Writing With Elbow

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Deep in Peter Elbow’s thought and work is the belief that we—writers, thinkers, teachers—need to be able to hold in our minds, simultaneously and without conflict, two ideas that are in radical opposition to one another. This is such an extraordinary belief that it is often—perhaps almost always—misunderstood. We have been so conditioned to believe that we should be seeking the Aristotelian golden mean between the extremes that we in a sense marginalize the extreme positions, seeing them not for what they are, but as a necessary frame for the middle ground, a precondition to compromise, settlement, reconciliation. As a result, we are practically incapable of seeing as Peter does and, more particularly, of understanding his work in the light of this belief.

It is tempting to try to connect this element of Elbow’s work with another: his disposition to fight for what he perceives to be the underdog, the view that is likely to be silenced by a dominant, more politically-powerful, received truth. Elbow has said and written again and again that he is not wanting his students to do nothing but personal, autobiographical writing, but that he wants us to make room for some of this writing in our courses. He wants his half of the bed. Here he aligns himself with James Britton, Nancy Martin, and the Schools Council project: as Britton, Martin and their team found, in the upper grades of British schools, students were practically never asked to write expressively, to write from what Britton termed the stance of the “spectator”. Arthur Applebee’s 1981 study found the same to be true in American secondary schools. Elbow has argued as he has because of what he sees as a curricular imbalance: we spend too much of our time preparing student writers for the academic workplace; we spend too little of our time encouraging student writers to make sense of their lives through their writing. In the good writing curriculum, we would do both, and some of each in its most extreme form: absolute freewriting, and absolutely perfect documentation in a researched essay.

Yet this role that Elbow so often takes, the advocate of the silenced, the marginalized, is at odds with his larger aim: to help us move away from advocacy, away from the oppositional, and toward the active and generous belief in the position of the other. His is not the peaceable kingdom, where the lion lies down with the lamb, but a world closer to that envisioned by William Blake,
one in which contraries are necessary if there is to be movement of any kind. The dissonance is to be cherished, to be internalized, to be sustained, reflected on, understood. Winning and losing is not what it is about at all. And neither is tolerance, or reconciliation. War is not an option—think of Elbow’s work with conscientious objectors here—because war is a process that eliminates, silences one side. How, then, can Elbow participate in a conventional academic debate, as in the Bartholomae-Elbow exchanges? He could win this debate only by silencing the other side. It is fitting that the Bartholomae-Elbow debate is kept alive in composition theory readers as a debate, as an argument that will not be won or lost, as a dialogue that calls us to reflection.

What I have learned from working with Peter is how easily I acknowledge the contraries and then move toward the center, toward the compromise. Instead of including, for instance, both ungraded and graded writing in my writing class, I will “sort of” grade everything. So my intended use of both low-stakes and high-stakes writing becomes all middle-stakes; and I and my students lose the virtues of the extremes: we are never entirely free from evaluation, and we are never really, seriously evaluating. Easier for me, but still slippery, is my simultaneous hold on the radically opposed teacher-roles of “coach” and “evaluator.” I need Peter to remind me that when I shift roles I am not betraying myself, or my students. And I note in passing how rhetorical, how dramatistic this approach to teaching is: multiple and conflicting roles to be played by the teacher and, therefore, by students as well. When I feel that I am, in my essence, my essential self, a coach and that in grading students I violate that self, Peter’s advice to me denies the essence or redefines it: I am many things, some in absolute conflict with others, and I should cherish, nourish, exploit, continually examine these oppositions that are, in all senses of the word, essential. Given that I often feel that I am a natural coach, Peter would ask me to look hard at what I do and see that I am also, naturally, the opposite of coach: the grader, evaluator, the stickler for standards. It is true—there is something in me that really hates bad writing! And this multiplicity is not just OK; it is just what it should be. I am, naturally, both coach and evaluator. The trick is to keep both roles as clean as I can: be the pure coach when that seems appropriate, be the pure evaluator when that seems right, and not slide toward the middle ground.

My struggle to enact Peter’s theory in the classroom is mirrored by the authors in this section, as they struggle to come to terms with the complexity of his thought. Cy Knoblauch and Lil Brannon take on what seems to be Elbow’s attack on those who call themselves followers of Paulo Freire but do not follow his teachings. Elbow’s 1973 essay, “The Pedagogy of the Bamboozled,” reprinted in Embracing Contraries (1986), is a complex, many-voiced argu-
ment against what Elbow sees as the duplicity of those who declare themselves critical teachers but do not come clean about the power relations that exist in their classrooms and in the institutions in which they teach. Knoblauch and Brannon argue that in this piece Elbow does not embrace contraries, does not balance doubt and belief, but unfairly tips the scales against critical pedagogy, making it seem too fraught with contradictions—not as applied by Freire, but as applied by teachers of middle-class students in America’s suburban schools. Knoblauch and Brannon admit to finding themselves to a degree baffled by the complexity of Elbow’s argument—is his tongue in his cheek? And if so, when? Is this an attack—or a game? Yet if critical pedagogy is to have its half of the bed, Elbow must be taken seriously and his arguments answered. They offer, therefore, a detailed response to his arguments and a passionate defense of critical pedagogy, which they see as a “Pedagogy for the Bamboozled,” a force for change in a society, an economy, and a culture that is entirely too sure of its own success.

Thomas O’Donnell takes Elbow’s work with doubt and belief and pushes it further, “marking a distinction between doubting as an activity and doubt as a reaction to a claim.” He finds a connection between Elbow’s way of reading students’ writing and the work of the ordinary language philosophers, in particular J. L. Austin. For these philosophers, the meaning of a word lies in its use by ordinary speakers in real-life situations. For instance, to discover the different meanings of accident and mistake, we need to imagine ourselves into situations where we would use first the one and then the other of these two terms. O’Donnell sees Elbow’s reading of student writing as an attempt to live inside—to imagine—the world created by the student’s language—an acting out of the believing game, a taking on of the other. When, as Elbow reads, he encounters difficulty in this attempt to imagine, he is made to doubt, and this doubt becomes the center of a comment to the writing—not a comment that seeks to disprove, but one that explores a moment of dissonance and asks the writer to go back and re-think, revise.

M. Elizabeth Sargent looks at Elbow’s essay “The Doubting Game and the Believing Game,” published as an “appendix essay” to Writing Without Teachers (1973), as one of our field’s foundational documents and therefore long past due a careful rereading. She finds that throughout his career Elbow has misread or misrepresented Polanyi, to whose work he has often acknowledged an intellectual debt. Sargent argues that Polanyi would not present believing as a “game,” nor would he see the tacit dimension as a kind of “magic,” as Elbow on occasion calls it, a faculty opposed to the rational. For Polanyi, Sargent tells us, “believing can never be as detached or as reversible as Elbow’s formulation of it as a ‘game’ or ‘method’ suggests.” Elbow’s practice as
a teacher, she believes, lies closer to the heart of Polanyi than does his theory, particularly that articulated in “The Doubting Game and the Believing Game.” For Elbow, as for Polanyi, she argues, belief is primary, a necessary first move: a belief that you will have something to say (freewriting) and a belief that a student writer has something to say (attentiveness). Elbow’s critics, Sargent concludes, sense Elbow’s implicit advocacy of the need to believe, and they simply can’t accept this fundamental premise because it threatens their present practice and the structures that support it.

George Kalamaras leaves western civilization to understand Elbow, finding an analogue for Elbow’s theory in traditions of meditation in Eastern thought. Kalamaras has come to understand Elbow through his own deep experience of Eastern meditative tradition, where “embracing contraries yields a consciousness nonattached to either pole of an apparent contradiction, but, rather, a deepening attentiveness to their reciprocal interaction.” No western dualism this, but a deepening attentiveness: contradiction is complement, not conflict. So, from this perspective, as Bartholomae and Berlin doubt aspects of Elbow’s work, they enact his belief that two heads are better than one. What is generally understood as debate thus becomes “cooking,” a process that draws on multiple ingredients to produce a dish superior in taste to that of any of its components. Kalamaras traces his own journey from his first readings of Elbow as a dualistic thinker to his subsequent re-reading of Elbow in the light of his own experience of the meditative traditions of the East. In an instantiation of yin-yang, the reciprocal interaction of contraries, Kalamaras finds that his re-reading of Elbow’s work has, in its turn, “deepened my understanding of the dynamic interplay within Eastern meditative practices.”

The flaw in Elbow’s theory, as Sargent sees it, is that he has not completely reconciled in his own mind his deep, instinctive faith in the primacy of belief, what he and Polanyi call the “fiduciary transaction,” and his position that believing and doubting are contraries that must be equally embraced. Her construction of Elbow gets at the opponent that Knoblauch and Brannon feel behind the mask, the rhetor whose arguments must be struck down if critical pedagogy is to flourish. Sargent’s construction of Elbow resonates, too, with O’Donnell’s need to limit and sharpen our understanding of Elbow’s own practice of the doubting game. Beside these versions of Elbow stands George Kalamaras’s Elbow, who, like the Elbow of Lucile Burt’s poem (opening this volume), is thinking beyond the envelope, seeing doubt and belief, like yin and yang, as inseparable elements in an organic whole.