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.