CONFIDENT AND HUMBLE

And Other Contradictions We Live By

There is a genuine paradox here. The positions are conflicting and they are true.

Peter Elbow, “Embracing Contraries in the Teaching Process”

Composition is a world of contradictions. Perhaps our most popular formula for good writing—“clear and concise”—wars with itself: clear usually means more detail, more length. Teachers who don’t recognize the paradoxical nature of our work may get frustrated listening to (or giving) conflicting advice: “Meet with your students as often as possible . . . but you gotta have a life of your own to stay sane.” If we recognize the oxymoronic nature of much composition advice—or, to switch metaphors, the delicate balancing act between extremes—we can search for our own balance point rather than be buffeted from one extreme to the other or become so cynical that we see all advice, all generalizations as meaningless. I will try to sketch out the two sides of some of these contradictions, but don’t expect me to locate the perfect balance point. There may not be one . . . or the balance may be different for each person in each situation.

CLEAR AND CONCISE

This central tension helps make writing so complex and fascinating: on one side, pressures for more length—“complete,” “thorough,” “thoughtful,” “well-reasoned,” “detailed”; on the other, terse words exhorting us to be brief, tight, pithy, succinct. The two sides never call a truce—we’re always looking for the document to be a little shorter and a little more informative. But trying to reach both goals at once can lead us to develop sophisticated writing strategies—making a quick, convincing point with a crisp generalization and a striking example, for instance, or using bullets to get all the information across without repetition. Many people value poetry as the most elevated of the written arts because good poetry, short and deep, reverberates through the consciousness.
Of course, as Elbow points out, some student writers don’t want to be clear or concise; wordiness and lack of clarity may be “part of the ‘writing process’ considered from a wider angle” (1998, 107.) As Elbow says of his own writing, “My syntax never got clearer until I was finally wholehearted in my desire to give myself and my meaning to my readers” (107). I’ve taught smart, successful students who wrote primarily to demonstrate to others the depth of their vocabulary and the width of their education; they viewed clear communication as beneath them. I couldn’t make any headway against that attitude until I understood the contradiction as the student saw it.

GRACEFUL AND POLITICAL

The generic pronoun—“he” used to refer to both sexes—is simple, straightforward writing. No substitute for “Everyone should bring his book” does the job with equal grace and brevity. (To my ear, making the whole sentence plural comes closest.) Similarly, “first-year student” is an awkward mouthful compared to “freshman,” and “humankind” doesn’t roll off the tongue as easily as “mankind.” The writer in me says “be direct and brief.”

But the feminist in me vetoes any word that contributes to the impression that women are subsidiary, afterthoughts. Though I’m torn, I try to use gender-neutral language exclusively and expect my students to do the same. Fortunately, some terms are both graceful and neutral—“chair” instead of “chairman,” “fishers” instead of “fishermen.” But sometimes you have to take a stand. Some colleges demand gender-neutral language, as do some state governments. We all need to get used to it.

Debating the politics and style of gendered pronouns should make students wary of other charged words that we use too readily without thinking about their effects. Why do we never call something “terrorism” when a government does it? For whom is “free trade” really free? Is the “reform” really a step backward?

CREATIVE AND COMPREHENSIBLE

The easiest message to understand is the most familiar. For the American motorist, “Stop” or “Pay Toll Ahead” communicate instantly, unambiguously. Such messages also have no originality, no creativity, no sense of authorship. And that’s just fine; we wouldn’t want our octagonal signs to start saying “Halt” or “Desist.”
But while some of the activities we give our students may ask them in effect to create signs that we’ve all seen a thousand times, most of us, most of the time, ask our students to do original work, perhaps even be creative, push the envelope. Yet to be creative means to experiment, perhaps in nonproductive directions. Some students might want to change the sign to “Put the Kibosh On It” or paint the sign in unreadable psychedelic letters or eliminate the sign altogether just to see what would happen. Occasionally, a particularly creative writer will come up with an original way to be clear, but more often, our students must choose. We need to decide which end of the spectrum we value more and to make clear to students that the choice of ends depends on audience and purpose. If we ask them to be creative one day and comprehensible the next, it’s not that we’re confused or that we’re asking them to do the impossible. We’re exercising abilities that they’ll use throughout their writing lives.

**WRITE FOR YOURSELF/WRITE FOR YOUR AUDIENCE**

When we—and our students—sit down to write an essay, who should our imagined audience be? Any rhetorician will tell you to write for your eventual reader, but many who teach for personal growth and discovery argue that writers must, first, please themselves. (See Elbow’s “Closing My Eyes as I Speak: An Argument for Ignoring Audience.”)

The “first” in that last sentence provides us a little wiggle room in this conundrum. Many writers write first for themselves, with no thought of how they might affect a reader, and only later revise for a specific audience. Though perhaps not the most efficient method, this approach does allow for both the free personal expression of a journal and the audience focus crucial to most communication.

Maybe we should resolve the “Which audience?” dilemma by asking “Which audience motivates the writer?” Sometimes student writers need the safety of writing for themselves or a close friend and will be motivated only if they think no one else will ever read their work. Others may get motivated only if they can imagine writing to a specific audience—the coach they admire or the manufacturer of a defective product. In most classes, we use peer responses to give writers a sense of a local writing community that they can write for and get honest feedback from.

Our students need to understand audiences, recognize that almost all the writing they do during their lives will be directed at particular audiences (almost always multiple for any piece of writing), and gain some
insight into why and how they write for those audiences. What audience they actually focus on is less important.

**DEDUCTIVE AND INDUCTIVE**

How do we teach students general truths? The fastest way is just to tell them—e.g., list the most important factors in making a paper persuasive. That takes a lot less time than inductively searching for factors, and the list may be better—more complete, more accurate—than a list compiled by students trying to generalize from their own experience. But will students remember and believe in your list as thoroughly as in a list they generate themselves?

Rather than just present my conclusions, I usually try to make room for students to draw their own, to practice inferring. If students can, from reading editorials, abstract some rules of persuasive writing, they may be able to draw conclusions about, for instance, how writers in their discipline construct and present knowledge. They need to learn to make sense from their own observations rather than run to a book every time a question arises that they haven’t specifically encountered before.

But what if they don’t reach the obvious, crucial conclusions that we’ve reached? Worse yet, what if they’re wrong? What if they read a couple of essays with surprise endings and conclude that essays should be like detective stories, all false leads and surprises until the end? Their inductive investigation needs to be balanced with direct, deductive instruction, completing, validating, enlarging their ideas. We have no assurance that either method, or any combination of approaches, will work. But teachers need to be aware that these different approaches have different advantages and disadvantages, not all of them readily apparent.

**DIRECTIVE AND STUDENT-CENTERED**

Teachers who work inductively tend to be “student-centered,” a general perspective that appeals to many composition teachers. Student-centered teachers draw answers from students, let them determine the direction of their papers, let them learn the hard way, if necessary. Didn’t you learn most of your skills yourself, with the aid perhaps of a well-timed tip? Each student has a head full of schemata different from his or her neighbor’s, and therefore learns different things in different ways. Student-centered means encouraging students to find their own paths while we get out of the way.
Confident and Humble, and Other Contradictions We Live By

The extreme in teacher-centered teaching, the lecture, has been largely discredited in composition classrooms, and now we strive for the anti-lecture, where students end up explaining their new understanding to their teachers.

But what happens when the students don’t get it? When they’re ready to give up on a paper that just needs a little restructuring? When they’re never going to write better papers until they can get started before midnight? Do we just hope they learn from this semester’s errors and do better next time? Or do we guide them, say “Try this” or “This is where I think you get hung up” or even “I don’t think this paper is going to work”?

Don Murray modeled how to work on the horns of this contradiction. Some readers of his books imagine Don to be Mr. Student-Centered, and certainly his work shows an extraordinary respect for students and their writing. He has always preached “let the student speak first about the paper.” And yet students always came out of Don’s office knowing what he thought. It’s a tricky business, balancing the desire to let the student make decisions about the paper with the need to give the student some direction, some help. I find when I’m particularly pressed for time and/or the semester end draws nigh, I tell the student what I think more often and give more concrete suggestions for improvement. But while students generally thank me for such suggestions and marvel at my ability to see hope and a way out of writing binds, I consider such moments a failure for the writer even if they’re a success for the paper.

I strive to make myself unnecessary for the student writer. Ideally, by the end of the semester students have had enough practice in analyzing and improving their own prose that they no longer have to rely on me or my suggestions. Somewhere in that process, they probably need to be shown that there is a way out of their dilemma—they can say what they want to say and still write an organized paper. But for this particular paper, do they need a model, a demonstration, or the time and space to experiment and figure out their own solutions?

You can’t really go wrong in dealing with this dilemma, even if you go to the extremes. If you solve all of a student’s problems, you’ve helped the student write a better paper and demonstrated that there are solutions. And if you refuse to give the student solutions, you’ve probably helped the student along the path to writing independence.

This apparent contradiction actually has its own logical compromise—instead of being teacher-centered or student-centered, we really want our
courses to be learning-centered. So we choose whatever combinations of methods will bring about learning.

**CHALLENGE STUDENTS AND LOWER ANXIETY**

I always include in my opening-week spiel a promise to reduce anxiety in my course as much as possible. Most students have good reasons to be anxious in English class—they fear the blank page, the red pen, the public humiliation of using “bad” grammar or suggesting a “wrong” interpretation, being criticized for habits that may seem to them as unchangeable as the size of their feet. Some writers argue that they need the anxiety of the imminent deadline to get the words to flow, but I’m suspicious of that rationale and certainly don’t want to encourage it. In the vast majority of situations for the vast majority of writers, anxiety is the enemy of good writing and learning.

Yet we can’t run a college class—at least not after the first few weeks—as though it were first grade, cheering any words that make it onto paper, overlooking invented spellings, rewarding quantity regardless of quality. Some writers *will* improve if they are simply given the time and encouragement to write. But others, particularly better writers, need a push, a challenge, critique peppering the encouragement, a bar raised high enough to require a real leap. And for most people, the challenge of the high bar brings with it anxiety.

To make this balancing act productive rather than paralyzing, we need as much as possible to set ourselves up as coaches, not judges, working with the student to conquer the new height. That means, first, eliminating all the trivial sources of anxiety that set us in opposition to our students—the surprise quizzes, the public humiliation, the red pen. We develop the coaching role through scores of small interactions with each student. For instance, we can frame the student’s recurrent writing problems not as weaknesses or immutable character flaws, but as opportunities for rapid growth and improvement, or as dragons that may have been nightmares in the past but that, with our help, the student can certainly slay now. We challenge student writers most successfully not by setting specific targets or exhorting them, but by forming a relationship based on caring about the student and the student’s writing.

**BE A DEVOTED TEACHER AND HAVE A LIFE**

If you have dreams about being a teacher, if it’s not just a rung on a career ladder that’s headed somewhere else, you probably imagine yourself as
one of those life-changing teachers that you may have experienced in your own past and that you have certainly seen in movies, teachers so devoted to their students that they seem available 24/7, so enthusiastic about their subject that they can rouse even the abused and sullen kid in the corner. We want to be the person that kids turn to before they kill themselves or run off to join a gang. Unfortunately, such devotion leaves no room in life for anything else—those super teachers can’t have spouses and kids of their own, let alone their own interests that might steal a few hours from their thinking about their students.

Teachers who want to work toward the ideal but also have a life figure out their own compromises, but I think generally the secret lies in choosing how, when, and to whom to be devoted. I will not spend hours—or even minutes—on the phone with a student or meet students for lunch or a beer after class. But I do meet every student one-on-one early in the semester, and I give students as much timely written commentary as they can handle, usually responding to emails within hours, trying to get papers back within a couple of days, and writing lengthy critiques if I think the student will make use of them. Each semester, a few students realize how rare and potentially valuable professional feedback can be, and give me draft after draft. I end up spending hours on their work and, from their angle, appearing to be the ultimate devoted teacher. But I don’t spend nearly as much time on students who just want to get by and who don’t seem to read the comments I give them. It’s not exactly that I favor the better students; I’m just willing to match the student’s own energy. Sometimes poor writers invest lots of energy and make major improvements.

Other ways of keeping enthusiasm high while not working yourself to death: choose readings that you love, that you don’t have to reread carefully, and that are reasonably short, “The Death of Ivan Ilych” rather than War and Peace. Don’t always prepare for hours; join students in the fun of exploration. Respond to ungraded writing with a single carefully chosen phrase—“you found a perfect example” or “I see the connection between your mother and Mrs. Hopewell.”

Keep in mind that what students really react to, what makes us “beloved,” is who we are. Students aren’t grading our on-time performance. Their key judgment is something like, “Do I like and respect this person well enough to take seriously what they’re saying?” You’ll be the most likable, the most effective teacher if you take some time off, have a life, and bring the energy and rejuvenation of that life into the classroom. The best teachers live, inside the classroom and out.
CONFIDENT AND HUMBLE

That phrase may express the ideal attitude for any employee, but it has particular meaning for comp teachers because our attitude affects our students so much, and the combination requires such a tricky balancing act.

We need to be confident so we don’t have to endure daily challenges to our authority and ideas, and so we don’t give students the impression that they can dismiss our evaluations as just opinions. The nastiest of students feed off teacher insecurity, leveraging it for better grades and special treatment. And apparent confidence begets real confidence—we grow into the roles we project for ourselves. We need to give the impression that we know what we’re talking about.

On the other hand, many students harbor lingering resentment against know-it-all English teachers who punish anyone who knows less about grammar than they do. An unfortunate number of English teachers attempt to overcome their general sense of powerlessness by asserting their power in the one sphere in which they have some—“correctness.” So an English teacher calls up NPR to tell Dr. Zorba that he should say “healthful” not “healthy,” another writes a letter to the editor outraged at the decadence of putting periods outside quotation marks, many give grammar tests to assert their grading power without slogging into the subjectivist swamp inherent in grading essays.

It doesn’t help for us to be perceived as grammar police. It’s a real triumph for an English teacher to say “I don’t know. I’ll find out.” But if you say it more than once a week, your students may feel that you “don’t know” too much, too often. So there’s the rub—confidence without arrogance, humility without humiliation.

ENTERTAINING AND SERIOUS

How much energy and effort should we put into making our classes fun, engaging, entertaining? Many people would label that question itself absurd, evidence of what’s wrong with education today. English is supposed to be difficult, mysterious, confusing, frustrating—it was in our day, so why should it be different today?

We base our own sense of the right kind of teaching persona almost exclusively, I think, on our teaching models. I had very few entertaining teachers—my best teachers were serious, and they kept things interesting through the power of their ideas, the cleverness of their articulation, the gee-whiz surprise of their connections. Whenever I observe other teachers
now, I’m both impressed by and suspicious of the ones who keep students laughing and on the edge of their seats. Sure, if you show Simpsons clips all day, you’ll get good evaluations, but is any learning going on here?

Luckily, good pedagogy often entertains. Students generally enjoy and learn more from hands-on activities than from lectures; discovering something ourselves thrills us and makes us remember. Obviously, it would be crazy to leave our senses of humor at the classroom door. But if you find yourself doing something just because you think it will amuse—showing movies or illustrating points solely with cartoons—it might be time to rethink.

AUTHORITY AND PEER

Who are we in relation to our students? In most cases, we’re the grade-givers, and therefore the authorities. We need to sit on the highest stool so we don’t argue constantly about grades and mechanics, and part of our pedagogy relies on our students’ paying special attention to what we say. But few comp teachers feel comfortable being just the authority in the classroom; we want to develop a human relationship as well. I know I took my writing most seriously and progressed most when I felt that my writing mattered in the personal/professional relationship with my writing teacher. Students who don’t care about the grade or developing the skill may still care about the relationship.

Besides, most of us teach because we like the human contact, and the higher the stool, the less human you can be. Many of my current friends were once my students, so I don’t feel the gulf between myself and my students that some teachers feel; because I can easily imagine the role distinctions evaporating, I’m inclined to treat students as friends-to-be. That means accepting their excuses for missed classes, being “reasonable” about deadlines, not asking for signed plagiarism statements with every paper. But most people can remember teachers who were too chummy, and being friendly may make it harder when you need to be tough.

Peter Elbow raises interesting questions about one aspect of this relationship, students’ need to resist the dictates of the teacher, discipline, or genre (1998). As teachers, we may find such resistance irritating and perverse, but as Elbow points out, acts of resistance often define us and may be crucial in our intellectual growth. So while it may not feel good to have a student stomp out of our office saying, “I’ll do it my way,” it may be a productive and beneficial moment in the student’s life.

Talk about contradictions: when we feel most hurt, maybe we should applaud.