

Audre Lorde explores the resources the erotic can offer to women who wish to rescue their own power, their capacity for using feeling to explain and explore their lives. She describes a method women can recover in order to express fully and honestly their own experience. The erotic refuses the dichotomy between thought and feeling and between the body and the mind. It insists on the whole, on making the erotic a part of the way women come to know and come to speak. Lorde rescues the word “erotic” from associations with the pornographic and expands its meaning beyond merely sexual connotations. She suggests that the erotic is a “resource,” “spiritual” as well as physical, and that it is embedded in “unexpressed or unrecognized feeling.” The erotic is powerful; it allows for connection, for pleasure, for voice. Moreover, Lorde urges women to call upon the power of the erotic to work toward excellence in their pursuits. Lorde is speaking to and about women when she makes her claims about the necessity of the erotic as a source of power and information. Perhaps it is even rarer for a man to make such claims, given gender ideas about the place of the emotions and the place of the sensual in professional life or professional discourse.

In this essay, we suggest how Peter Elbow claims the erotic—the place of feeling and the role of the body—in all his writing. He does so in an “erotic,” that is, in a sensory, engaging, and powerful, way, not primarily in the arguments he makes about voice or process or style, but in his own speech, in the metaphors he chooses, and the in careful way he presents himself. In other words, we argue that Elbow’s voice is embodied—physical and present—in ways that bring an audience close both to Elbow’s persona and to his ideas about writing and in ways that few academic writers attempt (and few academic readers expect when

they read him for the first time). His message is made more powerful, and perhaps more problematic among some of his critics, because of the bodily imagery he uses and determined intimacy of his voice. This essay points out and explores the physical, embodied nature of Elbow's language and style. We trace his use of bodily images and metaphors in order to illustrate and analyze the cumulative effect of a rhetoric that calls up so many physical images and provokes such personal reaction from his readers. We are less concerned with an analysis of Elbow's theory, pedagogy, or his thirty-year efforts to help teachers and students actually write—rather than merely talk about writing—than we are in the cumulative effect of that message, how Elbow's embodied voice becomes the argument, a way of seeing the whole of his message about readers, writers, and writing rather than its discrete parts.

Everyone seems to “know” Peter Elbow—and know him in a way that goes beyond being familiar with his work or his pedagogical/scholarly positions. Teachers and scholars in Composition, including graduate students and many undergraduates, feel as if they “know” the man, the living person behind the work. Elbow's persona feels perhaps more intimately present to his wide-ranging audiences than any other writer in the field of Composition. Yet although his presence looms large in the minds of researchers and students, it appears as much by reputation, more by a presumed knowledge about his work than from actual study of the work itself. And his familiarity works both for and against the message his work attempts to convey. “He's an expressivist,” a graduate student will say dismissively. Or, “He's a liberal.” “He's not theoretical, political, or radical.” “Have you read his work?” Kate will ask. “Well, everybody knows. . .,” they respond. Or, “Berlin says. . .” This easy presumption of understanding, as well as the ease with which he seems to be contained by an unfashionable epithet—*liberal*, *expressivist*, *romantic*—indicates how much this intimate persona precedes and governs what those in the field know and believe about Elbow's work.

We were in graduate school, reading theorists and researchers in a composition theory seminar, when we first encountered Peter Elbow. Hepsie remembers clearly how she tried to put a face to the name and a body to the voice that appeared in the first paragraph of the book: “Perhaps I shouldn't try to talk to so many different kinds of people. . .” (*Writing with Power* 6) What kind of author admits that kind of hesitation? What kind of person has that sort of confidence? A writer who was that open, that powerful, demanded a body. She formed one. Reading on, she thought she could see him: Dave Garroway glasses, shirttails working loose, a little overweight, genial.

When both of us taught *Writing With Power* in our first-year classes, we weren't really surprised to find that our students had much the same response.

They commented as much on the demeanor of the person on the page as they did the substance of the discussion. He says he couldn't *write* his dissertation. *He* couldn't write. They were amazed that the author of their textbook admitted he had problems with filling a page. They liked that admission; they liked him. Elbow's book remains the only first-year writing text we've ever used that our students have actually lent to their friends in other writing classes or to their roommates. One semester, Hepsie asked students to respond to the voice they heard as they read the first couple of chapters of *Writing With Power*. "He sounds real," remarked one student.

For most of his career, Elbow has in one way or the other wrestled with the problem of what's *real* and *not real* about voice. In *Writing with Power*, he tentatively (always tentatively) offers these definitions: "Writing with voice is writing into which someone has breathed" (WWP 299); "Real voice is whatever yields resonance, whatever makes the words bore through" (WWP 313). Note the physicality, not only of the writer, who must breathe her own life-force into the words, but the words, which must bore through a reader's body in order to be heard. Our experience and our students' confirm that Elbow's voice feels *real* in this physical way; we make him into a person, a physical being, we embody him because his words suggest his *self*.

Whether that "self" is "natural," "real," "unique," and "essential" are questions that have contributed to readers' strong reactions to Elbow's presence on the page. At times, Elbow seems to insist on the individuality of voice: "We all have a chest cavity unique in size and shape so that each of us naturally resonates to one pitch alone" (WWP 282). He stresses the connection between the rest of the body and voice as well. Elbow says that "the metaphor of voice inevitably suggests a link with the body and with 'weight.' . . . After all, the body shows more of ourselves than the conscious mind does" ("About Voice" xxxvi). This connection between the revelations of the body and the mind also makes people nervous. After all, much of academic writing tends to mask, cover, or disguise the writers' doubts, fears, or insecurities. We are struck by how much Elbow "shows" in his physical imagery. Both our mothers warned us as young girls and women not to "show" ourselves, not to reveal our true natures (assumed to be selfish and vain) in public, as in "Well, you really showed yourself that time, didn't you?" Elbow's connection between the unique individual body and the writers' voice, however, seems to insist that a writer must show herself, expose herself, give herself.

But Elbow's long-standing discussions of voice are more complicated than simply insisting that a writer tell the truth or stop feigning modesty. The point, finally, is to get to something real, something excellent, something worth saying to somebody. In all his work, Elbow tries valiantly to see from

opposite directions, and so his explorations of voice always include a critique of essentialist positions. In his introductory essay to *Landmark Essays on Voice and Writing*, he explains that “The central question then for this kind of power in writing is not ‘How sincere are you?’ but ‘How much of yourself did you manage to get *behind* the words?’ . . . That is, the physical voice is more resonant when it can get more of the body resonating behind it or underneath it” (“About Voice” xxxvi). We had the sense that Elbow’s writing was full of physical images; when we went looking for them, we were astonished at how often—and how deliberately—Elbow uses the physical body as a metaphor to add resonance and weight to a voice he has crafted to reach more than one pitch.

In almost every one of his essays and books, Elbow tries to tease out the physicality of his writer’s voice and, as well, the physical transaction between writer and reader: “I want to read and study more about the human voice itself. It took me a long time to realize that if I’m interested in voice then covertly or implicitly I’m interested in importing the body into the realm of writing. The body is where the voice comes from. . . . At a totally intuitive level, I’m sure our writing will improve if we perform voice, if we move our bodies” (“An Interview” 28). “Voice is produced by the body. To talk about voice in writing is to import connotations of the body into the discussion—and by implication, to be interested in the role of the body in writing” (“About Voice” xxi).

Writing worth reading comes through just this combination, he seems to say, of sensibility and sense, body and mind, thought and feeling. “But if we learn to talk onto paper and exploit the speech-like quality possible in writing, we can have the experience of writing words with presence, and thereby learn what such writing *feels* like—in the fingers, in the mouth, and in the ear” (“Shifting Relationships” 299). In that combination, a writer finds power. We can’t help hearing echoes of Audre Lorde’s description of the erotic’s role in knowledge: “Beyond the superficial, the considered phrase, ‘it feels right to me,’ acknowledges the strength of the erotic into a true knowledge, for what that means is the first and most powerful guiding light toward any understanding. . . . The erotic is the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge” (56). Lorde is trying to reclaim the body and felt sense in epistemology, to put women’s power back into systems of oppression; Elbow’s goals may be less political or radical, but in his connection of body to the acts of writing and reading, we see him exercising the uses of the erotic in ways that Lorde describes.

Elbow gets across his belief about connection convincingly, but not directly. In fact, his ideas about real voice sound tentative and speculative rather than definitive. “Real self. Real voice. I am on slippery ground here. There are layers and layers” (*WWP* 293). “Real voice” may be hard for Elbow to define directly,

but his readers get the point: the body—the self—is part of voice, and a necessary part if voice is to be *real*. Elbow helps us see the connection between the physical self and the writers' voice by enacting it. His style, particularly the metaphors he chooses as he explores writers' behavior, creates the argument for a way to find real voice by using the body. There may be no final definition for what's "real" in voice, no discovery of an authentic self, no formula that explains sincerity, but there is something felt within it, something, as Lorde would say, erotic.

WRITING THE BODY

Elbow's metaphors of writing and of elements in the writing process are embedded in all his texts, and they're quite various. Especially in his earliest books, *Writing Without Teachers* and *Writing With Power*, he uses some fairly typical metaphors to describe what happens when a writer writes—writing as playing a game or making a journey or sculpting a piece of art. For example, "Consider the writing of a poem as the playing of a game, getting the ball through a hoop" (*WWP* 102). Or, "the open-ended writing process as a voyage in two stages: a sea voyage and a coming to new land" (*WWP* 50–51). But these analogies for writing and the writers' role, images so comfortably familiar that they don't even feel like metaphors to those of us used to reading about the writing process, are found rarely in Elbow's texts, especially in his writing after *Writing With Power*. It's as though he tries out the common comparisons and then abandons them in favor of others—more physical, more direct, and startling—that work better to convey Elbow's insights about the relationship of writers to writing, writers to readers, teachers to students.

Other, more overtly physical metaphors are tried out in *Writing With Power*, but unlike the journey or the craft-making or the game, they're retained. They appear over and over again in *Embracing Contraries* and in many of the essays Elbow has written since 1985. As he finds the metaphor and repeats it, he often plays with the implications of the comparison, spinning out the possibilities that come from letting the metaphor run its course. These are the metaphors of the body—of the erotic—that become his way to make meaning and his way to connect. Obviously these body metaphors are generative words for him, comparisons that provoke him to new thinking. Their use and repetition provoke readers too—to imagine him, the writer who chooses these images to explain himself as well as his ideas about writing. Lorde might say that these metaphors signal Elbow's willingness to acknowledge that his work matters to him, personally, and his hope that writing will matter to his students and readers. She says that "The lack of concern for the erotic root and satisfactions of our work is felt in our dissatisfaction from so much of what we do" (55).

Readers sense Elbow's pleasure in his exploration of the body as part of the writers' presence. He concentrates especially, it seems, on the mouth, the skin, and the eyes, all sites of emotional, erotic, and physical satisfaction and tension. Taste, touch, and sight metaphors seem the most provocative for him, the most productive in terms of where the metaphorical image can take his discussion of writers and writing, and the most engaging for readers as they read him.

EAT LIKE AN OWL

"The owl pops down the whole mouse, trusting her innards to absorb what is nutritious and discard what is not" (*Embracing* 287). Of all Elbow's sensory body metaphors, the most familiar to his readers is the one of hunger and all the related images of what a mouth can do—not only eat, but taste, touch, suck, spit, gag. Elbow is fascinated with the mouth, of course, since the descriptions of the mouth encoded in all the dozens of images he employs reveal the workings of the voice itself, the connection of speech to hunger, of breath to life, of voice to need.

His use of the mouth as a metaphor leads naturally to the emphasis on eating, on finding what's nutritious for the body and using that sustenance to grow. Hunger, and the need to be satisfied, are maybe the most important—certainly the most recurrent—metaphors in all of Elbow's writing. Writers and readers alike eat because they're hungry. As they eat, both reader and writer take nourishment or risk illness, as Elbow configures the metaphor: "Or does the writer squeeze out so much of the juice of human communication, the oil of actual spoken discourse . . . that the language is indigestible?" (*WWP* 95). Even words that in other mouths would not even sound like metaphor, or would seem to be simply the faded metaphor of cliché are clearly a viable and productive comparison in Elbow's work because he makes so much of the sensual metaphorical implications of eating: "If you want to digest and remember what you are reading, try writing about it instead of taking notes" (*WWP* 95). Or, "We must keep on reading it and try to digest its ideas. For our jobs and for our own needs" (*WWP* 344). In all his images of the rhetorical transaction between writer and reader, the compulsion of hunger and then the satisfaction of digestion are described as both pleasure and need, work and play, survival and luxury.

If the writing works, it's tasty: "There is always a crunch in waiting" (*Embracing* 52). But it also requires at least a community of two: someone to feed and someone to eat. Elbow compares "nourishment that comes from having a real audience" (*WWP* 215) to what might happen when you've looked at your own work too long without an audience to help you out: "never do major revising when nauseated by your writing" (*WWP* 175). To describe a writer as

“nourished” by an audience seems to us a feminine metaphor, especially when read in the context of traditional definitions of rhetoric as agonistic, a duel, a war of wills. In Elbow’s image, readers feed writers as well as the reverse. The reader prevents nausea, in fact, as she gives the writer real nourishment. That audiences both feed and are fed by writers calls up an erotic “resource,” one that Lorde says has been “vilified, abused, and devalued within western society” (53).

Eating is also physical work: “Perhaps all the writing throughout the open-ended writing process hovers over the same territory. You are gnawing on a single tough bone” (*WWP* 55). Continual references to the physical act of consuming lead Elbow to acknowledge the primal nature of eating, the chemical and physical changes that accompany nourishment: “There is violence in learning. We cannot learn something without eating it, yet we cannot really learn it either without being chewed up” (*Embracing* 148). And, as elsewhere, Elbow dramatizes the oppositions inherent in metaphor: the doubled image of eating and being eaten, of digesting and spitting out.

Metaphors of writing as eating/survival also point to Elbow’s insistence that writers must have a compulsion, a need, to get it right—both to get it right in terms of subject matter and also to make it palatable, even delectable, to its readers: “Caring about quality implies a hunger to stamp out terrible writing. A hunger to destroy defects . . . hungering for excellence” (*WWP* 301). As usual, there is no one “right” way to put this meal on the table. Elbow speaks of “a hunger for coherence; yet a hunger also to be true to the natural incoherence of experience” (*Embracing* x). He urges on his readers “the realization that certainty is rarely if ever possible and that we increase the likelihood of getting things wrong if we succumb to the hunger for it” (*Embracing* 257). A more important hunger, even if it’s not more insistent, is the hunger for connection with an audience. Writers must admit, yield, to their hunger for community with readers. Echoing Lorde’s description of the way “unexpressed feeling” is a resource suppressed by Western culture, Elbow says wistfully, “We are held back from maturity and autonomy by a compulsive refusal to satisfy the less acceptable hunger for participation and merging” (*Embracing* 98).

Elbow is no innocent; he does not drop these mouth/eating/hunger/digestion metaphors into his descriptions of writers and readers without being fully aware of their connotations. In fact, he explores in some detail those “less acceptable” connotations of hunger, especially sexual hunger. He tells us that “My wife makes fun of me sometimes, saying, ‘The style of that book invites the reader in bed with you’” (“An Interview” 18). No wonder, when in *Embracing Contraries*, he says, “To change metaphors . . . as writers you must say to your reader, ‘Why don’t you take off your clothes and let me play with your body?’”! (314). This last is perhaps the most overtly sexual metaphor

we've found in Elbow's work, but throughout all his writing, he, more than any other teacher/theorist we know, dares to say what the rest of us might be thinking about the metaphorical possibilities inherent in the images he creates.

Here's Elbow complicating the standard student-centered paradigm, for example: "It is clearly hostile to professors and professing: standing up there and putting yourself at the center of the stage, asking students . . . to ingest you or to fall in love with you" (*Embracing* 124). Here's how he describes the pedagogical relationship: "Teaching is like a delicate human encounter, like love, like sex" (*Embracing* 120). He describes the relationship between teacher and student as "overtly sexual Teaching is sexual. What is uncertain is which practices are natural and which unnatural, which fruitful and which barren, which legal and illegal. . . ." (*Embracing* 70). And he tells students of the dangerous and compelling power of teachers: "Or the falling in love model. . . . You want to know what he knows, feel what he feels, have the opinions he has. You probably adopt many of his mannerisms. Or hers. . . . Teacher as 'role model' though that term seems to be a pale defensive abstraction trying to guard against the emotional truth we sometimes actually feel: he or she is someone you want to eat or someone you want to eat you. To love and be loved" (*Embracing* 96).

It may be dangerous to desire this connection, to hunger, to feed, to digest. But like the owl, we need to eat—and we should eat it whole. "Babies begin by putting everything in their mouths. Thus when we doubt we sit out or fend off; when we believe we swallow or incorporate. . . ." (*Embracing* 263–64). We open our mouths, even when we fear it. "The idea of methodological belief . . . may arouse our natural fear of being invaded, polluted, or forced to swallow" (*Embracing* 265). Rescuing the faded metaphor of learning as simply "swallowing" what the teacher says, Elbow makes swallowing part of the necessary act of eating and being nourished, one natural consequence of opening the mouth.

This image of the mouth and all its metaphorical possibilities—blowing, sucking, eating, breathing—is especially generative for Elbow because it carries within it oppositional images. Metaphors are oppositions in themselves, as Elbow says. "Every metaphor is a force-fit, a mistake, a putting together of things that don't normally or literally belong together" (*WWP* 79). With the images of the mouth, eating or taking in, come the images of regurgitating or spitting out. Both pleasure and danger, gluttony and survival are implicated in writers' relationships with audiences, and teachers' with students.

WRESTLING AS EMBRACE

Elbow seeks profound satisfaction in writing for his students as both writers and readers. Part of that satisfaction involves merging, especially in terms of feeling the skin or being inside the skin of another. "As though a single skin

lined the inner flesh of the performer and the music he sings” (“About Voice” xxxvii). Or, “make sure you spend plenty of time with your mouth shut . . . Inside your reader’s skin” (*WWP* 269). “In the long run you get more out of taking a ride inside your reader’s skin than you get out . . . of your writing” (*WWP* 246). Complementing the focus on skin is the metaphor of the itch: “the force that drives this kind of learning is not the itch of a problem or contradiction but the itch for the person who is the teacher” (*Embracing* 96). Or “Unless there is a felt question—a tension, a palpable itch—the time remains unbound” (“Shifting Relationships” 296). Elbow uses the skin quite often as a metaphor for what separates and connects, as well as for what soothes and itches. His most powerful description of skin comes when he shows skin in contact, and the contact he chooses is wrestling.

Wrestling appears frequently in Elbow’s writing as a metaphor for what happens among teacher and student and education, between writer and reader, or between writer and the page. We were surprised by how often the images of wrestling, and the muscles it takes to wrestle well, appear in Elbow’s work. It’s a productive, and obvious, metaphor for the kinds of oppositions Elbow likes to set up as he considers how the interplay between two elements works. Again, as with metaphors of hunger and eating, both pleasure and work figure into Elbow’s conception of writing as muscular; so do the oppositions of power and surrender, exercise and relaxation.

Like hunger, too, muscles—stretching, contracting, vibration—are not neutral. They pull and push writers toward what they hunger for: “In the case of our physical muscles, we can exert ourselves only to contract them, not to loosen them. So in the case of our minds, our attaching muscle is usually stronger than our detaching one” (*Embracing* 268). In other words, writers want to believe in their developing texts, and Elbow invokes a muscular metaphor in order to argue that working the opposing muscle—doubt—is crucial: “But you don’t have to give into this dilemma of creativity versus critical thinking and submit to the dominance of one muscle and lose the benefits of the other. . . you can exploit these opposing muscles one at a time” (*WWP* 4).

Balance, however, is not easily negotiated or won. In fact, images of struggle, power, resistance, and force dominate Elbow’s own wrestling with the metaphor of writing as wrestling: “To write is to overcome a certain resistance: you are trying to wrestle a steer to the ground, to wrestle a snake into a bottle, to overcome a demon that sits in your head” (*WWP* 18); “you are straining to lift a heavy load of bricks onto your shoulder or struggling to carry something unwieldy across a stream” (*WWP* 194). And it can lead to unproductive thinking, what Elbow calls “non-cooking”: “There is only deadlock and stalemate. Two strong men arm wrestling: great energy expended, muscles bulging, sweat popping out

on the foreheads, but no movement” (*Embracing* 46–47). For Elbow, then, as usual, physical struggle can be both productive and nonproductive.

Writing isn’t merely the outcome of all this force. It’s also the training routine, the exercise that prepares the athlete for the race, the game, the contest: “Reading your words out loud is push-ups for the specific muscle used in taking responsibility for your words” (*WWP* 23). Elbow’s exercise metaphors might in some ways account for his critics’ beliefs that writers write only to “express themselves,” when in fact what Elbow’s recommending is a regular workout, in private, before a writer “shows herself” in public: “twisting and stretching what you are trying to write about by mapping it against a variety of terrains” (*WWP* 80). It’s important, he says, to “manage this flowering . . . gradually teach the stiff cells of our bodies to vibrate and be flexible” (*WWP* 282). Unlike advice that cautions writers to hide the traces of the private messy process of composing in the public performance, Elbow shows himself in the training room as well as in the arena. And he makes both spaces concrete and physical, containing actual bodies with muscles, cells, and organs tuned to the act of communication. This intimate, physical presence is both powerful and problematic in a profession that at once understands and values the personal location and mistrusts its use in scholarship.

Amid the force of the wrestling and workout imagery are also images of surrender, the importance of letting the wrestling stop, the muscles relax. Akin to the hunger metaphors, where writers and readers both prepare food and accept nourishment, Elbow tells students that they must also “have the courage to stop wrestling with the foe and give gifts to allies” (*WWP* 190). Muscles must relax as well as contract, and Elbow often insists that extension is as useful as contraction. In advising students to explore all ideas, even those that seem opposite to a developing argument or point of view, he says, “Surely the danger is not so much that false beliefs will defile us if we try them on like garments—as though the muscles in our minds will somehow be made permanently labile” (*Embracing* 282). As always in Elbow’s thinking, the whole contains the opposing parts; force includes surrender, exercise includes ease, and wrestling also involves the embrace.

Teachers wrestle as well as writers and also must engage in this dance of power and surrender. Elbow often advises teachers to become more passive in the classroom, letting go in order to take stock: “The class finds a new and stabler center of gravity. And I discover a mental or emotional muscle I’ve always been clenching to keep the ship from sinking . . . by feeling all of a sudden how tired it is” (*Embracing* 72). At other times, teachers must wrestle with students, and students must exert their own force. “Wrestling seems inevitable to me because of the inherent paradox of authority in learning and teaching: students

seldom learn well unless they give in . . . they resist or even reject their teachers” (*Embracing* 65). In fact, good pedagogy demands a power struggle: “With that good teacher . . . we feel we can go for broke, wrestle full out” (*WWP* 217). Or if they don’t wrestle, they box: “Students only dare get in the ring with their teachers because they know the teachers will pull their punches” (*WWP* 224).

Wrestling, stretching, exercising are productive metaphors for Elbow because of the doubting and believing, resisting and acceding, giving out and taking in that such images call up for Elbow’s readers, reminding them of the tension between opposing forces that results in interaction, dialogue, communion. For Elbow, the metaphor of wrestling is much more about the physical straining, pushing, pulling, exerting, and surrendering than it is about declaring a winner, about defeat or victory, vanquished and conqueror. Lorde tells us that the erotic functions not as contest but as sharing: it is the “power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another” (56). Although wrestling is a metaphor that is gendered male, the way Elbow uses it to produce a new relationship rather than a winner or a loser transforms the metaphor into something more like a dance than a fight.

SEEING IS BELIEVING

As we re-read Elbow, looking deliberately for bodily images, it seems to us that his most productive metaphor for getting across his ideas about writers and writing and for showing himself to his audience is sight. As with the image of “digesting” or “swallowing” information in school, or the image of learning as struggle and contest, Elbow reclaims an old metaphor and energizes it with new contexts: “Vision is a paradigm for belief—‘seeing is believing.’ Just as we mistakenly feel helpless about what we believe, so too with what we see” (*Embracing* 272). For Elbow, vision is not passive, but active, again a kind of wrestling, or even eating; in any case, seeing is not just believing, but also acting: “A belief is a lens and one of the best ways to test it is to look through it” (*Embracing* 283).

Elbow also makes sight an active sense by, of course, describing vision as doubled, focused in two directions at once: “You have used two kinds of consciousness: immersion, where you have had your head down and are scurrying along a trail of words in the underbrush; and perspective, where you . . . get a sense of shape and outline” (*WWP* 52). Moreover, sometimes it’s useful for writers to surrender their clear vision, to lose sight of their goals: “If you want to end up with new insights, you have to allow yourself to *lose sight* of your topic during much of the voyage out” (*WWP* 75). Or, writers must use both eyes in order to see the complicated whole of their texts as it’s developing: “Nevertheless we feel it’s possible to have a *bit* of detachment with our left eye

as it were—a certain part of one’s mind that flies up to the seventh sphere with Troilus and sees, ‘Ah yes, I’m really taking a strong position here—and I’ve got a big personal stake in this’ (“Academic Discourse” 142).

Despite all the ways that Elbow’s writing is infused with images of the physical body, he does not often refer to his own body, except when he’s talking about sight. With this metaphor, Elbow quite often uses his own eyes, his impaired vision, to illustrate and explore writers’ dilemmas with topics and readers: “I often find myself involuntarily closing my eyes as I speak. I realize now that this behavior is an instinctive attempt to blot our awareness of audience when I need all my concentration for just trying to figure out or express what I want to say” (“Closing My Eyes” 50). (In fact, this habit of speaking with his eyes closed was the physical trait that most struck us when we finally found out what Peter Elbow looked like, at 4C’s in 1984.)

The idea that closing the eyes—becoming for the moment blind—allowing for better “sight” has been a productive paradox for writers since Oedipus. Elbow’s instructions for describing a person, for example, end with this suggestion: “Close your eyes and see _____’s face as clearly and vividly as you can” (*Embracing* 37). But his fear of blindness—of never being able to see—is part of Elbow’s sight metaphor as well: “I can’t seem to make myself write well anymore,” he reports from a journal entry describing his use of free writing. “If I just write flabby, mushy, soupy, I’ll go blind and insane if I indulge myself in this easiness” (*Embracing* 51). Still, even in this moment of doubt, Elbow understands the advantages of finding your way in the dark: “Is it really true? I think I’m able to do more complicated things now—work at a higher level.” (*Embracing* 52). This higher level—excellence in writing—may come, then, from groping along as well as from scanning deliberately.

For one accused of writing merely the personal, there are few autobiographically personal details, like the journal entry, in Elbow’s work. Here’s another exception: “My brain is accustomed to accepting conflicting data. . . . I started out cross-eyed and childhood surgery left me with two good eyes which happen to look outward in different directions” (*Embracing* 233). This revelation is more than just a biographical detail. Elbow uses his own physicality to express an argument: the mind needs to be able to handle conflicting data, to use data that doesn’t easily mesh. As in his other bodily metaphors, sight carries oppositional tension; this metaphor holds the double perspective of seeing and of being seen. Writers must understand that not only their vision but their readers’ as well completes the rhetorical transaction. “When we speak, listeners don’t just see our words, they see us—how we hold and move ourselves” (“Shifting Relationships” 286). Being seen carries with it a connotation of exposure and also the sometimes painful possibility of judgment. “For

none of us can function at our best unless we are *seen* as smart by ourselves and others. One of the many reasons why smart students function well is that they are *seen* as smart” (*Embracing* xiv). Elbow emphasizes the metaphorical quality of the word by italicizing it, as though he’s reminding his readers that he’s talking about actual eyes looking for signs that signal “smart.”

This metaphor of “seeing” each other, as well as oneself, exposing and being exposed, with nuanced attention to how bodies move and how both writers and audiences “hold” each other, infuses all of Elbow’s writing and, we would argue, embodies Lorde’s conception of the “uses of the erotic.” Lorde insists that the erotic is not merely feeling, but the use we make of feeling: “To share the power of each other’s feelings is different from using another’s feelings as we would a Kleenex. When we look the other way from our experience, erotic or otherwise, we use rather than share the feelings of those others who participate in the experience with us” (59). Reading Peter Elbow, we get the definite feeling that he writes not only out of his own experience—his own wrestling with his writing—but that he writes always something that’s actually on his mind, something he deeply cares about and struggles with. With Elbow, you don’t get a presentation with a canned response programmed in, but a conversation, a search that deliberately includes not only Elbow’s experiences, but ours.

Lorde also asks us to remember that the erotic is connected not only to depth of feeling, to satisfaction, but also to the striving for satisfaction, for excellence: “The erotic . . . is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. . . . For the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing. . . . Within the celebration of the erotic, my work becomes a conscious decision—a longed-for bed which I enter gratefully and from which I rise up empowered” (54–55). Elbow’s bodily metaphors not only call up the erotic to his readers in a physical sense, reminding us of the bodily act of writing and connecting with other people; in all his work, Elbow has attempted to lead students to this sense of satisfaction with writing—the work of having wrestled, fed—and to the joy of being seen in the process of that striving.

Peter Elbow is thin and tall, a little stooped. He wears tweed jackets and turtlenecks. He has a wide, generous smile. He doesn’t wear glasses, but one of his eyes focuses by indirection—looks at you sideways so as to see you straight on. “Perhaps I shouldn’t have tried to write to so many different people,” he says. But that was the point all along. He comes at it sideways, letting the metaphor do its work, letting his audience of “many different people” find a way to embody his voice and their own.

15 GONE FISHIN'

Rendering and the Uses of Personal Experience in Writing

ANNE J. HERRINGTON

The impetus and title for this essay come from a research essay written by a former student of mine. Her essay, also titled “Gone Fishin;,” begins as follows:

A popular rap group called Arrested Development once had a song called “Fishin’ for Religion.” I can honestly say I know what they meant. I have been “fishing” for the past two years. Through research and experience I think I’ve finally made a great catch.

In the next paragraph, the author draws on personal experience to describe her disillusionment with Catholicism, concluding “I took the best lessons that I learned there, to care for others and to love wholeheartedly, and went ‘fishing’ for a religion I could trust my soul with.” The essay goes on to focus on how and why her search led her to settle on Native American beliefs in a spirit world. In the essay, she draws on a number of sources, documenting them appropriately, to discuss primary spiritual beliefs shared by many Native American tribes.

I used this essay once in a writing-across-the-curriculum workshop to show how I structured the process of working through a research essay. In doing so, I wasn’t thinking that this opening to her final draft would be controversial. To my surprise, a few faculty objected quite strongly, challenging me as to the purpose of such an assignment: how could I justify having a student include a personal narrative where claims about the Catholic religion were personally, not historically, contextualized. At the time, I responded that my purpose was for students to learn that they could use personal interests as a springboard for research and could use their personal knowledge and experience along with that from other sources in their writing. And I wanted them to realize the importance of situating themselves for readers. A string of defensive responses.

This challenge stayed with me. Even though it was from one person with support from only a few, it touched a chord, really an insecurity and doubt. Maybe I was just perpetuating self-indulgence and uncritical thinking. Similar challenges come from within Composition Studies as well: charges of “sentimental realism” (Bartholomae, “Writing” 67) and cultivating “the sentimental persona of the personal essay” (Mahala and Swilky 373) are ringing in my ear. I

don't cite these charges to imply an easy distance from them. Indeed, the challenge to this essay genuinely caused me to wonder about my curriculum and approaches in my first-year writing classes. So, I went fishing myself for some answers, not just to the question of the place of personal experience in a college "research" essay, but also to how I ask students to represent their experience in any writing they do.

This essay represents a present attempt to develop part of an answer, a part that relates to an important contribution that Peter Elbow's work has made to my thinking, particularly with the value he places on writing that "renders" experience. In this essay, I aim to make a case for rendering of experience in academic as well as nonacademic writing by analyzing some of the purposes it serves. Because my primary focus is on my first-year writing course, this essay is only a start toward an answer to questions from faculty in other disciplines. First things first.



Anne the Doubter: Enough of this debate over the personal. You've nothing new to add, Anne. Give it up.

Anne the Believer: I'm tempted to. Call Charlie and say I have to withdraw. I'll just be rehashing tired debates and writing a self-indulgent celebration of "I"-present writing.

Peter: Don't give up yet. Try writing an instant draft.

Anne the Doubter: Writing under the influence. Am I just being a Peter Elbow groupie?

Peter: (Smiles, his eyes sparkling.)

Anne the Author: They differ frequently. She doesn't believe any writing is "free."

Peter: Well, freewriting is both free and nonfree.

Anne the Believer: Always both/and. Yes, but today I want to try to avoid setting up dichotomies, particularly a dichotomy between academy and nonacademic writing.



Peter Elbow: *I want to argue for one kind of nonacademic discourse that is particularly important to teach. I mean discourse that renders experience. To render experience is . . . to tell what it's like to be me or to live my life. I'm particularly concerned that we help students learn to write language that conveys their experience—or indeed, that mirrors back to themselves a sense of their own experience from a little distance, once it's out there on paper.* ("Reflections" 136–37)

This claim about the value of writing to render experience is a fundamental belief of Elbow's about writing, learning, and personal development. What I want to do is make my own case for this kind of writing, exploring some of the multiple functions it can serve for writers and readers. In doing so, I'll draw on the writing of composition scholars and undergraduates in my writing classes, ones whose writings have influenced my thinking as I've been on this fishing

expedition. And, yes, I'll draw on my own experience. Those composition scholars include Linda Brodkey and Min-Zhan Lu, two whose views differ from Peter Elbow's in many ways. My intent is not at all to conflate their views or imply some line of influence; rather it is to show how reading across perspectives has broadened my own perspectives, as I hope it will readers'. The writing from the students was done in classes where, following practices first instituted in our Writing Program by Charles Moran, final drafts of their essays were published in class anthologies, these anthologies then becoming the primary texts of the course. I point this out because I believe that having an audience for their writing motivates students and often provides important validation of them as writers and thinkers.

To Peter Elbow's mind, "discourse that renders is . . . one of the preeminent gifts of human kind" ("Reflections" 137). He identifies it with literary texts, poetry, and autobiography. As he presents it, rendering is distinct from explaining: rendering evokes an experience and the feel of it. Elbow's conception of rendering seems related to James Britton's conception of writing in the spectator stance. Britton views this stance as serving a personal, psychological function, conceiving of it as a stance through which we step back from the world—as if a spectator—and remake it, work upon it, and craft our version of it (99–115). Britton's focus on "making" departs from Elbow's view of rendering as "mirroring back" and is central to the concept of rendering that I am making a case for. When we write of a past experience, we are shaping it with the mind's eye of our present self, doing so in a way that feels true to us in the present. While it is a stance Britton associates with imaginative writing, I believe it applies to any writing in which writers take up this stance, certainly autobiographical writing. Britton says of writings in the spectator stance that it "is their function to preserve our view of the world from fragmentation and disharmony, to maintain it as something we can continue to live with as happily as may be" (117). I would add, it can also be their function to preserve ourselves from fragmentation and disharmony.

These purposes for writing personal experience were already in my mind before I began this fishing expedition, but I am now more conscious of trying to heighten students' awareness that they are indeed shaping experience as they recall and write of it. That shaping may serve for us as writers as a way to transplant ourselves to another time and, by creating and thereby re-experiencing a moment, to ground ourselves, as happens in this passage:

It had never been so white around me; the walls, ceiling, window blinds, flower vases, and closet were all white. As a feeling of being in a holy place swept through me, I gently moved my left hand closer to my thigh and pinched myself. The intense pain I felt assured me that I was awake and not dreaming, alive and not dead. From

every angle, the bright specks of white harassed my drowsy eyes and confused my tired brain. My room had never been so spotlessly clean; my closet never lacked clothes peeking out to steal a glance. This was not my room.

In this essay, entitled “White Omako,” Uche I. Nwankpa writes of waking disoriented, later to find that she is in a hospital, having been taken there while unconscious and seriously ill. She wrote this essay while struggling through her first difficult semester as a pre-med major. By invoking a tie to that period in the hospital, she reinforces her commitment to her goal:

Now that I am a Pre-med student, each time I fill out a form that requires me to write in my major, each time I am faced with a difficult academic problem, memories of “Omako” flow back to me. I see myself wearing my imaginary white robe. I hear Dad’s words: determination, hard work, and time. Then Mum’s sentence echoes back to me, “She is equal to the task.”

The careful crafting is evident here as Nwankpa renders not only sights and sounds, but feelings. Her essay was written for an assignment to describe a place that stands out in memory. The exploratory writing prompts called for students to write about that place—following excerpts from Sandra Cisneros, Allan Gurganus, and Judith Ortiz Coffer that included first- and third-person perspectives. The aim was to heighten students’ awareness that their memory of that place is constructed and, through the drafting and revising of their own essays, for them to be conscious of how they were shaping their self presentation. It was from the Coffer excerpt from “Silent Dancing” that Nwankpa picked up on the strategy of focusing on color.

Nwankpa’s essay also conveys a feeling of pleasure in the writing of it. As does the following excerpt written for the same assignment. In it, Andrew Hobgood writes humorously of huddling with others at a bus stop, waiting for a bus while a rainstorm whirls around them:

Suddenly a gust of wind came up and blew hard against us. We all leaned into it as if we could stop it by proving that we were stronger. I looked down once again at my feet. This time, though, I discovered a leaf that had been blown free from a tree and stuck to my shoe. I peeled it off and was about to throw it away, when something occurred to me. I stood very still and got very quiet, so silent that all you could hear was the rustle of the breeze against my umbrella. I strained to my ear to see if I could hear the faintest hint of it. Nothing happened though. The *Forrest Gump* theme just wasn’t going to start playing. I had hoped that maybe this leaf would be like that feather in the opening of the movie and some kind of theme would start and I could break out into this monologue of some sort, but instead nothing happened.

Here, Hobgood seems to take revenge on that rainy day by using it for a humorous essay. He also plays with “self” for the pleasure of it, calling attention

to his narrative as a construction and himself as depicted at the bus stop that cold, rainy day, hoping to be transported into another monologue, another role. An indulgence? Perhaps. But more than that. Using humor and links with movie scenes, Hobgood is experimenting—playing—throughout this essay with representing everyday experiences, for himself and for readers. Reflecting on this essay, Hobgood wrote, “It was just my mind wandering and pondering on various events. . . . I made the audience look at the bus stop in a completely different way and I enjoyed doing this.”

As I have implied, certainly by invoking the quote from Britton, writing to render experience can, and often does, serve personal developmental ends as well as ends for writing development. It can also serve purposes for learning in other academic courses. For example, one of the students whom Marcia Curtis and I write of in *Persons in Process* told us that the most personally valuable writing he did while an undergraduate was a spiritual autobiography he wrote (187–96). It was not for a writing course, but for a course by that name in Comparative Literature, in which students both read some published spiritual autobiographies and wrote their own. His autobiography served as a way to render memories and shape some understanding of his spiritual life and identity over time. In the Comparative Literature course, this writing was also done as a way to learn more of the functions and forms of this specialized kind of autobiography, one that calls for a reflective stance and re-examination of one’s past from a particular vantage point.

Texts with these attributes—a reflective stance and re-examination from a particular vantage point—begin to look more like what is accepted by many, but not all, as “academic writing,” both academic writing to serve aims for undergraduate learning and academic writing for professional purposes. I’m thinking here of what Mahala and Swilka term “academic storytelling” and also of academic writing in our field where personal experience is evoked for the purpose of making a point about language and literacy as viewed in relation to class, race, family, and other institutions. Notable examples are Min-Zhan Lu’s “From Silence to Words: Writing as Struggle,” Linda Brodkey’s “Writing on the Bias,” Victor Villanueva’s *Bootstraps*, and Keith Gilyard’s *Voices of the Self*. A part of the power of these pieces is in the renderings, the evocation of childhood experiences as viewed from a later perspective.

To understand how this rendering is used, I looked more closely at Lu’s and Brodkey’s essays. While both authors stress the public purposes for each essay, for me as a reader, part of their power comes from the feel that the writing served a personal purpose as well. In “From Silence to Words,” Lu uses the recounting of her experiences to urge teachers to recognize that the discourses of school and home may conflict for some students and, with that recognition,

to adopt a pedagogy conducive to helping students understand and negotiate these possibly conflicting discourses. She makes the point about conflicting discourses through her powerful description of the cultural conflicts she experienced during the Cultural Revolution in China between school Chinese language, infused with the ideology of the Revolution, and her home English language, infused with the ideology of Western literary classics. But in this essay, the renderings of these experiences served a personal purpose as well, as Lu acknowledges. In the opening, which begins with the strikingly rendered line, “My mother withdrew into silence two months before she died,” Lu writes of the power that reflecting on her experiences through words had in helping her create an understanding from her inchoate feelings of confusion and frustration:

My understanding of my education was so dominated by memories of confusion and frustration that I was unable to reflect on what I could have gained from it.

This paper is my attempt to fill up that silence with words, words I didn’t have then, words that I have since come to by reflecting on my earlier experience as a student in China and my recent experience as a composition teacher in the United States. (437)

Note that time and additional experiences also enable her reflection. In other words, by looking back and putting into words from a new perspective, she gave a shape to that experience, made an understanding of her memories, memories that included a mix of images and feelings. She also creates a tie with her past that helps her understand her future. In “Life History among the Elderly: Performance, Visibility, and Re-Membering,” Barbara Myerhoff writes of the purpose such writing and oral telling of past experiences can have for giving shape to one’s life, “a shape that extends back in the past and forward into the future” (111). Myerhoff, a cultural anthropologist, is writing of her study of elderly survivors of the Holocaust. She uses the term “re-membering” to signify this kind of focused rendering that re-animates the past and connects one with a past self and others.

This giving shape by connecting across time is also evident in the following excerpt from Yeon Mi Kwon’s “Between Mountain Ranges.” This essay was written for a research project where students were to inquire into some aspect of their culture or family history by interviewing a family member and doing library research. Kwon, wanting to understand more about her cultural and ethnic identity, focused on the small village where her mother grew up in Korea, studying something of Korean history, folk myths, and everyday life in the village for her grandparents and mother. In the introduction to “Between Mountain Ranges,” Kwon, like Lu, indicates the personal purposes this project also served:

I have found there is a rich culture and history that has gone unacknowledged, yet has been a part of me since my birth. Across vast oceans that separate East from West and across the millennium of time, I have a history, deeply embedded within me. My link is through my mother who traces her life to a small village sheltered by the mountain ranges of Korea. . . . Initially, I was not in search of my identity, but as research progressed and associations were made, it gradually unfolded. It is as if I have tapped a part of my memory I knew not existed.

In this essay, Kwon's tapping of her memory included rendering some of her own experiences as well as her mother's and, in so doing, creating a link across oceans and time. The following passage includes some of that rendering:

I visited my mother's childhood home once, and there is a kind of simplicity there that does not exist anywhere else I have been. I dyed my nails using crushed flower petals, just as my mother had done decades before me. It was only a taste of my mother's past, yet her ways of Pochun life have sifted its way into the American present. She has a passion for the outdoors and finds joy in working with the soil. If offered help when she toils over weeds, she refuses. She responds that it is her time to remember the past and reflect on the present. Sometimes, I watch her from my bedroom window and I wonder how she works so silently and steadily, what thoughts go through her head?

In rendering these moments, Kwon is creating this tie for herself and shaping an understanding. Here is how Kwon concludes:

My mother and I share a common view of what the mountain's mysteries are, and a common love of them. We share a link that threads through time and distance, a history that can be identified in generations before us. Somewhere between America and Korea is where I find my identity. But, I don't think my mother has ever been in this confusion, because she knows where her identity lies. It is somewhere between the misty mountain ranges of Korea, where ghostly laughter of children's play can be heard and whispering voices recounting ancient folktales spread its truth to the keen listener.

While some might say that Kwon creates an idealized, even sentimentalized, picture, this closing leaves me with the sense that she recognizes that some of "this confusion" to which she refers still remains for her. While her rendering may not evidence the same reflexivity as Lu's, it still evidences a conscious and thoughtful attempt to compose a coherence for herself, however provisional, and also offer something to readers.

Kwon's essay was published with three other students' in a minipublication that they entitled, *Voices of our Past: Unfolding our Cultural History*. The preface they wrote speaks to the purposes they believe these essays serve both for the writers and their readers:

This collection of essays spans great distances between the shores of Puerto Rico and the mountains of Korea, traverses time from the immigration of Italians to America to Hitler's reign during the Holocaust. Through the voices of our relatives, a cultural history is unfolded to us. These stories and remembrances have more relevance on our present lives than we may assume. It is a key to the understanding of what is past, present, and future. We are all tied to history, the history that lies in books and the oral history passed on by our relatives. Listen carefully to these stories, you may find an answer that you seek.

In this passage, they echo Myerhoff's point about the function of rendering of past experiences to give shape to one's life, "a shape that extends back in the past and forward into the future" (111) and of doing so publicly, making oneself visible. And they point to the function and attraction of such writings for readers, offering them a way to pursue such self-searching and shaping for their own lives.

The quality of "re-membering" that Myerhoff writes of is also evident in Linda Brodkey's essay, "Writing on the Bias," even though she minimizes a personal function for the essay. Brodkey introduces this essay as an experiment with "autoethnography" (27). As she explains autoethnography, while it resembles personal narrative, it differs "to the extent that personal histories ground cultural analysis and criticism" (xv). What she means by this and how it differs from "rendering" as Elbow presents it is evident in the following excerpts that both render experience and analyze it. In the first, Brodkey tells us of her first trips to the town library, marking her telling as a recollection, not a present experience:

I am sometimes reminded that I nearly became a reader rather than a writer in a vivid memory of myself as a young girl slowly picking her way down the stairs of the Quincy Public Library. I know I am leaving the children's library and am en route to the rooms reserved below for adults. The scene is lit from above and behind by a window, through which the sun shines down on the child whose first trip to the adult library saddens me. On mornings when I wake with this memory, I am overcome by sorrow even though I know the actual trip to have been a triumph of sorts. (34)

This passage renders for me both the feel of that moment from childhood and the moment of remembering with its sorrow. Brodkey goes on to "read" this moment, that is, to use it as the basis for her cultural analysis of literacy. In doing so, she is also explicitly reminding us in that the memory is a creation of the experience, not a representation of it:

This memory of myself is carefully staged. I can be looking only at the loss of innocence. A young girl. A descent. Away from the light. That I set the scene in a library

suggests a loss specific to literacy. Yet here is a child who read so much that the librarians have declared her an honorary adult. (35)

In this passage, Brodkey can talk of this “young girl,” in the third person, trying to understand her as would an ethnographer. And that is what Brodkey is consciously attempting in this “autoethnography”—to read her own literacy from a social-cultural perspective. I believe that it is *through* the rendering, an involved perspective, that Brodkey gets back into the memory enough to evoke the feelings—the sorrow felt at a moment of triumph—she needs to understand in relation to literacy. In other words, involvement is necessary to access and recreate the experience that one will attempt to read from a distanced perspective.

There are also sections in Brodkey’s essay where she does not make the move to distance as much from the memory, from the girl of the past. For instance, she does not read her connection to her mother—something fundamental to her way of thinking, that is, seeing on the bias—with the same cultural lens and third person perspective as she does such literacy experiences as going to the library. In a closing section of the essay, Brodkey recalls her mother taking her and her sisters “shopping” for school clothes, except they were shopping just to try on and decide what they’d like, so their mother could then make those clothes for them. Her telling of this memory renders as much the feel of the moment of remembering as the past moment:

Yet even now I can see my mother examining garments, turning them inside and out to scrutinize the mysteries of design, before bustling off to buy fabric. . . .

I lack the skill, the capital, and even the patience to clothe myself with the rigorous attention to detail I learned from my mother. Yet I am never more confident than when I am wearing something I believe she would admire. It is less a particular style of clothing than a certitude that my mother could tell just from the hang of it that I had not forgotten how much depends on the bias. (48)

“Yet I am never more confident than when I am wearing something I believe she would admire.” In these final lines, I feel the emotion of a tie renewed and the implicit statement, “This is what it’s like to be me”—without a move to analyze that self from a cultural perspective. These reflections on her connection to her mother demonstrate how, even in an essay whose primary purpose is cultural analysis, rendering for the purpose of self-affirmation can be present, whether that is the author’s intention or not.

Reading this memory evokes my own memories of similar “shopping trips” with my mother and her then making the skirts, dresses, slacks, suits that I chose. I remember hours standing for fittings in our front room with Mom pinning a hemline, taking a tuck, fussing over the lie of a lapel. I remember other

fitting sessions: Mom fitting sixty plus high school band members for our uniforms each year and fitting wealthy women of town to tailor something or create a dress from a picture they would bring in. I sketch these experiences now with feelings of pride and love, and sadness, sadness at her advanced age with dimmed vision and fingers that no longer work so ably. And I take from this memory a respect for the skills and art of work done by hand, creating a kilt for me, a silk suit for another, a well fitted slipcover for our living room; an appreciation of the creative intelligence of mind, eyes, and hands. My hands do not create in these ways, but they do feel fabric with the intelligence I learned from my mother and when I walk through stores, feeling fabric to decide whether to look more closely, I renew this tie with my mother, just as I am renewing it now.

In starting to render this memory, I am drawn into feeling those past moments with the emotions of the present. In renewing my connection to my mother and a shared past, I am creating a sense of stability for myself. Yet, this writing also evokes a sense of uncertainty as I wonder about what I truly do bring into the present from my past. In other words, the rendering serves to prompt reflection by being the means of recalling some of that experience. As I reread what I have written, I also see that I am idealizing these moments, representing them selectively as I attempt to create a present “truth” of that past and my mother. This is reflexive writing where I am conscious of creating a meaning, one where my frame of reference is personal relations and where I suspend a cultural frame of analysis.

Still, looking back at what I have written, I also wonder how my mother experienced her work as a seamstress, fitting band uniforms and sewing them late into the evening, fitting dresses for wealthier women. This is a direction my reflection and further shaping of these memories could—but need not—take, viewing my memories with a focus on class and attempting to understand my mother’s as well as my own perspective. Both framings of these memories of the past would be *equally* valid. Further, I do not believe I would have arrived at either possibility had I represented these memories as only a sketchy example. It is only the close evocation of experience that elicits the feelings as well as details that prompt questioning and further reflection.

Brodkey’s reflection on her tie with her mother is but one part of “Writing on the Bias,” and it is one I am obviously reading as serving a personal purpose—whether intentional or not—for Linda Brodkey, as does the writing I began for me. But that is not Brodkey’s primary purpose and elsewhere she writes that for her the value of autoethnographies is “the potential for social change rather than any psychological benefits that may accrue” (28). By focusing on personal purposes, I do not mean to minimize the social purposes served by Brodkey’s critique of the literacy values she encountered in school—

just to stress that it is equally important that the personal purposes that may enter in, whether intentionally or no, not be dismissed. And, more generally, that the presence and function of rendering in these academic essays of cultural analysis not be eclipsed. Failing to recognize the presence of rendering in some academic writing—including writing within Composition Studies—contributes to dismissing its value in undergraduate writing.

When we render experiences—even for ends of cultural analysis—we tap into emotions that we may be unable or unwilling to analyze objectively. That does not lessen the value of the cultural analysis, but it should serve to remind us of the limits of our own analytic control and the powerful pull to create our own “reality,” provisional as it may be and sentimental as it may sometimes seem to others. Paradoxically, though, as I have tried to illustrate, rendering of experience, while it can sometimes sidestep analysis, can also be the opening for analysis and interpretation. For Brodkey, the sorrow that she feels recalling her childhood visits to the library prompt her reflections on the relations between class, schooling, and literacy.

Lu's and Brodkey's essays underscore that our renderings themselves are creations. As Lu argues in much of her work, experience is created in the telling, by the words we use. In “Redefining the Literate Self: The Politics of Critical Affirmation,” Lu is critical of approaches that treat “personal experience’ . . . as a self-evident thing existing prior to and outside of discursive practices” (174). Instead, discursive practices shape how we know experience. While I am reluctant to grant that all knowing is discursive or that all knowing is shaped predominantly by discursive practices, I do accept that to access experience is to create it. On this ground alone, Lu's argument is persuasive: we should stress “revision” instead of “recitation and revelation of the personal” (174). In this essay, Lu's argument is couched in terms of a sociocultural approach to reading “the formation of one's self and the material conditions of one's life” (174). Drawing on Cornel West's ethic of “critical affirmation,” she poses a kind of self-examination of our literacy practices as scholars that asks us to “grapple with our own privileges as well as experiences of exclusion” and “to approach more respectfully and responsibly those histories and experiences which appear different from what one calls one's own” (173). In the essay, she models this dual act of reading one's self and reading others for the aim of understanding and joining cause across differences to realize the ultimate goal of social justice, of “hanging together as we work to end oppression in the twenty-first century” (193).

In “After Words: A Choice of Words Remains,” Lynn Worsham demonstrates the power of such revising, or rewording, of renderings of past experiences. In the essay, she revisits a story she had heard many times from her mother. The

core of the story is that when the two- or three-year-old Worsham was told by her mother that a “colored” woman named Betty was going to come to care for her, Worsham referred to her as “Blue Betty,” reflecting her childhood understanding of what “colored” must mean. Worsham works through the story as her mother told it successive times and then attempts to reword it from the perspective of race and gender, moving, as she writes, from “seeing blue to seeing red” (340). Worsham writes that her aim is to “educate myself first by working theory close to the bone” (335). To work close to the bone requires the kind of rendering that touches emotions as well. Like Lu, Worsham believes such an approach—an open-minded and reflexive reviewing of stories we tell about who we are, coupled with open-minded listening—offers a way to work across lines that divide people, such as lines of race, class, gender, culture.



Autobiographical rendering that prompts revision, not solely recitation and revelation, is valuable in its own right for writers, but also for readers. Commenting retrospectively on two autobiographical essays written during a first-year writing course, Abigail Ferrer wrote, “As a writer, I’ve allowed myself to explore the questions I have.” She went on to comment on purposes she had for writers with the final drafts of those essays: “I didn’t want to just state what I felt, but try to have the reader feel it as well. To have them realize something about their lives as they read of mine.” Such writing is valuable also for developing confidence in what one experiences as one’s “own ideas” and the confidence to include those ideas and experiences in writing about public issues, as Min-Zhan Lu is doing when she brings in personal experience in her article.

The relation of writing that renders experience to developing confidence is evident in the comments many students include in end-of-semester reflective essays. Here is one such comment:

Another characteristic of my writing that I’ve seen develop over the semester is my exploratory voice. I’m always questioning why? Why do I have stage fright? Why are children so violent? . . . When I was first asked to write about myself in our first essay, it made me scared. I had always shied away from writing about personal experiences. I have always loved writing fiction so that’s what I wrote for pleasure. Then in high school, all I ever wrote were documented papers, so my first thoughts of writing something personal made me skeptical and frightened. I don’t have that fear anymore, because by writing my essays this semester, I have learned how to write about my personal feelings.

Laurel Swetland

Two things interest me about this comment: Swetland links developing an “exploratory voice”—her term, not one I introduced—with gaining experience

with writing about personal experience; she also represents that false dichotomy that is ingrained in so many students: fiction and other creative writing where one's imagination can come in versus "documented papers" and reports where one's thoughts, let alone personal experience, are not to be included.

A student we wrote of in *Persons in Process* struggled with a variation of this dichotomy: the split created between writing that includes personal experience and academic writing; and, coupled with that split, the difference between everyday language and more specialized language of an academic discipline. Rachel was in another first-year writing course where "rendering" of experience was also valued. She chose to write a research essay on child abuse, an issue about which she had personal experience. In an early draft of the essay, she included reference to her own experience and that of a friend:

In none of our cases did we report our sufferings. We were scared, frighten, and petrified of our abusers. We were afraid that if we told we would not be helped, but only hurt more. Pushing our pain deep inside where no one can see it is a common defense mechanism. Why didn't any of us run for help? There are many reasons. The bottom line is it hurts. It hurts unbelievably bad. . . . I think the part about being abused that hurts the most is that it came from people who said they loved me.

As she revised, Rachel wrote that section out of the essay and did not identify herself as one who had experienced abuse. Here Rachel is rendering her feelings as much as actual experiences: this is what it *feels* like to be me, and by implication, anyone who is abused. In another section that she deleted from the final draft, she renders more vividly experiences of her abuse. As she said in interview, writing about an issue that's painful "is just another step in the process of understanding something that you want to understand" (267). When asked about including herself, she said, "I don't know why I did that. That's what made me want to write about it." And she had authoritative knowledge about abuse. In the final draft, she omits direct references to herself but does write of her friend's experiences, along with published scholarship on child abuse. In her end-of-semester portfolio review, Rachel comments about this essay:

I noticed that the sections of this essay that I added my own thoughts or explanations flowed better and were easily understood. When the time came to be factual, I had trouble incorporating my style and the information on psychological abuse. . . . The facts seemed to overshadow the point I was trying to make. (234)

In interview, Rachel added, "It was after that paper that I realized that I needed to change my style, and that I needed to learn how to incorporate the two. I think that's something that's going to have to come with time" (234).

In talking of style and “incorporating the two,” I believe Rachel is referring both to language and to a style of including personal knowledge and information from published research. I doubt she would have come to this realization had she not had the experience of being encouraged to try to bring the “two” together, to try to bridge that gap that is falsely created between personal and academic knowledge. It is significant to me that in her drafts she was not representing her experiences as detached examples, she was *rendering* them. Evoking the feel of those experiences in words helped her formulate her desire to be able to incorporate that knowledge.

And why does that matter in other than a psychological sense? Here’s what Rachel said her senior year:

Sometimes the way we experience things in the world isn’t exactly how theories explain things or how something you learn in class explains things. I think because we experience life differently, writing it down and saying “look, this is what the majority of people say, but this is what I found and this is maybe what people I have spoken to have found.”—even though that’s not written down anywhere, you can certainly make some valid points. (268–69)

In some instances, that may mean bringing in experiences and perspectives that have not been represented in academic writing. In “Telling Stories, Speaking Personally: Reconsidering the Place of Lived Experience in Writing,” Mahala and Swilky argue for a kind of storytelling that gives a “sociohistorical sense of experience,” particularly because it can serve to represent perspectives and “contextual conditions” that have often been suppressed (365). Mahala and Swilky also validate storytelling, specifically storytelling that aims to “write the self reflexively,” as an important starting point for fostering critical agency. “We contend that valuing stories as possible starting points for knowledge is more likely to foster critical agency of students than situating stories as cases awaiting critical ‘demystification’” (365, 377; see also Curtis et al. for a pedagogy that takes this approach). In this comment, they are distinguishing themselves from some sociocritical approaches that they see as placing experience in a subordinate or inferior position to an academic methodology or theory. Perhaps here is my reply to those who challenged the opening to Urban’s “Gone Fishin’” essay.



I thought of closing this essay by writing, as did the author of “Gone Fishin’” that I’ve “made a great catch,” but that phrase feels a bit too exuberant (academic that I am) and also gives a mistaken impression that I’ve selected one thing instead of another. I do not mean to champion rendering experience as the sole focus of a composition course, but I do mean to argue against those who would make no room for it. Further, I aim to make a place for rendering of experience for personal

purposes, not solely for sociocultural critique or analysis and not always to view oneself as a product of cultural forces and discourses. I want to stress that I find both purposes equally viable, I am not valorizing one over the other.

As I hope the examples I have used have demonstrated, rendering of experience can be evident in an extended narrative or a few phrases of description: what is key is that a writer evoke an experience and the feel of being in it. This fishing expedition has led me to be more conscious than I was before of my purposes in designing exploratory writing and essay prompts that encourage rendering, whether for a personal essay, an autoethnography, or a research essay. I have two purposes in mind. One is to heighten students' awareness that, in the act of writing, one is creating the experience, shaping it for present purposes under the influences of present perspectives. The second is to present rendering as an effort to achieve some understanding. That effort requires a reflexive and questioning stance, where one can trust in oneself: that is, trust in one's ability to shape a provisional truth, not in one's ability to uncover self-evident truths. Rendering fuels this questioning stance. Through rendering, one gets back into one's memory enough to evoke feelings and complexities that prompt questioning and reflection. Those complexities are often ones that work not so much to confirm a static individual self as they do to open up instabilities and questions that prompt reflection, including cultural analysis.

In "Traditions and Professionalization: Reconceiving Work in Composition," Bruce Horner argues against a utilitarian view of the aims of a composition course. Part of his argument includes arguing against the course as being defined solely in terms of service to academic courses. Citing Anne Gere's study of writing in community-based writing workshops, including the Tenderloin Women's Writing Workshop, he stresses the value of writing for "critical rethinking of one's life experience and the culture at large" (392). Caroline Heller's ethnography of the Tenderloin workshop, *Until We Are Strong Together*, shows the range of writing done by these women that renders their experiences: autobiographical writing, poetry, and fiction for intertwined purposes of affirming self, of commenting on social forces that shape lives, and of advocating for social change on such issues as homelessness, poor medical care, and racism. Through the many excerpts of their writing that she includes, Heller demonstrates her point that the power of their writing comes through the "worldviews" they express, "complete with ambiguity, conflict, and change, that held the life experience that *could* penetrate the surface of the institutionally known" (151). Mahala and Swilky make a similar point about the value of academic storytelling for bringing "what seems 'outside' into the academic game" (372).

For these reasons and others, writing to render one's experience has a place in undergraduate education. Surely, many of us believe with Horner that an

undergraduate education should contribute to students' developing understandings of themselves in relation to their past, their cultures, and in ways that tie past with present and future. We believe also in cultivating inclinations to reflecting, revising, viewing from multiple perspectives, and developing an "exploratory voice." And, we should value students being able to bring their own authoritative knowledge from personal experience into academic writing, not as inferior to formalized theory and knowledge, but as equal; not as self-evident, but as partial and provisional and subject to critical reflection and revision, just as is formalized theory and knowledge.

I am working indirectly into an answer to those who questioned the "Gone Fishin'" essay at the writing-across-the-curriculum workshop. Instead of being defensive, I might have initiated a discussion of the role of personal experience, including writing that renders, in academic writing for professional work and undergraduate learning in disciplines across the curriculum. To launch the discussion, I might have mentioned the spiritual autobiography written in the Comparative Literature class. I might also have mentioned an assignment made in an Art History course to write about the art work in a medieval church as if one were living in that time and entering the church: in other words to render vicariously (Herrington and Curtis 240–41). Given discussions I've since had with other cross-disciplinary groups, I am confident other examples would arise from the group, as well as discussion and debate over the role of such writing for learning and professional work. Such discussions can only serve to widen understanding of purposes and limits of writing of personal experience, as well as of our disciplinary and personal perspectives. I do not feel that "rendering" of experience has a special purchase on knowledge, but it is a valid and important means of knowing, within and without academe. "When students leave the university unable to find words to render their experience, they are radically impoverished" (Elbow, "Reflections" 137).

They are radically impoverished while at the university as well, if they are cut off from a powerful way of continuing the ongoing work of composing themselves and, in relation to others, of bringing their knowledge to bear on topics pursued in their course work across disciplines and of affecting readers—entertaining, evoking those readers' own self-reflections, prompting their thinking regarding issues of the world. I would like for all students who finish one of my writing courses to say, as one has said of her writing course, "You're going to learn how to write. I think you learn about yourself too. And I think this all goes into the whole idea of college to broaden your mind" (Herrington and Curtis 220).

16 MY FAVORITE BALANCING ACT

WENDY BISHOP

"The thing of it is," each time I begin, I wander off into the reaches of the Web to find out more about the Chinese plate spinners on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. When I was growing up, Ed Sullivan on Sunday night was the world written large. Snuggled down in hiding under a coffee table where I couldn't easily be found and sent to bed, I watched the TV shows my parents watched on the very few channels available to us. Few, but to my mind fabulous; on Sunday night at 8 o'clock, after Disneyland at 7, (for more than a thousand shows, I learn) Ed Sullivan introduced what now seems a crazy hodgepodge of talents but then seemed simply like consecutive exhibitions of pure magic: "The Rolling Stones, then a trained bear act, Robert Goulet and then Joan Rivers, a plate spinner, a film clip, Red Skelton and then a closing number by the Rolling Stones" (<http://www.edsullivan.com/facts.html>).

"You want to know something?" Oddly, I don't remember the Rolling Stones, but I do remember being frightened rather than entertained by Red Skelton. And what comes back to me most often when I think of dour and grimace-smiling Ed are those plate spinners.

Don't let beginnings be a problem. Write through them by brute force. I often have to use all-purpose beginnings: "And another thing . . ."; "The thing of it is . . ."; "What I want to talk about is" . . .; "You want to know something?" At the end you can write better beginnings" (Elbow, *Writing* 74)

"What I want to talk about is this": Peter Elbow reminds me of those Chinese acrobats who got their plates spinning on the end of long sticks—first one, then two, then three, ten, twenty—an impossible display, all done so pleasantly, always a smile on the face and a diffident bow when Ed gave them a hand at the end of that brow-wiping performance of dexterity. While no reader surely always agrees with Peter, many of us are often smiling happily back and clapping for the way his ideas spin and wobble above our heads in a way that gets our own ideas spinning.

"The thing of it is," I want to honor not just his ideas—the ones that recur to me with the persistence of that image of Chinese plate spinners—but the quality of his approach, at once tenacious and gentle, slow but sure, rigorous and

sometimes wacky, as oxymoronic in person and in his thinking as in the methods he advocates.

Once you have gradually grown your meaning and specified it to yourself clearly, you will have an easier time finding the best language for it. (21)

So let me grow my meaning by putting several Elbowian plates in the air for a short demonstration of what I find has brought me back to his work, repeatedly, across the years.

FIRST PLATE: PETER AND THE (USEFUL) DANGER OF APHORISMS, OPPOSITES, AND OXYMORONS

In my mind, several things happened when Peter Elbow published *Writing Without Teachers*, the little trade book that could. It was admittedly unacademic in the way the term was accepted then and still holds true today: a book that is *popular* cannot be very *deep* and certainly not *scholarly*. A Harvard graduate student, then Brandeis graduate, steps from high art (Chaucer) to low art (writing for the common person; though surely Chaucer would have been interested in that common person) and does so in a voice that was and remains slow, thoughtful, and friendly. A book that is encouraging to the readers it was intended for, blocked writers, about the most discouraging of activities for them: writing. Also, it was often aphoristic and pithy.

Still, pith—no matter the friendly voice—often carries a terse and implicit critique, due, no doubt, to the autobiographical pain that Peter returns to about failing at writing, at the Ivy League academic game. Subtextually, there is perhaps even a quiet howl. *Writing Without Teachers* was a dark horse that rubbed against the grain in so many ways. No wonder it was embraced by the relatively disenfranchised—blocked writers, just writers, teacher-educators, students of writing—who may have felt they never before had a such spokesperson.

And it still holds up, only recently going into a second edition because the first continued to sell so well for so many years. *Writing Without Teachers* offers useful metaphors of growing and cooking. It offers a solution—yes: freewriting. It offers an explanation: writers can write without teachers. But not an overly simplistic one: writers must write and must have readers. It is direct, detailed, sympathetic. For instance, on readers:

Don't reject what readers tell you. Listen to what they say as though it were all true. The way an owl eats a mouse. He takes it all in. He doesn't try to sort out the good parts from the bad. He trusts his organism to make use of what's good and get rid of what isn't. There are various ways in which a reader can be wrong in what he tells you; but it still pays you to accept it all. (102–3).

In fact, this little book provided a strong attack on the status quo, couched in a disconcertingly brave language that was very much I/you, student-writer-friendly (in a way that seemed to strike fear in certain teachers and academics), filled with analogies to psychology and self-help, urging introspection and empowerment for all. In his most recent collection *Everyone Can Write*, Elbow notes this himself: “So my deepest theoretical foundations are probably psychological rather than philosophical” (3). Such a stance was received, I believe, as a deep criticism of (literature) teacher dominated communities. Because of this, critics *and* Elbow did exactly what Elbow suggests they do when they play the doubting game. They dug in. And he dug in also, standing by his book but reaching out over the years to work to explain it.

Sometimes the doubting game works just the way it’s supposed to: I believe something I shouldn’t; someone argues against it; this serves as a booster shot of critical thinking, I realize I shouldn’t have believed it, and I stop. But actually it seldom works so nicely for me or for others.

In many cases the doubting game has the opposite effect: I experience it as a strong attack and I dig in my heels the harder. (*Writing* 184)

Exit a benchmark 1973, and years later, the doubting of the dominant academic community has made the *believing Elbow* that much more pithy. In 1986, he shakes a stick at naysayers who claim the moves advised can’t be integrated into institutional constraints: “A teacher can give meaningful freedom even if he works within a very tightly constrained system” (“Exploring” 77). In 1993, he provides a sharp reminder from one who has been there—and who refused to stay there: “Teachers who are most critical and sour about student writing are often having trouble with their own writing. They are bitter or unforgiving or hurting toward their own works” (“Ranking” 204). And of course, as we all do, he complains about large scale systems that mis-schedule our lives: “Writing wasn’t meant to be read in stacks of twenty-five, fifty, or seventy-five” (204). In 2000, he provides a reminder about why his earliest book was successful when much of our academic writing isn’t: “It strikes me that academic discourse is one of the least powerful discourses in our culture—especially recently. Many academics are strikingly unsuccessful in writing for a larger audience. If we were better at it, we might see less bashing of academics” (“Discourses” 232).

It seems natural that Elbow takes these at first tacit and later more explicit (pot)shots at a composition establishment that continues to suggest his work is less than mainstream and scholarly. My own observation in teaching teachers and in becoming a long-lived teacher of writing has been that many of us are motivated to teach from extreme experiences: we hated our teachers

and hope to be better, or we loved our teachers and hope to be like them. It's rare that I run into a teacher with an unpolarized teaching path; those who landed in the experiential middle most often seem to be *in* teaching writing on the way to going somewhere else: law school, literature, the corporate world.

For Elbow, the position of guru-gadfly has come about for clearly psychological reasons:

I realize now that much of the texture of my academic career has been based in an oddly positive way on this experience of complete shame and failure. In the end, failing led me to have the following powerful but tacit feeling: "There's nothing else they can do to me. They can't make me feel any worse than they've already done. I tried as hard as I could to be the way they wanted me to be, and I couldn't do it. I really wanted to be good, and I was bad." These feelings created an oddly solid grounding for my future conduct in the academic world. They made it easier for me to take my own path and say whatever I wanted. ("Premises" 7)

That Elbow's sense of his own bad boy behavior represents a very mild form of what we'd term bad in today's culture has led to some interesting responses, to be discussed when I get another plate or two spinning. He's certainly not bad as in James Dean (though that's fun to imagine), though he did feel *badly* in school, as in not good enough. Others have termed his pedagogy, as they understood it, bad or apolitical; that is, lacking enough social contexts. But for now, it's important to see that the oxymoronic gestalt of Elbow's learning, teaching, and publishing history led him to undertake a public enactment of the very doubting and believing mode of being that he advocates: he is what he preaches, for he invites us into his position via images (the failed student done good), models (freewriting as a base for freeing our writing), metaphors (cooking and growing writing; the owl eating the mouse), and narratives (Chaucer scholar turned writing teacher turned senior composition scholar who battles the stronger forces of academic discourse advocates). Given his belief in belief, this is not surprising.

Methodological doubt is the rhetoric of propositions; methodological belief is the rhetoric of experience. Putting our understanding into propositional form helps us extricate ourselves and see contradictions better; trying to experience our understandings helps us see as someone else sees. Thus believing invites images, models, metaphors, and even narratives. ("Methodological" 264)

For this version of Elbow, doubt is rhetoric and belief is action. The acrobat is center stage, the pole is up, the plate is spinning. What then are the implications for viewers of the performance?

NEXT PLATE: PETER AS PROCESS POET

Walking back to dorms from a WPA reception at Saratoga Springs some years ago with a group of friends, Peter mentioned to me that he admired my poetry writing. I said then, and I would say to him again, that everyone can be a poet. In fact, I think Peter is a poet plying prose. His composing process, life-long, as he has described it, is very poet-like. He's a process poet in two ways—his process is poet-like, and he's given life, metaphor, image to our discussions of composing processes. The former has been relatively unremarked upon; the latter has been in some ways harmful since he has been frozen in amber, as have his metaphors, as the arch incarnation of expressivism when that is a title he would not claim for himself.

From the scraps of thought-pieces that became *Writing Without Teachers* to the way he worries a text, an idea, a position, over and over, I detect an engagement with language and thought that seems most similar to that of the practicing poets I know and admire. Peter says some of this comes from the way he thinks and speaks; he knows he's a slow, patient student—and it is true that a careful reader can see that the basic “poetic vision” of his work was set out in 1973 and then theorized since: he works at his vision and version. Like many poets, Peter puts theory into practice (as the poet constructs a lived moment after the fact).

And isn't much, or even most, poetry an attempt, in a way, to slow down comprehension? (The poet Richard Hugo famously remarked, “If I wanted to communicate, I'd pick up the telephone.”) Almost everyone loves riddles, which are a central art form in most oral cultures. In short, humans naturally use language to make their meaning more clear and striking; but they also like to use language to make their meaning less clear to use language as a kind of filter or puzzle or game to distinguish among receivers. (“Illiteracy” 16)

It is this puzzling-through-a-problem that most distinguishes the style of Peter's writings.

Personally, I don't think I would have turned to prose—scholarly, essayistic, academic—without the advent of the word processor that allowed me to write long enough to appreciate my mistakes, which were legion (like Peter, I teach out of failure, failed qualifying exams, failure to match up to the dominant model of white male poets). When writing poems, I could nibble at a text again and again, in ways that remind me of the way Peter nibbles at his ideas. Many literature-trained academics, I find, don't feel free to doubt and believe with poetry since they've been trained to revere, maybe even fear the genre. But poetry writing and essay writing have much in common. The doubting and believing game, for instance, shows up as epistemology but also as action. So many Elbow essays move this way and that way and then this way and then that way—nudging the

author and the reader to their own best resting place. And that place is usually taken up in the next piece and then advanced in more detail, before it, in turn, leads to the next essay. It's a one step backwards, two steps forward way of working. It's tortoise and the hare. It's sometimes tiring—when read as a collection—but it's also often astonishingly instructive (particularly for this hare) to observe such a flexible determined march. This method honors antecedents and the ancestry of an idea by returning to them and moving on again, often.

This vision of composing is similar to that of the poet who finds her poem's frame and then fusses with it—changing one word, then the next, going back to the middle stanza like a terrier, moving down, returning to reopen, fussing with drafts, with scraps of paper in a pocket. Peter's description of his writing hearkens, then, to poetic processes in that the poet's task is try to explain his certain slant of insight:

Throughout my life I've found myself characteristically ineffective in speaking. Not only do I tend to bumble and stumble at the level of syntax, but I also can never even get my thoughts straight. Over and over I have had the experience of trying to explain or persuade people about something that seemed palpably true to me, only to have them not understand me or think my thinking was foolish or useless. This has been a big incentive for me to use writing. I have had more success speaking my mind on paper. ("Discourses" 232–33)

I'd extend my comparison: scratch many a contemporary poet; and you'll find an aspiring song writer, rock and roll wannabe, abjectly shy performer, introvert who has more success speaking his mind on paper.

Having been immersed during the writing of this chapter in Elbowese, I'd love to see Peter move beyond his familiar style when advocating for other genres. While "Your Cheatin' Art" valorizes and enacts collage, it still joins texts together via traditional Elbowian moves. I'd like to see the Elbow of other genres, the multigenre Elbow. In fact, I suspect there may already be a file folder of poetic scraps or fictional fragments hiding on some Peter Elbow desk or in a pocket somewhere. It might take his arguments down, shall we say, different paths, but always, I trust, back again. This, after all, is the writing teacher-reader who, in three consecutive pages, mentions Dickinson, Shakespeare, Wright, Frost, Roethke, Koch, Hugo, and Blake as structural or linguistic inspirations for students' own work ("Breathing" 368–70).

ANOTHER PLATE: PETER AND SYNECDOCHE: WHY PART DOESN'T
(ALWAYS) STAND FOR THE WHOLE

"*You want to know something?*" I'm baffled, really, by the cultural critique of process-oriented classrooms. How can a theory and practice of writing instruction be deemed apolitical when it grows out of resistance to the

Vietnam War; when it advocates a democratic care for all writers, particularly those most disenfranchised in the academy—basic and first-year writers; when it toys (nearly ad nauseam) with issues of evaluation, fairness, and access; when it is grounded in understandings of language and how language cocreates culture? Well, perhaps because the words race, class, gender are not foregrounded. Absence of those code words does not, however, mean that what those words stand for is absent. The same issues are named and addressed in similar *and different* ways within a pedagogy of action; in such a class students are always writing themselves into, around, and against culture contexts.

Here is where Peter Elbow's able metaphor making doesn't serve him. The success of the seriohumorous teacherless classroom trope was to make readers assume that it's actually so; I've never seen a process-oriented classroom without a teacher—and often a fairly structured and controlling one. And freewriting is of course a pragmatic concept, not a pure possibility; when assigned in school it is not free, it is an attempt to create space for other angles of vision as pointed out by David Bartholomae:

To say this another way, there is no writing that is writing without teachers. I think I would state this as a general truth, but for today let me say that there is no writing done in the academy that is not academic writing. To hide the teacher is to hide the traces of power, tradition and authority present at the scene of writing (present in allusions to previous work, in necessary work with sources, in collaboration with powerful theories and figures, in footnotes and quotations and the messy business of doing your work in the shadow of others). (“Writing With Teachers” 63)

To which I want to say: exactly. There is no sense of a hidden teacher in Elbow's work. He is, if anything, omnipresent in a way that allows us to make fun of his work, to evoke a caricatured version of him, often instead of taking on his (slowly) evolving discussions (for more, see Bishop “Places”). Although the origins of his subsequent work are clear in *Writing Without Teachers*, the later work is not mere amplification. Synecdoche—assuming Elbow is and always will be *early* Elbow—just doesn't do these twenty-eight years justice.

For me, the much repeated triad of race, class, gender works as clichés do. Clichés are useful placeholders in an initial draft, standing for something we need better to articulate as we refine a text. So too the call to concern ourselves with the material existence of our students. Those so often calling, though, seem to me mostly to move these place holders around from one philosophical-theoretical-based discussion to another without specifying who they are really talking about and what life experiences really inform their own discourse. Here you can see why I appreciate the constant self-interrogation that

Elbow undertakes. Otherwise, what actual students and classrooms are lost in parallel sentences that doubt students have agency?

At worst, the “democratic” classroom becomes the sleight of hand we perfect in order to divert attention for the unequal distribution of power that is inherent in our positions as teachers, as figures of institutional/disciplinary authority, and inherent in the practice of writing, where one is always second, derivative, positioned, etc. (Bartholomae “Writing With Teachers” 66)

David Bartholomae points out an “at worst.” What, I wonder, would create an “at best”? It seems as if those holding a primarily critical position don’t often enough focus on what works and what will work even better. At best, a democratic classroom respects student users of language, starts where they start, and helps them accomplish as much (writing) learning as can be accomplished in the artificial space of a term or a quarter. Yet so often these issues aren’t discussed. At the same time, many social-based discussions seem to ignore the failures of socialism and communism and other isms of the last half of the century and neglect to explore what such failures really say to us about putting writing students in critical dialogue with powerful texts. What is accomplished, then, by social pedagogies that is distinct from what is accomplished in student-centered pedagogies? For writing teachers, what is provably more important than the acts of putting writers in active dialogue with each other and with each other’s texts?

Certainly I am touchy about this issue because I’m in the Elbow-like camp and because that apparently situates me as resisting what is currently cool. Certainly I am liable in my work to the same critique, as in this one offered by Pat Belanoff:

There will be those who criticize on the basis of philosophies that advocate attention to the social, economic, political, and cultural as primary influences in the classroom. In particular, a number of the exercises outlined in the Bishop collection indicate no awareness that students come into the classroom with cultural baggage that includes, but is not limited to, their gender and ethnic background. (400)

Often my response to this type of statement is the flippant “Well, duh. Of course I’m aware of this” (But I like and respect Pat too well to respond that way, and I also realize she is playing devil’s advocate from a book reviewer’s stance.) I can’t look at a class of students and read their writing without being aware of the many cultural bags they’ve packed and brought along. But is this the central issue for the classroom? Well, for me, no: my primary considerations include improving writers and their written texts and of letting student writers experience themselves in the role of writer/author. A part of this role,

of course, includes, but is not limited to, exploring their cultures. Such explorations are the inevitable and desirable outcomes of sharing writing in a community of readers and writers.

What about another way of looking at the issue?

I think my teaching benefits when I recognize that I am faced with conflicting goals: helping students find ways to comply, yet still maintain their independence and autonomy; and ways to resist, yet still be productive. We can't remove the conflict, but we can at least understand it. . . . Resistance gives us our own thinking and the ownership over ourselves that permit us to do the giving in we need for learning; compliance fuels resistance and gives us the skills we need for better resistance. ("Illiteracy" 22)

Certainly Peter is arguing here for dialectic, a democratic stance, minority and majority positions respected and regularly voted in or out, depending on the times, on the context. Understanding conflict requires an investigation of and suggests the possibility of compromise. Often he is looking for a new place to stand, an unexpected and productive view.

Peter Elbow is part trickster. Dreamer and diagrammer. Definer and detailer. Outsider and insider. Coiner and confuser. Subdivider and classifier. Reluctant arch academic. He begins at one side of the equation and arrives there again by taking excursions to the other side of the equation: he enjoys seeing everything along the way. Indeed, he embodies the dichotomies by taking us to several extremes in his explorations until we give up, nibbled to death sometimes, so that the centrist position does look darn inviting.

Because synecdoche doesn't work here—part doesn't stand for whole—it's instructive to consider where nondichotomous investigations take us. When thinking is not on the run (under attack), looking at a combinatory set of positions can yield insights. In fact, that may be part of what encourages Peter to work so earnestly to consider all the angles of his assumptions. Like many of us, he has used theory, of course, but has placed it in the service of making his practice more understandable, acceptable, and accessible to both critics and consumers. It seems relevant here to mention that *Writing Without Teachers*, that intentional trade book, did not leave the presses without a theoretical appendix; that Elbow as a certified academic is not just testified to by a dissertation and a book on Chaucer but by his determination to defend his position(s). He was not trained in the literary tradition for nothing. The traditional literary scholar's lifetime devoted to a century, an author, a genre is not in that sense very different from a lifetime devoted to proposing, investigating, and defending a theorized approach that results in a particular stance toward writing instruction. Some of his tenacity, then, is bred in the English Department bone.

ONE MORE PLATE: PETER AS PRACTICED THEORIST

As an untrained teaching assistant in 1975, I was offered a section of ESL freshman composition and another of basic writing. For preparation, I was told to read *Writing Without Teachers* by a Subject A director who didn't have time to train me. I was learning to teach without teachers. I read and much of what I read seemed sensible to me and provided a welcome change from the less generously run writing workshops of my master of arts in poetry program. That was all.

One has to be open and accept bad writing now—meaning this year, this decade—in order to get good writing. I can now see that a lot of my stuck situations in writing come from trying to write something that I won't be able to write for another ten years: trying to avoid the voice and self I now have. (WWT 47)

As that little book faded from consciousness, I was more influenced by new-teacher terror; I checked handbooks for advice, talked to a few shadowy teaching assistants in the program, pored over stacks of student papers, and listened to and watched my students. I didn't really re-meet Peter Elbow until I met him in person in 1987 after his and Pat Belanoff's article on portfolio proficiency exams in CCC let me see how the University of Alaska English Department, where I was training writing tutors and helping with issues of writing assessment, could use his advice.

Well, I lied. I did re-meet him in graduate school when I returned to work on an doctorate in Linguistics and Rhetoric from 1985 to 1989 at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Peter Elbow was one of the few names I brought with me—he was my luggage as well as my baggage. Freewriting and other Elbow influences filled the adjunct's assigned writing textbooks I had been using, and I actually probably thought I'd start with him in my coursework. But he was not in favor, or much favor. He was not a compositionist, exactly. He hadn't conducted the type of research (empirical) that I was being trained to conduct, which was busy taking me a far cry from my creative writing and ESL instruction roots (little roots, but my own). Whenever I encountered Peter's work, it was a breath of fresh air: not relentlessly constructionist, not heavily linguistic, not mystifyingly lit-critical. And the more I entered the working realm of evaluation—teacher of student, student of teacher, programs of curriculum, and so on—the more I valued the type of careful thinking-through stances and positions that his work on evaluation offered me. It was his voice that made what I was already reading more readable because his examinations of definitions and issues let me work out those definitions and issues with him.

It was around this time, after having met Peter in person in Alaska and after that at conferences and having seen how closely he listened, that I understood

what I hadn't before, just why he was so valued as a person and so studied as a writer. There were also a number of theorists he was inviting me to join him in exploring. For instance, in *Embracing Contraries* we find (along with rhetoricians, literary critics, and churchmen) J. L. Austin, Bruner, Booth, Dewey, Erikson, Freire, Habermas, Ong, Perry, Piaget, Polanyi, Popper, Rogers, Rorty. These were not the French feminists, the Foucault and Bakhtin and Barthes, who had perplexed me in my first round of graduate school. Those he offered were joined later by a range of compositionists and by Kuhn, Lakoff and Johnson, Graff, Chomsky, Vygotsky, Bakhtin, Geertz, Hirsch, Mead, Gates, hooks, Ohmann, Kristeva, Smitherman. In those days, I was self-teaching myself critical theory in order to be able to talk to my colleagues in my first tenure-line position. I had to have a bit of Bakhtin in my bag to go with the feminist critics I had by affinity begun with.

We might indeed call Elbow a late-adopter, as I was. But that semi-denigrating term does not allow for the way his thinking appears to take place so ruminatively. Not surprisingly, he mentions loving two-stomached animals. In his work, a theorist is encountered and studied, absorbed, considered, looked at up and down. The progress is scholarly, in the best sense of the word, in a manner that allows a seeming leisure to . . . think. Thinking, for Elbow, is a serious business and a developmental journey. And everywhere his readers are witnesses to the terms of travel.

As intellectuals we need to learn to doubt things by weaning ourselves from naive belief: we need to learn the inner act of extricating ourselves from ideas, particularly our own. We need to learn how to cease experiencing an idea while still holding it, that is, to drain the experience from an idea and see it in its pure propositionality. That's why learning to doubt goes hand in hand with structured uses of language and logic such as syllogisms and symbolic logic.

By championing methodological belief, I might seem to be inviting us to turn back to natural credulity. But of course I am not. Methodological doubt represents the human struggle to free ourselves from parochial closed-mindedness, but it doesn't go far enough. Methodological doubt caters too comfortably to our natural impulse to protect and retain the views we already hold. Methodological belief comes to the rescue at this point by forcing us genuinely to enter into unfamiliar or threatening ideas instead of just arguing against them without experiencing them or feeling their force. It thus carries us further in our developmental journey away from mere credulity. ("Methodological" 263)

It's easy to dismiss the tortoise, especially if you're a hare like I am. It's easy to say, I agree with you but what's the big fuss? To ask, Why does he keep at it, keep those plates spinning? He's had success. He's made his way. He has the

platform from which to refute and rebut, the position that allows the time for percolation and an assured and interested audience. Does he really need to keep taking that show on the road?

Well, yes, because that's what is truly interesting: how unpopular the pace, the position really is. But is what is maddening to some (sometimes even to me) about our pilgrim's progress primarily his pace? The way early success led to long years of responding to that success? Do we want to speed him up or move him along? I don't think so, exactly, or merely. As I've tried to point out elsewhere, often his intellectual positions are simply dismissed. Treated as "Oh, that's Peter. Doing his thing." As in, isn't that precious or quaint. It's an easy way not to engage with him, with his texts. And the toll of such dismissals is mentioned in Elbow's new collection. Where he says—rightly, I believe—but with the pain of someone not really invited to the party,

But *now*, in writing this introduction, I am looking for people in the field of composition and rhetoric to engage me at the theoretical level too. In twenty-five years, I don't know anyone who has ever really done so despite an incredible flowering of theory, much of it epistemological, and despite plenty of criticism of me. . . . I don't know anyone in my field who has actually engaged the substance of the argument about the epistemological strengths of the doubting and believing games. ("The Believing" 79)

We could say that the list of linguists and theorists I've set out above are simply not important. Simply not the folks with the answers and insights for our complicated multicultural classrooms today. But might we also say that—to a degree—they're just not the most hip? And that with a limited reading time in a turbulent new century, like will follow like. We'll pursue Bakhtin (I know I did—wouldn't be caught dead not trying to understand him) or the next newly *discovered* person, instead of wandering off on our own to contemplate those less usual voices that speak to the problems we're wrestling with. Which leads me to question: who is really wrestling with what?

YET ANOTHER PLATE: PETER AS GADFLY—GOOFY, GENEROUS, AND TEXTUALLY GREGARIOUS

In talking to a very good teacher of writing the other day about the difficulty I was having with her dissertation prospectus, I found myself a little ashamed of the observation that escaped me after an hour of trying to explain why the prospectus draft I had was to a finished draft what her first-year writing students' research paper topics on first class sharing were to their final papers. I didn't feel anywhere in the text that she was *passionately engaged* with an issue or topic. Perhaps it was partly the cover letter that said she hoped I would approve it because she really wanted to be done? Perhaps it was my providing

her with a *teacherless* learning environment? Perhaps it was because she really doesn't yet care enough about academic discourse? My biggest sense though is that she hasn't spent much quality time with the text, and the act of writing has yet to turn into the act of learning. I don't think she does (or dares) yet trust her own investment in the project.

Nevertheless, if I want to help my students experience themselves as *writers*, I find I must help them trust language—not question it—or at least not question it for long stretches of the writing process till they have managed to generate large structures of language and thinking. Some people say this is good advice only for inexperienced and blocked writers, but I think I see it enormously helpful to myself and to other adult, skilled, and professional writers. Too much distrust often stops people from coming up with interesting hypotheses and from getting things written. Striking benefits usually result when people learn that decidedly unacademic capacity to turn off distrust of language and instead not to see it, to look through it as through a clear window, and focus all attention on the objects or experiences one is trying to articulate. (“The War” 9)

I think Peter Elbow has been an academic gadfly. For me, he illustrates Norman Holland's theory that we have a writerly identity theme (though I don't think the theme is set and that's ever all we are or want to be). From 1973 to today, Elbow has come at the same subjects with a gadfly's tenacity. Sure, some might wish he would get it said once and for all, though that assumes there is a single thing to be said—which is the synecdochic assumption. And, as surely, he'd point out that he's more diversified in his writing portfolio than such a characterization of him allows. Sometimes he's goofy: he talks to himself in texts, and, when he does, Peter Elbow risks becoming an unbelievable alter ego to Peter Elbow. I've seen him go out on a limb for the unknown, for psychology, for belief, for writing and drama and movement (were you in those workshops where we did improv? meditation? partner exercises?), but I've also seen most of his think-throughs done with a great generosity and ageless curiosity about what makes what work.

As shy and inarticulate as he may see himself to be, I dare say I can call him textually gregarious: he can worry an idea to death and just when you want to say, drop, or bury that bone, he'll have run to the far side of the yard and picked up another artifact of intense interest and take you (or at least me) along with him.

You can't edit till you have something to edit. If you have written a lot, if you have digressed and wandered into some interesting areas and accumulated some interesting material (more than you can see any unity in) and if, at last, a center of gravity has emerged and you find yourself finally saying to yourself, ‘Yes, now I see what I'm driving at, now I see what I've been stumbling around trying to say,’ you are finally in a position to start mopping up—to start editing. (*Writing Without Teachers* 38)

FINAL PLATE (FOR NOW): PETER AS PERSISTENT ACROBAT

Yes, now I see what I'm driving at. Peter keeps all the plates spinning at once. To do that—as the Ed Sullivan plate spinners did—he has cautiously to launch one into the air. We watch. And for some that one plate would be enough, thank you. Then he sets the rod down to balance on a tabletop and goes for a second plate, gets that one going and almost takes our full attention with him. Wait, we see the first plate is slowing and threatening to crash down, so he goes back to it and gets it in motion again. But that action has brought to light another idea. Time for a third plate. Somehow, he juggles plate one and plate two. Looks like he almost just stumbled getting back to that one, but ah, up, aloft with plate three. Now he's busy—a new plan, moving from one to the other to the other. But maybe, greedily, just one more plate, there's still something to be said, to be learned.

We can end the show. Ask him to pack his bag of sticks and plates. Tell him Ed Sullivan wants to shake his hand and send him backstage. But darn if he doesn't seem to discover and have to try out a fifth plate and a stick that he's pulling out even as he moves to keep the first four going. Peter returns to ideas (plates) over time and reinvestigates and connects and uses this rethinking to produce richer thinking. To risk a cooking metaphor, the longer the stock simmers and reduces, the more it continues to improve in taste and quality. This is a model of productive habits-of-mind that many of his readers benefit from.

I've long found it profitable to join Peter Elbow when he thinks aloud because I've come to trust his acrobatic integrity:

Because human functioning is organic and developmental, because for example you cannot learn to be a cut-throat editor till you learn to be a prolific producer, so too people cannot learn to play well either the doubting game or the believing game till they also learn to play the other one well. (*WWT* 191)

Without the gift of belief that believing in his work has given me, my own critical endeavors would be lopsided and half-baked at best. I would take only one side (mine). I would spend less time than I should in reflection. I would forgo the long term for the short term. As a teacher, as a writer, as an administrator, as a member of composition discussions, I often find myself giving a little nod to this image I have of Peter Elbow, plate spinner, for it's one that reminds me that it's not only what I'm learning, writing, or teaching but also how I'm doing so that's important. And luckily, Peter has been here all along, providing me with a useful model for persistence and inviting me to join in his thought-provoking games as I go about my own tasks.

17 DEAR PETER

A Collage in Several Voices

SONDRA PERL

Peter Elbow writes. He writes to himself, to figure things out, but also to us, his colleagues, students, and friends, to those he's met and to so many others he may never meet. And even in the figuring out, in the sharing of his struggles, his words speak in uncanny ways. They reach and grab and hold. I wonder if he knows their weight and heft.

Peter the writer and Peter the man are not separate for me. Since the time I first met him in 1979, at a small conference in southern California, I felt a kinship. Something in his quiet manner, his unassuming way, struck me, and we began a friendship. Sometimes over the years we'd write or call, but more often than not, my half of the conversation occurred silently. It would happen as I read his latest article or book. Frequently I'd find myself nodding, marking passages, usually agreeing. In these pages I take my private musings and make them public.

Roland Barthes writes that reading happens when we look up from the page. Here are some traces, then, of what I pictured, the responses evoked in me, as I paused over Peter's words. They serve as my anchor. They weigh in without weighing down.

PETER'S PUBLISHED WORDS

Process

I've always been drawn to the question of what *really* happens when we learn or teach: What goes on inside the mind? Behind appearances? What's the process? There is a mystery here. (*Embracing Contraries* ix)

Dear Peter,

How is it you ask precisely the same questions I ask? I, too, wonder, "What *really* happens when we learn or teach? . . . What's the process?" Only now, in response to you, I'd say, there is not one process—but many. Remember the days when we used to talk about 'the composing process'? It seemed then as if there were one process we might describe and come to understand. But now of course we know there are many—there are processes of taking in and absorbing . . . processes involving patience, periods of not-knowing, of groping, of letting

words come . . . processes over which we may ultimately have little control and even less understanding.

And if this is true for writing, how much more is it true for teaching and learning? After spending our lives in classrooms, what do we *really* know about what happens there? What are the occasions for learning? What really happens when we sit among students and write and read with them? We can enact processes, put actions into motion, but can we ever fully, finally, say what leads to knowing?

Through years of such questioning, reflecting on countless hours spent inside classrooms (as a teacher and an observer), I know this much: there are moments when a class comes together . . . when people are awake . . . when the questions come alive. But how do I know this? What tells me? It seems, now, that I am reading the class the way I read a text I am in the process of drafting. I listen carefully to what is being said, to how people are saying what they have to say, to where their comments or questions are pointing . . . and I look to gather it all together in such a way that I can hand it (our evolving text) back to the class so that together we can take it further. It occurs to me now to point out the recursive nature of this process. Like composing a piece of writing, teaching and learning have a rhythm, a going back and a moving forward. In each, we (the teachers, the learners, the writers) go back to what is there (in the evolving text of the classroom) so that what has been said and thought can lead us to what we can next say and think.

This seems to be a way to capture what happens when we are composing a class . . . to talk about the process of teaching . . . and yet, I know, even here there is not one process but many. I know these processes emerge in different ways on different days. And yet when I teach, as when I compose a text, I often pay special attention to what is still inchoate: to what lies at the edge of my thinking . . . to what is not yet in words so that I can take what is beginning to emerge, what is implicit in the classroom discourse, and make it explicit.

You write, Peter, about “a mystery.” What is it, you seem to be asking, that cannot be seen and yet is often, nonetheless, felt when teaching is working? What, for example, makes one class come alive while another doesn’t? Is it the serendipitous mix of students in the room? Or the sort of presence we bring to bear? Does it have to do with how open we are to inviting our students to speak and write? Whether we do actually evince an interest in them? Whether we allow our own passion about the subject we are teaching to emerge?

We may never be able to answer these questions fully or to describe completely what comes into play when teaching is at its best . . . in fact, I hope we never will . . . I hope we always leave room for what cannot be put into words, for what lies beyond language . . . and yet, I hope we never exhaust our desire

to keep trying . . . to keep understanding . . . to keep looking. Clearly you don't. Your work over the years has focused often and well on what happens in the classroom, on staying close to the phenomenon . . . of exploring its intricacies. And if nothing else, you have shown us that the teaching is approachable, apprehendable, and endlessly intriguing.

Sexuality

The one thing sure is that teaching is sexual. What is uncertain is which practices are natural and which unnatural, which fruitful and which barren, which legal and which illegal. When the sexuality of teaching is more generally felt and admitted, we may finally draw the obvious moral: it is a practice that should only be performed upon the persons of consenting adults. . . . [This] is not a trivial point since so many teachers share these feelings but scarcely entertain them because they feel them unspeakable. ("Exploring My Teaching" 70)

How much I love this passage, Peter. Because I know you are an ethical man, I know (read, interpret) that these statements (taken out of context, yes) are not about manipulating or abusing students. You are pointing us in another direction. You are inviting us to consider what actually comes into play in any authentic encounter between people. But before I describe my own response to these words, let me add a bit of context around yours.

Your tone here is humorous. You are writing about two impulses in college teaching: giving and withholding. In one way, you suggest, we all want to tell, to impart what we know, to make full use of the expertise we have gained over many years. Yet we don't want to squander our knowledge (or affection). We want to know that our students want what we are offering. And so we may choose to withhold our thoughts and ideas until students express some desire to hear them. At least, that is the scenario you are depicting in this article. You are describing a kind of dance that seems to go like this: we want our students to want what we have to give them. We want them to taste, to feel, their own desire. We want them to receive us wholeheartedly, to take what we are prepared to give and to make it their own. Sometimes, often, we don't stop to check. We just forge ahead . . . telling them everything even when they seem bored, disinterested. But, if we are wise, you seem to be saying, we just might hold back. Hold out for something larger. Let them contact their own desires (for learning, for writing, for knowing). If we do, something will happen among us. Pleasure. Openness. Receptivity. It won't be work anymore.

You first wrote the article in which this statement appears, Peter, in 1968. Maybe you meant something other than what I have glossed your words to mean in the year 2002, but even so, from this vantage point, I marvel at your prescience. For since that time, the notion of sexuality, of what is unspoken

and unacknowledged in teaching, has moved from the margins to the center of our professional discourse. Conversations about sexuality, liminal boundaries, the body, the erotic, and even love have emerged in the pages of our journals and in the books we read. But we still don't have adequate responses. Yes, we have policies outlining which boundaries may not be crossed, guidelines regarding the abuse of power in student-teacher relationships, but I do not think we have actually taken in the question underlying your statement: What does it mean to claim, "Teaching is sexual"? What comes into play here? Aren't you asking us to consider the nature of classroom discourse, writ large? Aren't you asking how such ideas live in our bodies? What do we do with the desire to learn and the desire to teach? What happens every time we enter our classrooms and look at the students who have come to study with us? What is alive here? What needs to be attended to?

And so, while we are on the subject, how do I deal with it? What are the erotics of my classroom? Let me explain by borrowing a metaphor from Roland Barthes, who likens his seminars to a children's ring game. On the surface, he claims, the game has to do with passing the ring from person to person, but underneath it has to do with touching hands. It seems to me that in the writing classroom, a similar scenario occurs. What we pass from person to person are not rings but words and what touches are not hands but human beings in all their humanness.

For I am often, almost always, touched by what my students write. I see, appreciate, admire, am at times confused or distressed, but more often moved, by how they present themselves in writing and certainly by their struggles . . . I hear voices desiring to speak, voices desiring to be heard . . . I see so often that what has been lacking is any sense on my students' parts that they are entitled to speak. Not just the undergraduates I meet at CUNY . . . but the many graduate students I've taught, the hundreds of teachers both here and abroad, those who have, to one degree or another, successfully negotiated the system . . . they, too, are shaky when it comes to writing . . . when it comes to trusting their own voices, their own thinking, their own insights.

If there is an erotics to my classroom, I'd say it is more underlyingly sensual than overtly sexual. It has to do with a warmth I both experience and extend, one from which I welcome my students and their words. I am less concerned with their desiring my knowledge and than I am with their accepting my invitation to participate in the shaping of the work we will do together. My desire, then, is to set up a situation where giving and receiving seem natural and come to be expected, a situation in which I withhold judgment, welcome risk, watch with great delight as playfulness and pleasure begin to emerge, and together my students and I explore and enjoy the texts we create in response to the subject matter we are studying.

And as I think back over the many classes and many groups, I think of how often my students and I laugh, how I welcome the moments that are humorous, how important it is to me to feel pleasure in the company and fellowship of others. I enjoy listening . . . that may be a large part of what attracts me to this way of teaching . . . I like the interplay of ideas as my students speak and write to one another . . . and I like that I can feel all of this in a bodily way . . . that my body responds to words and to images and to the presence of others. So just as I sense my body when I write, I am equally sensing my classroom . . . sensing where we are heading . . . noting when we seem to be wandering or losing our focus . . . paying attention to what I want to call a felt sense of the classroom.

So (enough of this happy scene of turned on people acting responsibly and being fully present in the moment), aren't there moments when my teaching fails? When we don't reach a climax? When pleasure becomes gratuitous or conflict leads nowhere . . . or even worse to impotence? Well, of course. Someone goes on for too long . . . students condescend to one another . . . form cliques . . . won't listen well or compassionately . . . miss the point . . . don't do the reading or the writing. There are times when expectations are unmet, desires thwarted, warmth withdrawn, when boredom settles in and rejection makes itself felt. Surely at such times I watch my watch and beat a hasty exit at the end of our allotted time.

But neither failure nor success is what I am after here. Your words, Peter, make me think about all we have never said about teaching. All we tend to shy away from. All that remains, as you say, "unspeakable." And what emerges to me as the hardest thing to talk about is our passion . . . what drew us to teach in the first place. Can we talk with each other about what we most care about? Have we lost our purpose along the way? Have too many years in the classroom left too many of us unsatisfied? Surely, burnout must be an instance of people going through the motions without the requisite passion . . . putting the body through its paces without connecting to the heart.

You say, Peter, that like sex, college teaching should only be performed on consenting adults. Yes, education really only works when those giving it and receiving it are thrilled, engaged, turned on. When we seek it out . . . for we know we are after something. When we can contact our own hunger to know, to read, to write, to express, to learn. The classes that work best are those in which students can contact such desires for themselves . . . and then, of course teaching becomes what it is at its best: a shared endeavor where participants emerge more fully themselves for having been there. Having taken. Having given.

Agency

[Some people] said that when I talk about "meaning making" and "active learning," my language "carried the freight of the free, autonomous subject." I stress too much

that students write and not enough that they are written, that we construct and not enough that we are constructed. . . . Critical analysis can show us ways in which our thoughts and feelings are written for us by our culture or background. But I'm more interested in the analysis of people like Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., and even the existentialists, who point out the actuality of full choice even in the most constrained circumstances. This reflects my bias, then, but I'm more worried about us and our students thinking we are stuck when in truth we can act. (*What is English?* 83–84.)

Dear Peter,

How fully I resonate with the dilemma you pose here: it is theoretically naive to assume we are free. Such a position is easily critiqued by postmodernists, by poststructuralists, by deconstructionists. Autonomy. Identity. All constructs, they say. And yet, in how many writing classes over three decades have I seen them prevail? In how many writing classes have I seen my students take steps toward claiming their own full places in the world? Their emergence did not happen through a critique of the languages in which they (and all of us) are written. They became people who have something to say, subjects acting on their own and others' behalf, through the act of writing, through telling and shaping and claiming their own stories, through active participation in creating the classroom and the meaning it would hold for them. A bias toward agency? You bet. How could a writing teacher see it any differently?

Sometimes I wonder about people who write theory. I wonder what their lives are like. Of course, I realize I'm being cavalier here . . . one cannot lump all theorists together . . . theory, as a tool, is, in fact, often quite useful. But when theories become substitutes for experiencing, when ideologies replace the complexities of lived experience, I become annoyed, even angry. Too many theorists privilege their own thinking . . . placing people and ideas into categories without addressing the thorny question of what lies outside . . . what can't be accounted for by the theory. And yet in a writing classroom, what counts most (at least in my mind) is each person's encounter with language. I want theory that helps me make sense of my students' wonderful uniqueness, of the richness and variety of their individual life experiences, of their marvelous singularity. I want theory that leads me to act in ways I consider ethical. I want theory that addresses me in relation to others. I do not want theory that reduces me to a sign in a signifying system. Signs don't act. Signs don't protest. Signs don't love. Or cry. Or give birth. Or die. Signs don't teach. Or write. People do.

Condescension

I have had an interesting glimpse at how the literature profession somehow encourages its members to internalize an attitude of ironic condescension toward writing. When I teach a practicum or any graduate course in writing, I ask students to

write case studies of themselves as writers: to look back through their lives at what they've written and to figure out as much as they can about how they went about writing and what was going on—all the forces at play. I've noticed a striking feature that is common in English PhD students that I don't much see in graduate students from other disciplines in my course: a wry and sometimes witty but always condescending tone they take toward their younger selves, who were usually excited with writing and eager to be great writers. Behind this urbanity, I often see a good deal of disappointment and even pain at not being able to keep on writing those stories and poems that were so exciting to write. But instead of acknowledging this disappointment, these students tend to betray a frightening lack of kindness or charity—most of all a lack of *understanding*—toward that younger self who wanted to grow up to be Yeats. Instead, I see either amused condescension or downright ridicule at their former idealism and visionary zeal. My point is that people cannot continue to engage in writing without granting themselves some vision and idealism and even naive grandstanding—yet these literature students, now that they see themselves on the path to being professors of literature, seem to need to squelch that side of themselves, however urbanely. (*What is English?* 129)

Peter . . . The first time I read this passage, about ten years ago, I marked it, and it stops me every time I return to it. It strikes me as such a sad statement. I have no desire to place the blame only at the feet of graduate professors of literature . . . nor do you, I am sure. This attitude pervades more than English departments. It has to do, I think, with the sad fact that so few people truly understand what it means to be a writer in one's own right . . . with so few people in and outside of the academy having had the opportunity to cultivate the writer within themselves. It is a sad state of affairs that so few truly enjoy writing . . . truly trust themselves as writers . . . will risk allowing their thoughts to emerge on the page. How often, I wonder, were their attempts to write squelched by teachers or parents who did not know how to care for the writers in front of them?

My sense of your work is that it has always been and continues to be directed toward seeing the writer in each person who enters your classroom . . . toward releasing and cultivating the writer in whoever sits before you . . . toward teaching others (students, us) to listen carefully and appreciatively to colleagues and peers as they (we) put words on paper. And yet, even with your many years of staying this course, with all those you have influenced, those of us who share your vision remain a minority. And naturally, it is vision you mention here. Of course. One cannot teach writing well or write well (convincingly, passionately, thoughtfully, intelligently) without vision. Without a sense of what is at stake. Without a conviction regarding one's right to speak and to be heard. It's such hard work, isn't it? Not so much the teaching of writing—the setting up of routines and rhythms that support a workshop oriented classroom—that comes

easily enough once the ground is prepared. But the laying of the ground? Instilling the belief that each person has a right to write, a right to be heard, a voice that matters? If we could do that well, wouldn't we all—future teachers of literature included—honor that childhood self who yearned to express what lay within?

FROM PRIVATE CORRESPONDENCE

On Felt Sense and Teaching

Dear Sondra,

You'll see that your putting me on to Gendlin has been fruitful. It's lodged in one of those little transistors in my tooth cavity (do you remember stories about that?) so I keep hearing messages now and then in my head and talking back and chewing on things. Rich stuff. The following is a kind of freewriting to my Practicum . . . thought you might be interested.



(Someone wrote me a note after Wednesday's class, being troubled about what s/he had said. I said I thought what s/he said was fine. . . .)

But in so far as your statement led you to go through this restatement I'm very glad you were troubled. For it was a wonderful set of perceptions and affirmations about where you are at and how you are doing. And a great pleasure to read. Notice, by the way, how that sequence of utterances by you—first in class and then in the letter—represents exactly what Perl/Gendlin are talking about in "felt sense." . . . That is, you have an intention to say something and you say it; but then having said it, you consult your felt sense of what you meant to say—or in this case your felt sense came out and consulted you—and you realized that what you said didn't really represent your felt sense and so you made another utterance—this time closer to what you want to say. . . .

So Gendlin is talking about a basic process that is very natural: making an utterance and then noticing a slight lack of synch between that utterance and what you really felt/feel—what you wanted to say; and therefore making another utterance that tries to get closer to it. We do it all the time—naturally, spontaneously. But of course the trouble is that (especially in writing) we also *don't* do it enough. We get in the habit of saying things which *aren't* quite in synch with the feeling/intention that gave rise to the words. But we feel, "You can never really say what you really mean, so why try." And after enough of this, you stop *feeling* the lack of fit between your words and what you mean/intend/feel. . . .

How messy and slippery a phenomenological issue this is—but wonderfully central it is to the main thing about speaking and writing and making meaning. Perl/Gendlin/felt sense is all about figuring out what you "really mean." And there is the tricky business about whether you adjust/revise what you say or write—did you

change your intention of what to say, or was the intention there all the time but you missed it the first time and got it the second time (or 50th time.) I guess both processes must occur. . . . The matter is slippery because I suspect that if we want to speak accurately about what happens in people we also have to talk about deeper and more superficial intentions. . . .

This transaction . . . at the deepest level is often only possible, I think, if the person has a trust that all her meaning and intelligence is there, available; that all humans have rich complex meanings available to them at all times: as in a restaurant, they are not quite cooked yet—they still need more time in the oven—but they are nevertheless genuinely there and available and ready to be finished.

Dear Peter,

Your letter makes me smile. I'm glad I saved it in a file, labeled simply "Elbow." It reminds me of talks we've had—mostly about Gene Gendlin's work—and how eager you have been to explore what is central to composing, even when it is different, not quite in the language of "our field," even when it leads to what you later call "the suspiciously 'touchy-feely' aspects of the Perl/Gendlin thing."

I have always been uncomfortable with the "touchy-feely" aspects too . . . and yet your encouragement always helped me. You made me feel less alone when claiming that writing is anchored in our bodies as well as our minds, that it is not only cognitive—that language and meaning arise together by paying attention to felt sense.

And here you are, exploring, writing, attempting to say just what this means to you . . . experientially. Again the focus on process . . . on what happens as we think and speak and write. On what happens as we make meaning. It is interesting to see you struggle with a dilemma that I don't much explore: the question of order or timing or what comes first. You are intrigued, almost appear compelled, to pin down this question of what changes as we speak and write, the words or the intention.

In some ways, I think you are correct when you say both options must be true . . . sometimes the intention was there all along, and the writer just didn't find the right words . . . other times the words may have been on the right track, but the intention itself changed in the saying of it. But I want to quarrel with you about your use of the word *intention*. It sounds too set . . . as if we have intentions sitting around inside of us waiting to be discovered. The process Gene is pointing to is more open-ended . . . more malleable and intricate. With more give and take . . . more trying on and checking . . . and often the "rightness" of the words comes as a surprise . . . a kind of "Oh, *that's* what I meant . . . I see now . . ." but it isn't something we know prior to the saying of it. And in my understanding, it seems as if we only know if we've adequately captured our felt

sense by consulting (here we go again—that place) the location in our bodies where we experience ourselves directly.

Frequently, in the years since 1980, when I first introduced the idea of felt sense to our field, people have used it to refer to feelings. But Gene makes a clear distinction here. Felt sense is not an already constellated or identifiable emotion . . . it is just what it says . . . something felt but not yet articulated or identified as any one thing. It is only in turning towards a felt sense and bringing words to it that we come to see what is there . . . and in this way of thinking, it is never really set. It does shift and change. I have often thought of it as an internal criterion I use when writing (or teaching). I sense something larger than words . . . I ask myself, what is this? What is going on? What's right here on the edge of my thinking? And then, if I can bear to sit still and wait, if I have patience and don't jump up too quickly or grasp at the first formulation, words come that I recognize as right, as capturing the sense I am experiencing. It does take slowing down and paying attention to what is not yet in words . . . to what lies beneath the words, to a felt sense.

In this way I've often thought that using felt sense as a guide while writing is the opposite of what happens when I engage in freewriting. In freewriting, I move along like a train gathering speed, letting words come as quickly as possible, not censoring anything, putting down on paper whatever I can catch of what is crossing my mind. When I use felt sense or the exercise you have called the Perl Guidelines, I enact a very different process. I begin slowly, easily, accepting whatever words come to me, but I also cultivate an attentiveness and a deliberate waiting and pausing. In other words, I pay attention not just to the words that are emerging but also to the location in my body where I am able to sense, feel, intuit something. In this way, felt sense has more of a backward and inward motion than a forward and outer one. It holds an implicit invitation: to pay attention to what can be directly sensed but is not yet "in words."

You come closer to this formulation of felt sense, Peter, in a second letter you wrote to your students in 1984, which (since you are talking about my use of felt sense in the classroom) you kindly forwarded to me. Here you ask the following:

What does it mean to have something "in mind"?—What is it that is in mind? Even though we don't know the precise answer to that question, we can discover by practice that we can experience a sense of that something-we-want-to-say-but-it's-not-yet-clear-what-it-is.

Most people when they first try to attend to that "in mindedness" can only be clear about it in retrospect: after they've said or written something they can stop and ask themselves, "was that it?" and oddly enough usually know the answer without doubt. Thus, the point is that people do have available to them—even if they are not in the habit of noticing it—a "felt sense" of what they sort-of-intend to say or "have in mind."

What Perl's discovered and I've been able to reaffirm with myself and some teachers I've worked with is that though people often ignore that "felt sense" and just proceed with their thinking and writing, they can learn to attend to it more: to value and take more seriously their own *inchoate* intentions—vague feelings that they might have something to say about something. They can learn to pause and go back more often to this felt sense and see whether what they have written fits.

If you do this—go back and quietly, openmindedly check—you are often led to a "shift" or "adjustment" in direction: "no, that's not quite it, what I really want to say is. . . ." It turns out that even experienced writers (I use my own experience here) seldom find words on the first try which match one's felt sense. And so, interestingly, the process tends to lead one on a curving or jagged or surprising path of discovery rather than a straight one—yet a path that feels to the writer as though it is getting closer to what was wanted all along but not quite known.

It is important, by the way, that this going back and checking be, in fact, quiet and charitable. I.e., this process of checking the felt sense or intention should not be confused with revision or editing—which indeed must be done in a noncharitable critical consciousness. Checking with felt sense is very liable to make one move *away* from something that is well written to something that is more messy and inchoate—but closer to where one at the deepest level was trying to go.

It is Perl's sense—though this comes out of Eugene Gendlin—that we do well to look to our physical selves in trying to attend more sensitively to this felt sense. This will seem offensively "touchy-feely" to some. I believe she is absolutely right on this, still the notion of *some* kind of felt sense or not-yet-articulated-intention is more important and universally valid than any linking of it to bodily sensation. . . .

I love how closely you attend to the process here. How well you have articulated what it means to have something in mind . . . shying away a bit from the fact that having something in mind is also having something in body . . . These days we may be more comfortable talking about the body as a site of knowing . . . where desires, intentions, and meanings coalesce and make themselves felt than we were in 1984, but it's not yet easy or straightforward.

Not coincidentally, Peter, in the years that you have been exploring this concept and these processes with your students, I have been doing the same. A few years ago, one of my graduate students in the master's program at Lehman, elaborated on the concept of felt sense in a way that enlarged my understanding of the relationship between the body and writing. Writing in 1996, Danielle brings to bear a more body-centered thinking, a freer way of approaching the physicality of writing, than was available to us in the early 1980s. And not surprisingly her words link us to the sexuality connected to language you sensed years ago too. Addressing me in a journal entry, Danielle writes,

There are times when we come across an articulation of what we have always known, but did not know we knew it, because it had never been spoken in our presence by us or anyone else. The “felt sense” notion, even though it was kept particularly loose in definition by you, is one of those moments of articulation for me.

I love writing. This is not to say that I do very much of it, but when I am doing it, I love it. It is like sex in that way: long anticipated, short lived and puzzled about in the long time in between. And more than that, I have always been a little bit confused by the fact that the physical sensation of writing for me feels like, well, like something kind of stimulating. That is to say that when I really get down to writing something—anything—I have a series of physical responses that are virtually indistinguishable from what I experience when sexually attracted to someone. These sensations (in this order) are as follows:

Breath. My awareness of it in these two situations. I never think about breathing except when doing these things. All of a sudden, in the midst, I will notice that my lungs are almost too full, and I will hear the music of my own breath. For me this is a moment of authenticity, the breathlessness, the sound of me trying to breathe.

Heartbeat. More like a crash than a beat, except that “beat” connotes the rhythmic, which I am sure is the true basis for the resemblance between writing and other pleasures of the body. At times when I am making any sort of progress with my writing I feel my heart knocking at the door of my rib cage, a strong-armed angry prisoner who wants to see the guard, and who won’t be ignored. When the writing, or whatever it is I have thrown myself into, is working, my chest beats in my ears, my stomach, my teeth.

Tingling fluids. Need I say more? When things are flowing, they are flowing. Indulging in such pleasures means wet hands, moist face, water everywhere. But it all has that electrical charge on the skin that is strong enough to frighten, yet mild enough to allow me to continue.

I find Danielle’s description both powerful and evocative. A poet, she writes in metaphors. It is unlikely that she has captured how composing occurs for all people. But if Danielle’s description does anything, I’d say that it alerts us to the ways we may have ignored or been made uncomfortable by the power of bodily experience in writing—and teaching.

Finally, what strikes me in these letters, Peter, is your writing about trust. Not unlike the sense of entitlement I wrote about earlier. To trust that one is intelligent . . . that one can and will make meaning of even the most difficult and confusing of experiences or texts . . . that being human means nothing less . . . To teach writing well, mustn’t we all (in whatever settings, with whatever students) find a way to convey this message?

Christmas Greetings

December 17, 1980

Dear friends,

By procrastinating I have found a memorable day on which to write to you. Abby's fifth birthday. Cami, Abby, and Benjy are downstairs blowing up balloons and hiding little packs of raisins around the livingroom for a treasure hunt. I have escaped to my study, my state-owned electric typewriter, and the view over a grey and foggy Olympia harbor—to engage in the important work of communication with the outside world.

Till now we have used birthday parties as occasions for getting together with grown-ups we wanted to see, who happened to have children. We would all stand around our diningroom with its window seats and large plywood inclined plane, eating sweets and having a nice visit, as kids crawled among each other and made a mess. But this time Abby gets to decide who comes, and Cami consulted carefully with her on all the details of the party. The stakes are higher. Perhaps I'll have a draft of this letter finished by 4:30 when the party begins and I descend to help Heather, Lissa, Matthew, Megan, Abby and Benjy roll cans of baked beans at 9-pins of stacked milk cartons . . .

Our five month trip was the highlight of the year. . . the most exciting time started in May: six weeks in England and a month in France. . . Cami and I learned not to hurry and to treat foreign worms and foreign sidewalks as no less interesting or important than old buildings and museums. Our trip was really a tour of playgrounds, but that turns out to be a good way to visit foreign lands. England, by the way, is terrific on that score, France pretty bad. . .

Dear Peter,

How pleased I was to be included in your Christmas list. But now I ask myself, what prompted me to save your Christmas letters? I think it was because I enjoyed them so much . . . because I was beginning to learn about you not only as a colleague but also as a person, a husband, and a father. I loved the stories about the kids, the birthday parties, and the family trips. They were reassuring to someone who treasured her professional life and wasn't yet convinced it was possible to combine a full work life with parenting. Your letters began to convince me that a professional life could include, could in fact be enriched by, a family life. I loved, too, the sense that you were accessible, that you invited your world of friends into the fabric of your life . . . that you actually *wrote* to us. In any event, I found that after reading your (or Cami's) yearly letter, I could not nonchalantly toss it away. It seemed more respectful somehow to save each one, to let them accumulate.

In 1984, I gave birth to my daughter and in 1987, to identical twin boys. (You wrote a hastily scribbled note: "Congratulations on babies.") I smile at

that now too. Your Christmas letters did not prepare me for life with twins and a toddler. The only trips we took were to the pediatrician's office. But in 1992, Cami's Christmas letter prepares me for what is now (in the year 2000) quite familiar to me. She writes,

Life with two teenagers is about what you'd expect. The phone rings constantly—we've sunk to having Call Waiting. We overhear conversations which go: "S'up?" "S'up?" "Fly." "Dope." We haven't a clue what they're talking about, though at least they do still seem to talk to us, when there's no one younger about.

But Cami also describes your life at this time:

Peter tells me he is more relaxed this year, though I don't see it—he turns on his computer even before he gets dressed in the morning. He's been writing essays this year instead of books, and still travels quite a bit. He's enjoying teaching a graduate seminar called "Language as Performance", in which the students make noises and move around a lot—Peter says he's trying to "get the body attached to the writing." He moved the class to the Physics building for fear others in the English Dept would peek. He has gone high-tech for his once a week cooking responsibilities, with a bread machine that looks like R2D2. Unfortunately, he tends to fall for the more exotic recipes, like chocolate chip bread. . . .

How much I enjoy these stories from your shared life. Some things have changed from the 1980 letter: you have moved east, the kids are older, you write now on a computer, not an electric typewriter. But some things remain the same: here you are again, pushing the boundaries, looking to discover connections (again) between our bodies and our language . . . experimenting, cautiously, carefully, with students. I enjoy, too, seeing you through Cami's eyes—chocolate chip bread. My kids would love it.

Your letter from 1993 is reminiscent of the first one I received and then, of course, moves on to professional concerns that will dominate the 1990s:

Tonight, as I write, Abby is having a party here for her eighteenth birthday. I sit at my computer in my study above the living room hearing bursts of talk, music, laughter—and marvel at the benign scene. A score of them sit around, mostly on the floor, talking, listening, an occasional back rub. Free-floating, good-spirited presence and sociability. . . . Certainly we are aware that our days with Abby and Ben at home are numbered. We see everything through this bitter-sweet lens and appreciate them all the more. . . . I also get sucked into writing about assessment and grading of writing—trying to persuade people to do less of it. The schools and culture seem preoccupied with testing, ranking, measuring. Perhaps I could have skipped writing this year-end evaluation and just given us an "A-minus."

Dear Peter,

As I sit in my study in front of my computer, Sara can be found, as your children often were, on the phone. Josh and Sam sit for hours (if we let them) in front of the TV, playing video games. They still need rides to basketball practice or soccer games. Their friends don't yet come and go with quite the ease you describe. But you do, once again, hint at what lies ahead . . . their maturing and their eventual moving out and away.

I warm to the humor in your family's grade for the year's progress. I wish, as we enter the age of high-stakes testing, that the situation were not so dire. No grade or test can inform us about the richness of life in your house, just as no grade or test can ever tell us about the ways students learn and grow in our classrooms. I know you know this. You've engaged the battle far more intensely than I. But I worry, that at least for now, we are on the losing end. Those who think raising standards means standardizing what happens in classrooms are setting policies that undermine the kind of teaching and learning we value. It is a discouraging time for many of us who entered the profession when research about composing was young and offered the promise of something bright and new. I imagine you feel this too . . . but you've managed to stay the course. To persevere. To keep writing and listening.

So, Peter, I've known you for twenty years. When I pause over those words and ask what else there is to say, what comes is a realization I'm not sure I've ever put into words. I realize that in addition to your being thoughtful and inquiring in your work, you are also thoughtful and inquiring about your life—and that underlying whatever you do is a particular playfulness and a generosity of spirit. Whether you are parenting or teaching, thinking about testing or theorizing about meaning—or writing about any of the above—these same qualities shine through. When I look for colleagues, then, whose words and actions are consistent with their vision of the world, I find you. It is, I think, this seamlessness that I admire most.

Your words, Peter, have been a bridge, a way to connect worlds, a way to hold on to a vision of what it means to be a teacher, a friend, a parent, and a writer. It is a rich world for me: a world of connection, dialogue, and shared values. A world that, like a collage, is layered, circles back on itself, picks up a thread, and weaves it for a time. One that has no formal ending, only the possibility of continuing. Thank you for all of that.

Write soon,

Sondra

18 COLLAGE

A Coda

The best advice I ever got came during a presentation Peter was giving on levels of assessment—low stakes vs. high stakes. The first level, he said, was liking writing—not marking it, not grading it, just liking it. What a simple but extraordinary insight—that our first job as teachers of writing is to enjoy what our students produce! I never fail to think of that idea when I sit down to read a set of papers. It doesn't make the pile any smaller, but it certainly improves my outlook. It reminds me of why I became a writing teacher in the first place.

Bruce Penniman, Amherst Regional High School

Christmas Break, 1975, University of Hawaii, Manoa. Peter Elbow's first workshop to promote *Writing without Teachers*. Never heard of Peter Elbow or his book; I attend with the vague hope of keeping up on professional developments. *Without Teachers?* Will I be Elbowed out of a job?

No *preconceptions* = no *misconceptions*. I like young Dr. Elbow's low-key delivery. I especially like freewriting and the conversational way it reads. In ten quick minutes I write more than I usually do in an hour. How easy to just pour words onto paper!

Although he doesn't present it quite this way, I conceive of freewriting as calisthenics and am fascinated by the possibilities. Athletes run windsprints. Musicians play scales. Artists draw sketches. Shouldn't writers freewrite? I walk two miles home, sucking tamarind seeds and wondering what would happen if my students freewrote for five minutes every day. Universal fluency? Greater creativity? Confident, natural-sounding prose?

We write *The Journal Freewriting Handbook*, begin *The Read-Along Handbook*, name The Golden Triangle and show it to other schools. We must be having fun because before we know it, it's 1995, twenty years after Peter Elbow's workshop. I've read and admired his follow up *Writing with Power* but never attempted to contact him.

The University of Hawaii English Department sponsors a Citizens' Chair to lure distinguished faculty from other campuses for a year. For 1995 it snares internationally known writing guru Peter Elbow from Umass-Amherst. It's bad luck to ignore serendipity; I send Professor Elbow a description of The

Performance English Program-in-progress and explain how its seed was sown by his 1975 workshop. I invite him to lunch with us in our office. He calls, accepts, and later pedals over from Kuykendall Hall on a bicycle.

James Harstad, University of Hawaii, Manoa

I remember being on dish duty at the Amherst soup kitchen when two men burst through the double-swinging doors from the dining room, crashed to the floor, and proceeded to pummel one another violently. I was happy to have a series of sinks between me and them and everyone else in the kitchen quickly backed away. All except Peter. He moved in directly and put himself between them, forcing them to stop.

Later, when we all exclaimed at his bravery, he shrugged it off and said only, “the interesting thing is, they were fighting about language.”

Erika Scheurer, University of St. Thomas

In class recently an undergraduate student questioned me about the assignment to bring “one page of freewriting about their topic” to class. “What,” she wanted to know, “do you want? What should we include?” I give a little laugh, a kind one, and say as I have a thousand times in the past, “It’s freewriting. You know, you’re free to say anything you want. It has to be about the topic, but that’s the only limit. With freewriting, you can’t do it the wrong way. Everyone’s page of freewriting will be a success.” She replies that she’s “just checking,” implying that she can’t really believe what I’m saying is true. It’s early in the semester without enough time for her to psyche me out as a teacher. She’s looking for the catch and the trick. It makes me sad that students have been so thoroughly, yet necessarily, taught to distrust, to be suspicious and doubtful. I hope freewriting will stand up to the test. Not only do I intend for it as a strategy to affect her writing process, but I hope its practice, her writing and my acceptance of what she brings, will shape the relationship between us as student and teacher.

Jane Danielewicz, University of North Carolina

I was pleasantly surprised recently to overhear a group of students in a British Literature course exclaiming in a discussion group that they liked the word “ambiguity,” a word and concept that I interject quite frequently in my courses and that I have relished since my initial reading of Peter Elbow’s *Embracing Contraries: Explorations in Learning and Teaching* (1986). Since then, I have gently, at times, and not so gently at other times, urged students to consider the literary selections we are studying from a multivalent perspective.

For example, in discussing the title character in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” our discussion initially took a traditional—a

“safe”—slant by considering the Ancient Mariner from the mythological perspective. We embraced Elbow’s “defending attorney” position as the students and I argued in support of the Mariner, underscoring the universal role of the storyteller, the Mariner as the wisdom figure and prophetic voice, the “wanderer” who seeks forgiveness for committing a reprehensible deed and reintegration into the community who alienated him, the “teacher” or “mentor,” if you will, who serves as a disturbing voice at times but who ultimately alerts the “audience” to the need for confession and regeneration.

But knowing that Peter Elbow also invites the instructor and students to be tugged in a seemingly opposite or contrary manner enabled me to become simultaneously the prosecuting attorney just at the moment when students seemed comfortable and smug with the wind-down to the discussion. Students soon discussed the role of the Ancient Mariner as interrupter and as the catalyst who forces the audience to confront demons that render us sad and immobilized. Thus, we embraced both aspects of the Ancient Mariner. Elbow’s view of the instructor as both prosecuting and defending attorney was well enacted during that discussion. Such divergent viewpoints, based on textual proofs, provide a perspective on ambiguity that anticipates, welcomes, and balances the healthy tension that comprises so much of life, whose preparation, ultimately, is the goal of education.

Mary Theresa Hall, Thiel College

Dhira Mahoney, a colleague, conducted a workshop focusing on “The Open-Ended Writing Process” (50–58). She opened the session by paraphrasing Elbow’s advice: “When you’re freewriting, the editor should be out of the room.” After writing the guidelines for open-ended writing on the board, she noted that its goal was to help “in the search for the as yet unthought thought.” To get everyone in the room started on the voyage out, she offered the following statement: “The heresy of heresies is common sense.” My own voyage out, not so surprisingly, looked like this:

Yes. That is it. I know this well. This is the aphorism that all academics should keep in mind—if they are to please P&T committees. Write about basic research, and for Pete’s sake, don’t ever write about classroom practice. What happens in the classroom will do nothing for you. You will never get tenure that way. Write about that which is of no use to anyone. Be esoteric, arcane. Don’t be practical. Do exercises that demonstrate your mind’s ability to do mental gymnastics. Do those difficult gymnastic moves. Impress the judges. Above all—impress the judges.

Much of what I publish must be considered heresy among literary folks. Composition? That’s too practical. You can be esoteric, arcane, impractical. I wonder how people like Linda Flower, Peter Elbow, Nancy Sommers, and Sondra Perl are viewed by colleagues (literary folks in their departments)?

For my focus or voyage in, I asked the naive question: "Why do literary folks have such low regard for composition scholarship?" Then on my new voyage out, I pondered:

Perhaps this is a silly question. It all relates to the history of the profession. Until 100 years ago there was little literary scholarship, and rhetoricians had little respect for literary scholarship because literature seemed to have no structure, no discipline. As literary folks rose to power, they maintained a protective paranoia, which later turned to smugness. Interesting. Very interesting. Will the pendulum swing back? I see signs that it might be beginning to do so, but it's too early to tell.

Duane Roen, Arizona State University

December, 1984. In the newly formed Writing Programs at Stony Brook, where Peter was Director, he talked about a whole new way of thinking about the teaching of writing: process pedagogy. Freewriting, multiple drafts, collaborative writing groups, and the like. At one of the meetings, he noted that publishing student writing often resulted in improved texts, since the students knew the work would be made public.

Taking Peter's words to heart, at the end of the first semester, I published an anthology of writing by students in several classes of EGC 100, a pre-freshman composition course for mostly non-native speakers with little experience in writing in English. I gave a copy to Peter to look at. He returned it to me with a note. It read, "I (and Cami) were so touched by your books of writing from 100. Lovely. That piece about parting from the stone-faced grandmother: what a knockout. And even the illiteracies, rare, are touching. I'm very pleased that you have made such a spirit in your classes. Thanks for all you are doing."

I stared at it and reread it several times, almost in disbelief. Thanks for all you are doing? I was confused. Finally, I understood. It occurred to me that in the twenty-five years I had been teaching, no one in any school, from junior high to high school to the community colleges I worked at, no one, other than my students, had ever thanked me, for anything.

Peter's note exemplified how much he honored, respected, and valued these students and their writing, the teachers and the teaching of writing. He continued to notice and express his appreciation for the work I and others were doing, and it was not long before my teaching practice was transformed.

Peter used to say "a happy teacher is a better teacher." A simple statement, but oh, how profound. His ongoing appreciation of our work provided the support and motivation for five of his seven original faculty to continue working together in the Writing Program for the next fifteen years.

Fran Zak, State University of New York at Stony Brook

Somewhere in the recesses of the 1980s, when Peter was director of the writing program here at Stony Brook, I recall feeling very much burned out teaching—semester after semester—the basic comp requirement, EGC 101. It had begun to feel as though I was processing students, rather than encouraging process in their writing. An assembly line. With Peter, a casual “How’s it going?” in the hallway could be answered honestly. The idea of being collaborators was more than just talk.

“Not great,” was my reaction one particularly dispiriting day. “I feel like I need to change something.”

“Why don’t you try EGC 100?” This was then largely, unofficially, an ESL course. Territory I was unprepared to explore.

“I don’t have any training, any experience with ESL students,” was my reflex reaction.

“Just get them to do a lot of writing,” was Peter’s parry to my caution.

I did, I loved the course, and that simple sentence has resonated in my writing head ever since. Skeptical at first, I soon found that the freewriting, the loopwriting, the emphasis on deferring the impulse toward “correctness,” toward separating the generative process from the editing process, was exactly what these students needed—so bent on grammar, vocabulary, so afraid of making surface mistakes long before they even had a surface. At semester’s end, their course evaluations became pleasantly predictable. Asked what had changed the most, I would see again and again, “I’m not afraid to write anymore,” “I feel less tension,” “I don’t have that anxiety when I start writing.” Of course. It made perfect sense. What held these writers back was the stark fear of making mistakes. They all could recite defining moments of embarrassment, of humiliation in their writing histories. Remove that pressure (not always easy), and there’s the possibility for richness and voice in the writing. It wasn’t, of course, a universal response. Just those who were willing “to do a lot of writing.”

Ron Overton, SUNY—Stony Brook

Journal entry 4-1-85 (My second semester in the doctoral program at Stony Brook).

The Writing and Thinking Institute at Bard College [this past weekend] was a tremendous reinforcement for both my teaching and writing. I was familiar with most of the techniques and strategies of “the Elbow method,” but my participation in the workshop showed me that periodic “practice” of the strategies can be very helpful. The workshop participants were mostly secondary and middle school teachers, some of whom were attending for the second or third time, reinforcing what they had learned at previous workshops. Their interest and enthusiasm about writing and the workshop was contagious. There was a strong sense of community and involvement in all the sessions.

Participants were divided into three groups—two social science groups and one English group. In the English group, we were introduced to freewriting, loopwriting, reader-based and criterion-based feedback, process writing, focused freewriting, and text-rendering. . . . Everybody actively participated in all the activities. In fact, we all become so immersed in what we were doing and in our own writing that questions about classroom implementation became secondary. . . . On Sunday, Leon Botstein, the president of Bard spoke to the group. His commitment to the Writing and Thinking Institute and to getting students involved in their education was inspiring. He explained that Peter Elbow had started the Institute four years before and how it has continued in its commitment to help both students and teachers in the areas of thinking and writing. Botstein and the faculty have high regard and respect for Peter’s work, something that was evident throughout the institute. I was so proud that I had him as a teacher and that I was working with the “demi-god” that they were all worshipping.

Pat Perry, Virginia Commonwealth University

Peter’s stubbornness: I show up to Peter’s office and we sit side by side, looking out at the tennis fields and the hills beyond. I say something despairing: “I can’t write—I’ll never get this chapter done” or “I’ll never finish by June” or “If I do finish it’ll be crap” or “I don’t belong in the academy” or “The people who hired me must have made a mistake.” With extreme patience (only now do I realize how much patience!) and allowing no contradiction, Peter firmly insists: “No, you *can* write—you *will* get this chapter done” and “Yes, you *will* finish” and “No, it will be *great*” and “Yes, you *do* belong” and “No, they made the *right choice*.” Somehow his willing it makes it so.

Erika Scheurer, University of St. Thomas

When Elbow first came to Stony Brook, his idea was to hire writers to teach writing . . . not PhD’s in English but writers, those who practiced what they were to teach. Others said to me, “You don’t have a chance of getting that job,” but to their surprise Peter hired me, a fiction writer, to teach freshman composition, and I’ve continued for eighteen years. In Peter’s program I found myself immersed in a community of talkers. In those first years, led by Elbow, we turned inside out a subject that we’d always taken for granted, posing epistemological questions about the nature of writing, becoming better writers and applying this thinking to teaching. Far from seeking the one true way to teach composition, Peter created a group of experimentalists willing to engage students in a messy and variable process, stressing the importance of this process more than the students’ actual written product. Elbow is a true revolutionary.

Carolyn McGrath, SUNY—Stony Brook

One day I'm worrying a lot about voice and off the shelf I slide *Writing With Power*. Peter opens the voice chapter by talking about being in a men's bathroom, how the echo in the marble stalls (he had been humming) makes him think about resonance. The black box seems to him like a violin, and violins must be broken in by frequent playing before they resonate richly. This leads him to thinking about voice and writing. I read on, caught by the idea of resonance.

But later, much later, I get to thinking about the bathroom part, about how odd and at the same time how remarkable yet unremarked upon it was. In the essay "Me and My Shadow," Jane Tompkins became notorious for mentioning in mid-text that she had to pee. I found it rather intriguing, though I didn't (and don't) know what to make of the fact that *Writing with Power* appeared in 1981 long before Jane Tompkins produced the essay "Me and My Shadow," published originally in 1987 (and reprinted frequently thereafter).

In *Voice Lessons*, Nancy Mairs talks about the feminine, being female, language, the body (French stuff), and how she is a female writer, not the male academic sort. With academic irony, I'm anticipating the day when Peter gets dismissed because he's a feminist; perhaps the connection might explain the rancor I've heard directed against him in professional circles, a subconscious backlash against feminism. On the other hand, maybe being interested in personal writing is damning enough.

The body, voice, authority, being female, giving way to voice, to the pleasures of making text that connects me with others—and I found myself (some five years after reading the bathroom sentence) writing a book about identity and pedagogy that included sections of autobiography about my life as a teacher and teaching a new course on women's personal writing. I finally recognized that for those of us who write it's permissible (maybe even necessary, if we wish to make things happen), although it goes against all our academic training, to try things we're not sure about, to have conflicting views, to work with stuff that slides around, to get personal.

Jane Danielewicz, University of North Carolina

Elbowing the EGC 100 class at Stony Brook produced dividends I could never have anticipated. It was easy travel to distant places, a primer in the various ways a language could be constructed, it was my education in cultural difference. I learned not to take personally the silence-instead-of-class-discussion. I learned not to force small group readers and listeners closer than their index for personal space allowed. That "thumbs up" was not globally positive. That speakers of Mandarin may sit together, and speakers of Cantonese will muster on the other side of the room. And, for the first time, I realized to what extent contemporary American English now depends on idioms, catchphrases, buzzwords, slang. Cool can mean hot, bad can mean good. Is the

antecedent for “it” in “Go for it!” (Thank you, Rocky) the same as the one in “Just do it!” (Thank you, Nike)? We still drive on parkways and park in driveways. Can we say, “It goes without saying”? Can an amateur be proactive? “It’s as easy as a piece of pie” is close, but no cigar.

Peter’s challenge to open up the writing workshop, to (first) write with abandon after kicking the editor out of the room, to understand the process of composition as something far richer and more mysterious than templates like the Baker Essay, than strategically placed thesis statements and well-behaved conclusions—all this made language come alive, made curiosity and discovery possible for all of us and our clashing languages. Moving to the margins of the class, away from the center—writing without teachers—I had more time, a better perspective, to notice, to listen to their language, to mine. As a poet, I became fascinated by how close the twist (the “English”?) some students put on expressions resembled the defamiliarizing work of poetry. A writer describes how she left her elders at the dinner table as “I walked out of their conversation,” and you want to know why that sounds right, sounds even better because it’s “wrong.” Another reflects back on his football mentor: “Coach was an angry man with a Jeep,” and you want to know why that bluntness works so well. “We ran under the raining day.” Do you correct that? Steal it for a poem? (Finally, I stole it.)

EGC 100

At the end
of the story about letting go
the giver of feedback
sternly writes:

You are crazy
You ran under the raining day
You will get cold

I have nothing to teach
either of you.

The words are good,
the concern is right,
as is the pleasure
to be taken from the raining day.

And who am I
to correct Li Ming
who begins:
Time flies fast away

It is the unexpected syntax
of truth,
of poems.

Ron Overton, SUNY—Stony Brook

Peter often talked with some urgency about his desire to help students see themselves as writers. Of all the things we do as teachers, perhaps this—the cultivation of our students' identities, and they of ours—is most central and sustaining. Writing and the teaching of writing are identity-making processes, acts that lead to becoming (not only writers, but any persona or self we can imagine). Few of my students have become writers (the published kind), but all have become someone. Writing and writing teachers have nudged this development along.

The January day I write this it is raining, a freezing rain that minute by minute coats every branch and leaf, every house and car, every rock and street-light pole. The accretion of ice, glitter, beauty, is slow, almost imperceptible, like the growth of these pieces, another word or phrase, another idea, and the shape appears, an outline against the page, the way the dark branches are illuminated by the thin, silvery cover that makes each one distinctive and dimensional. Their shape and meaning emerge in the process of raining and writing.

Jane Danielewicz, University of North Carolina

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