Writing With Elbow

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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.

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