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.

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