Writing With Elbow

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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). 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). 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. 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, superceded 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 exper-
tise 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 expres-
sivists’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 peda-
gogies 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 unfet-
ter 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 rela-
tion to Jane Tompkins’s words about the classroom stage on which we most tan-
gibly 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 nonex-
pert 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 simul-
taneously resisting long-standing cultural assumptions about what the sociolo-
gist 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 sup-
ports conditions of class stratification and “corporate-sponsored thought” con-
demned (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). 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 perogative 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). 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. 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.