Writing With Elbow
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With every year that passes, I become more and more aware of the profound impact Peter Elbow’s work has had on my theory and practice of teaching writing. But I also find myself wondering nearly as often why Elbow’s work doesn’t always get the serious attention it deserves—to mention one particularly incomprehensible instance of this, his complete absence from a lengthy bibliography of the field which Andrea Lunsford produced for MLA in 1992. I’ve finally concluded that Elbow’s powerful misreading of Michael Polanyi’s influential work may be partly to blame. Elbow quite simply gives too much away—by his own standards—when he writes about believing as a game and about the “tacit dimension” (Polanyi’s phrase) as magic, opposing it to reason (Writing With Power xxii, xxvi). It was precisely here, in altering and widening our definition of the rational to include—as central and necessary, not peripheral—the tacit and belief, that Polanyi’s major contribution was located.

I take Elbow seriously as a theorist: his work deserves the most careful theoretical discriminations we’re capable of making, with a close attention to chronology and change in his thought. In examining one of the founding documents in our field, a text that exists in two closely related but distinct forms—“The Doubting Game and the Believing Game: An Analysis of the Intellectual Enterprise” and the later “Methodological Doubting and Believing”—and the extent to which both were influenced by Polanyi’s work, I am concerned not just with setting the record straight, but with the continuing fruitful development of our discipline. In all fields, scholars go over and over foundational documents to tease out every nuance, paying particular attention to moments where the thought seems to take a wrong turn or grow tangled. Similarly, we need to give Elbow’s doubting and believing essays the meticulous reading and

Recurring references to works by Polanyi and Elbow will be abbreviated in the text as follows: “The Doubting Game and the Believing Game”—“DGBG.”; Embracing Contraries—EC; Everyone Can Write—ECW; Knowing and Being—KB; Meaning—M; “Methodological Doubting and Believing”—“MDB”; “Polanyian Perspectives”—“PP”; Personal Knowledge—PK; Science, Faith and Society—SFS; The Tacit Dimension—TD; Writing With Power—WWP; Writing Without Teachers—WWT
critical rereading they deserve. This essay attempts one such rereading, attending to difficult intersections with Polanyi’s theory, because chasing the thought back to the source of the difficulty might give us a chance to start over and carry the thought forward in a more productive direction. If we are able to do this, we can do so only because of the particular way in which Elbow misread Polanyi, only because of his sensitivity to a particular line in Polanyi’s thought and the generosity with which Elbow has expressed his indebtedness to Polanyi’s work.

Consider, for example, one of the passages Elbow cites, in which Polanyi argues that our use of language is itself sufficient to reveal that belief is the crucial and primary power of the human mind:

A child could never learn to speak if it assumed that the words which are used in its hearing are meaningless. Or even if it assumed that five out of ten words so used are meaningless. And similarly no one could become a scientist unless he presumes that the scientific doctrine and methods are fundamentally sound, and that their ultimate premises can be unquestioningly accepted. We have here an instance of the process described epigrammatically by the Christian church fathers in the words *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith in search of understanding. (*SFS* 45)

The Hungarian-born medical-doctor-turned-research-scientist Michael Polanyi published these words in 1946 in his first book, two years before he officially shifted his focus to philosophy of science and epistemology by exchanging his chair in Physical Chemistry at the University of Manchester for a chair in Social Studies. Peter Elbow read Polanyi’s *Personal Knowledge* (1958) in the late 1960s; and certainly anyone familiar with Polanyi’s work would be struck by the extraordinary echoes of Polanyi everywhere present in Elbow’s *Writing Without Teachers* (1973), but most obviously in Elbow’s appendix essay to that volume (“DGBG”).

In the recent reissue of *Writing Without Teachers* (*WWT*), Elbow—in a new introduction—acknowledges his intellectual debts, the formative reading that fed into that early book. To use a phrase from David Bartholomae, Elbow’s early published pages were “crowded with others” (“Writing” 63): Elbow lists seventeen by name, from Ken Macrorie to Peter Medawar, from Carl Rogers to Jerome Bruner. But the second name on this long list is Polanyi’s:

His rich and monumental book *Personal Knowledge* made a huge impression on me when I read it. . . . I learned more from him than it would be easy to say, but certainly I owe a large debt for my thinking about the believing game; he talks about the “fiduciary character of doubt.” He stresses the need to make use of what is tacit, unarticulated, and known by the body. He provides a larger picture of rationality and knowing. (xxviii)
In a little-known essay on Polanyi published in 1991, Elbow goes a bit further:

I read Polanyi a long time ago. . . . I’m indeed embarrassed at how deeply I had internalized and perhaps not credited his thinking. (“PP” 5)

Then, commenting on the passage above from SFS, Elbow continues,

The Polanyian phrase is “fiduciary transaction,” which suggests the act of belief that’s necessary, that underlies any act of knowing. I cite Polanyi in my doubting and believing essay (EC 258), but I see now that merely citing him doesn’t do justice to the degree to which I had simply internalized his point and was essentially borrowing it. And the “fiduciary transaction” is central to my teaching. When I write and when I try to help my students write, the necessary thing is the act of trusting it, the act of believing it. Freewriting is an act of believing that meaning will come. (8)

Elbow explicitly mentions Polanyi in WWT only twice (173, 189), yet Polanyi’s influence is clear on almost every page. What I want to do here is suggest, first, how accurate Elbow is when he says he had deeply “internalized” and “not credited” Polanyi’s thinking (even at those moments when he quarrels with it), and second, how, nevertheless, his formulation of the believing and doubting games is significantly at odds with Polanyi’s insights. For Polanyi, believing can never be as detached or as reversible as Elbow’s formulation of it as a “game” or a “method” suggests. Elbow’s take on Polanyi may have been strategically necessary and effective at the time, but I’ll argue that some of the continuing resistance to Elbow’s work grows out of two reactions: an uneasiness with Elbow’s wavering theory of knowledge, and, an underlying sense that deep un-game-like beliefs are being asserted or threatened.

In doing so, I won’t be able to claim that I’m taking up the full challenge Elbow issues in his new introduction to WWT: yes, I hope to engage “at the theoretical level” with the substance of his argument about “the epistemological strengths of the doubting and believing games,” but I can’t promise to do so by “using the doubting game or critical thinking . . . on [his] argument to see what we can learn” (xxv–xxvii), at least not in the way that Elbow means those terms. My thinking has been irreversibly shaped by both Polanyi’s and by Elbow’s; this does not mean that I am unable to answer back to them or to raise questions about parts of their intellectual frameworks, but I can do so (as Polanyi says in relation to the language in which we think and speak and write) only by relying acritically on the rest of those frameworks as I analyze or criticize one part of them at a time. In fact, some of the critiques of his own work, which Elbow describes but dismisses as having misunderstood or misrepresented what he was saying (xxvi–xxvii in “Introduction to the Second Edition” of WWT), fail precisely because they have not believed or indwelt Elbow’s
work enough. Elbow, characteristically, might hope to have it both ways—to have a thoroughgoing doubting of his argument that nevertheless fully understood it—but I’m not sure that he can.

In an attempt to make explicit Elbow’s debts to Polanyi—and to highlight what I see as the uneasiness of those debts—I lay out below eight theses on how *Writing Without Teachers* builds from *Personal Knowledge*.1

1. Without Belief, There Would Be No Knowledge

The insistence on belief in Polanyi’s *Personal Knowledge* clearly influenced the appendix essay in *WWT*, on the third page of which Elbow echoes Polanyi’s often-repeated use of Augustine’s formulation *credo ut intelligam*—“I believe in order to understand” (*PK* 266)—although Elbow mistakenly attributes it to Tertullian, who actually said, “I believe it because it’s impossible.”2 Of course, Tertullian would leap to mind in relation to the *Through the Looking Glass* epigraph with which Elbow opens both versions of the doubting and believing essay—“sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.” An emphasis on the role of belief in all knowing is central to both Elbow and Polanyi but is also the site of their primary disagreement (and in ways that correspond closely to Elbow’s revealing confusion between Augustine and Tertullian here); I will return to the role of belief at the end of this essay.

2. Doubt Has Been Overvalued as The Only Way to Arrive at Trustworthy Knowledge

“The Critique of Doubt” is the title of the ninth chapter of *PK*. Clearly, when Elbow announces on the third page of his *WWT* appendix that “this essay is an extended attack on the doubting game” (149), he is linking his project with Polanyi’s. He emphasizes that “somehow the doubting game has gained a monopoly on legitimacy in our culture”; since Descartes, we have come to believe that “the way to proceed to the truth was to doubt everything” (150). The result is that an intellectual who doubts in the twentieth century is seen to be “rigorous, disciplined, rational and tough-minded” (151).

The echoes from Polanyi’s “Critique of Doubt” are remarkable:

It has been taken for granted throughout the critical period of philosophy that the acceptance of unproven beliefs was the broad road to darkness, while truth was approached by the straight and narrow path of doubt. We were warned that a host of unproven beliefs were instilled in us from earliest childhood. . . . We were urged to resist the pressure of this traditional indoctrination by pitting against it the principle of philosophic doubt. Descartes had declared that universal doubt should purge
his mind of all opinions held merely on trust and open it to knowledge firmly
grounded in reason....The method of doubt...trusts that the uprooting of all vol-
tuntary components of belief will leave behind unassailed a residue of knowledge
that is completely determined by the objective evidence. Critical thought trusted
this method unconditionally for avoiding error and establishing truth. (PK 269)

However, Elbow—in both “DGBG” and in “MDB”—differs from Polanyi in
presenting doubt and belief as equal opposing binaries, both effective methods
for establishing the truth. Polanyi’s project is to reveal how inadequate “the
method of doubt” is for the production of knowledge; he continues the above
passage in this way:

I do not say that during the period of critical thought this method has been always,
or indeed ever, rigorously practiced—which I believe to be impossible—but merely
that its practice has been avowed and emphatic, while its relaxation was marginal
and acknowledged only in passing. (269–70)

By the time of Embracing Contraries thirteen years later, Elbow declares a
fuller disagreement with Polanyi on the issue of doubt and belief (contrast
“MDB” 267–68 with PK 272–73, 276), but it’s clear even from this early point
(“DGBG”) that Elbow is willing to grant more powers to systematic doubt
than Polanyi ever is.

3. When We Say That a Theory or a Finding Will Be Fruitful, We Are Saying We
Believe It to Be True

Elbow’s second direct mention of Polanyi in “DGBG” comes near its close:

People like Thomas Kuhn and Michael Polanyi give an account of the history of sci-
tence to the effect that...important cruxes are settled by something very like the
believing game....At a period of scientific revolution—when competing paradigms
or models are up for grabs—it is as it is with readings of a poem: the wrong para-
digm is not proven wrong; rather [scientists] perceive another one as more fruitful
and indeed truer. They perceive this truth from within it, not from without. (189–90)

Elbow rightly adds “and indeed truer,” recognizing Polanyi’s impatience
with those who would use circumlocutions to avoid acknowledging their
reliance on a theory or a finding to do their intellectual work—referring, for
instance, to the beauty or elegance or explanatory power or fruitfulness of a
theory instead of to its truth (PK 147). But Elbow significantly does not qualify
his use of the word “fruitful” as Polanyi would: Polanyi insists that it is the
“intimation of a theory’s fruitfulness” to science, not the fruitfulness itself, that
is a primary criterion for scientific truth (148). That is, we must be willing to
admit we are trusting an intimation of the fruitfulness of a hypothesis, based on our informed judgment, since we cannot know ahead of time whether a particular theory will be fruitful or not: “At the stage when we have to make up our minds about the merits of a discovery its future repercussions are still unknown” (147–48). Polanyi argues that the trained instincts and intimations of the scientist—indeed, of an explorer in any field—play a key role in the selection of productive problems to work on and lines of inquiry to follow. Elbow, however, insists from the start that we must not select: “Believe all the assertions. If you merely look through the pile and pick out what seems truest, that would be the guessing game or the intuition game, not the believing game” (148). We will return to this important disagreement between Polanyi and Elbow below, noting here simply that for Polanyi random guessing and trained intuition would be distinct behaviors.

4. Explicit Knowledge Always Relies on Tacit Knowledge and on Distinctions Between What Is “Focal” and What Is “Subsidiary”: Thus, Indwelling Is “The Very Mechanism for Knowing” (“DGBG” 173)

Elbow nowhere uses Polanyi’s term “indwelling” in “DGBG,” but when he contrasts the doubting game—dedicated to the attempt to “extricate the self” from the propositions being tested—to the believing game—“built on the idea that the self cannot be removed: complete objectivity is impossible” (172)—he makes his other explicit reference to Polanyi:

It takes practice over time . . . to learn to “project” more in the good sense—to see more of what’s really there by getting more of the self into every bit of it. . . . The believing game is built on the idea that you can’t get away from projection since it is the very mechanism for knowing and seeing—and that the culprit is not projection but inflexible and limited projection. . . . The believing game emphasizes a model of knowing as an act of constructing, an act of investment, an act of involvement: what Michael Polanyi calls “the fiduciary transaction.” (171, 173)

For Elbow, the impossibility of objectivity is closely related to the nature of perception, to the fact that both thinking and perceiving are “active and constructional” (171).⁴ Yes, the active shaping nature of perception and the necessity of indwelling make mistakes inevitable, but they also make knowledge possible. However, by the time Elbow publishes Writing With Power eight years later, indwelling has become an emotional, even magical, practice, as Elbow’s description of “a more magical view . . . this act of putting-yourself-in” (368) makes clear. Polanyi, however, emphasizes that the way we use tools—focusing not on how the hammer hits our palm with varying pressure, but on where the hammer hits the nail—is structurally identical to how we use all intellectual
tools, everything from microscopes to telescopes to X-rays to language. All of our knowing has this from-to structure: that is, we are relying on something subsidiarily, often tacitly, pouring ourselves out into it, while we focus on whatever it is we want to know or discover. If we suddenly shift focus—concentrate, say, on how the wooden handle of the hammer touches our palm—we momentarily lose our ability to hit the nail. Elbow’s emphasis on freewriting owes a great deal to this distinction between the focal and the subsidiary in Polanyi’s work, as Elbow himself acknowledged fifteen years after WWT, reflecting on a key passage in PK:

“We pour ourselves out into [our tools] and assimilate them as parts of our own existence. We accept them existentially by dwelling in them. . . . Our subsidiary awareness of tools and probes can be regarded now as the act of making them form a part of our own body” (PK 59). Then [Polanyi] makes one more turn into the next paragraph: “Hammers and probes can be replaced by intellectual tools.” That is, we use words and language as tools in the same way. I take the hammer, I take the cane, and in a sense I pour my body out into the end of the thing so I don’t feel like I’m touching the hammer or the cane but rather the nail or the street. I do the same self-pouring into language. This seems a potent, pregnant theme in Polanyi; I’m struck in retrospect with how much I got from it and how it informs what I do. . . . Freewriting: pouring yourself into the act of writing, indwelling in the tool. (“PP” 6–7)

Polanyi’s distinctions between focal and subsidiary awareness helped Elbow articulate one of his crucial insights, the necessity of separating the composing process from the editing process. However, Elbow wavers between wanting to reproduce the old binaries Polanyi set out to discredit and redefine—between objective and subjective knowledge, between rational and emotional/magical ways of knowing—and wanting to acknowledge, as Polanyi insists we must, indwelling as a deeply rational, structural principle on which all knowing depends.

5. The Languages We Are Born Into Inevitably Immerse Us in Theories about the Nature of Reality, Simultaneously Limiting Us and Equipping Us to Think Further, Even to Challenge Those Theories.

According to Polanyi, it is the interplay between these two kinds of awareness, focal and subsidiary—the shifting of our focus from our meaning to our symbols and back again—that extends our powers of thought. Carefully defining articulation (language) to include all symbolic representations, from maps to mathematical formulas to words, Polanyi argues that temporarily focusing on our tools, on an element that was previously subsidiary—to complicate or challenge or refine or explain it—can lead to important discoveries (PK 115).
Alternating between using our symbols as tools and attending to them “represents in miniature the whole range of operations by which articulation disciplines and expands the reasoning powers of man” (131). Thus, while Polanyi’s primary aim—like Elbow’s—is to allow us to trust language, to dwell in it, to pour ourselves into our tools to get work done, his epistemology (again, like Elbow’s) also requires that we challenge language, that we examine our tools, improve them, or toss them out and get new ones. But he insists we can never challenge all of them at once: a full-scale doubting of our entire socially created symbolic framework would render us imbeciles (295).

Elbow, too, argues that the rules for meaning building are tacit: they “are not explicitly set down and agreed to. . . . Our rules for building meaning into words are unspoken and are learned by doing” (“DGBG” 154). While there is a constant tension between what an individual wants words to mean and what various overlapping speech communities are willing to let them mean at that moment, language also has to follow certain other guidelines—economy, flexibility, redundancy, ambiguity (see 167, 157). The debts to Polanyi’s fifth chapter, “Articulation”—(PK 77–117), which draws on the work of linguists to engage “in an epistemological reflection on the relation of language to its inarticulate roots” (77 n.1), are stated explicitly in Elbow’s 1988 talk at MLA (“PP”), but they are also clear in WWT. Polanyi, like Elbow, insists on the necessary imprecision of language—since language must be flexible enough to be applied to new experience—and on our inability ever to get outside it. As contemporary critics have pointed out from other vantage points, language writes us. Polanyi puts it this way: every word we learn and use is a theory about the nature of reality (see PK 80–81, 104–5, 95).

6. All Knowing Is Inherently Social

Elbow argues that both the believing and the doubting games are inherently social (176). Throughout WWT runs the assumption that writing and language are social activities, that words have meaning only within speech communities, and that these meanings are constantly shifting slightly as we talk and write to each other. The teacherless writing class is dedicated to the principle that “when an individual speaker means things by a set of words which the community of listeners does not ‘hear,’ he tends to give in to the community and stop meaning those things by those words” (154)—with the important exception, of course, of the powerfully original writer who makes us hear “in an utterance what [we] never used to hear in it” (155).

As a scientist, Polanyi naturally pays particular attention (in Chapter 7, “Conviviality”) to the complex workings of the scientific community in policing and preserving the integrity of science: the convivial nature of knowledge
involves overlapping networks of mutual control that exist within and between disciplines. In fact, Frank Kermode and Wayne Booth both, like Elbow before them, draw on this aspect of Polanyi’s thought in relation to the idea of consensus in interpretative communities (see Art, 157–61, 168–84; Dogma 120). Polanyi emphasizes the social, communal nature of all knowledge and the necessity for challenging and revising each other’s findings; while individuals do challenge the scientific community (indeed, the growth of science depends on their doing so), they can’t challenge all of it at once—and they can only mount an effective challenge after serious apprenticeship and submission to science and identification with most of its skills, standards, and concerns (PK 206–8; cf. EC 96–97).

7. All Knowing Is Rooted in the Body

To ask how I would think if I were brought up outside any particular society is as meaningless as to ask how I would think if I were born in no particular body, relying on no particular sensory and nervous organs (PK 322–23).

In his new introduction to WWP, Elbow stresses the importance of Sondra Perl and Eugene Gendlin’s contributions to our thinking about “felt sense,” about our ability to sense where we connect with meaning in the body (xvi); but ten years earlier, he had already made the connections he saw between Polanyi’s work and theirs explicit, citing PK (71):

The famous word in Polanyi’s work, of course, is “tacit”…. Polanyi is getting at the fact that what we can say rests on a foundation of what we can’t say. He talks at length in Chapters 4 and 5 of Personal Knowledge about the paradox that what humans achieve through language actually rests on a root ability that we share with animals and infants—the root ability to simply match a sign or symbol with an experience. . . . Polanyi wants us to honor and develop and dignify the inarticulate. Gendlin and Perl have developed a teaching practice that trains people when they put out words to stop for a minute and say, “Wait, is that what I wanted to say?” Eugene Gendlin’s work, focusing on the bodily dimensions of that question (which of course fits Polanyi too), suggests for writers a reflective routine. . . . A related teaching practice is freewriting, writing out of inarticulateness, writing when you don’t yet know what you want to say and trusting it—plunging into the unknown. The practice of freewriting follows from this Polanyian insight about the priority and fecundity of the inarticulate. . . . In short, we know more than we can say. (“PP” 5–6)

Elbow clearly found Polanyi’s emphasis on the “bodily roots of all thought” (TD 15; cf. KB 147–48, 183–85), on the physical roots of language, congenial. The inseparability of mind and body is central to Polanyi’s work: “To a disembodied intellect, entirely incapable of lust, pain or comfort, most of our vocabulary
would be incomprehensible” (PK 99). But for all his emphasis on the personal, bodily, social, and limited nature of all knowing, Polanyi’s stress—like Elbow’s—is on how we can arrive at trustworthy knowledge. Polanyi sees all knowing existing on a continuum between the knower and the known, the person discovering/creating/upholding knowledge on one end and the claim/discovery/creation itself at the other. He never abandons what he refers to as the “universal pole” of personal knowledge: skillful knowing claims to reveal something about reality, and “any presumed contact with reality inevitably claims universality” (313). A believer in socially constructed knowledge—Polanyi would say there is no other kind—he simultaneously insists that this constructed knowledge is not whimsical or arbitrary: in any search for truth, the freedom of the discoverer/producer of knowledge “to do as he pleases is overruled by the freedom of the responsible person to act as he must” (309). Knowledge is always simultaneously both created and discovered in Polanyi’s epistemology; Elbow speaks in similar terms in “MDB” when he suggests that the interpretation of texts, hermeneutics, is a useful model for all knowledge, a paradigm revealing the world as always, simultaneously, both “given” and “made up” by perceivers (298).

8. The Hunger for Certainty Should Not Be Confused with the Search for Truth

“What kind of truth do you need?” Elbow asks in the appendix essay:

There is a dirtier and a cleaner truth, and the believing game settles, much of the time, for the dirtier kind: truth mixed with error. . . . There is a contrast here between the thirst for certainty and an acceptance of uncertainty and ambiguity. The doubting game . . . tends to confuse certainty with truth. This confusion is so widespread that many people equate the two. (“DGBG” 177, 179)

Indeed, Polanyi argues in PK that “truth mixed with error” is all we have: there is no “cleaner” kind. Since we would have no truth, no knowledge, not even any facts, without people who were committed to and upholding that truth or that knowledge or those facts and since we could always conceivably be mistaken, in whole or in part, no truth is certain. Polanyi talks about three factors that jointly determine scientific value, that is, how precious a particular hypothesis or finding is to science: (1) certainty (precision or accuracy); (2) systematic relevance; and (3) intrinsic interest. He argues that science can be very precise indeed about many things that are not in and of themselves very interesting to science, let alone to anyone else, and that within scientific fields these “three criteria apply jointly, so that deficiency in one is largely compensated for by excellence in the others” (136):

The scientific value of biology is maintained at the same level as that of physics by the greater intrinsic interest of the living things studied, though the treatment is much less exact and coherent. (139)
Polanyi then extends these values to all disciplines, arguing that each discipline has a kind of precision natural and appropriate to it and is thus equally valuable to human knowledge. Absolute certainty or precision is worth little indeed in the absence of the other two values. Elbow appreciated Polanyi’s insistence on appropriate forms of precision in different fields of inquiry:

Though the believing game produces less precision, what I wish to stress here is that it does represent a huge advance in precision over undisciplined thinking. And that using the doubting game in the realm where it doesn’t work is nothing but undisciplined thinking. (“DGBG” 173–74)

Elbow connects this hunger for certainty with the “itch for closure,” our impatience for answers, our unwillingness to dwell in uncertainties, complexities, contradictions: the parallel with Keats’s “negative capability” is close. All of WWT is an extensive, carefully articulated, and effective heuristic device designed to help writers resist the urge for too-early closure and for spurious forms of certainty. Thus, as with any heuristic device, its only true readers are those who, in the words of Elbow’s dedication, “actually use it—not just read it,” who fully test its usefulness in practice, who, in Polanyian terms, indwell it long enough to make it a fully operative extension of their bodies or use it as a lens to look through (M 36–37; Elbow, incidentally, also uses the metaphor of the lens, “MDB” 283, 299).

However, of course, once a reader has done this, the existential change, the change in his or her being, is irreversible. It is on this issue in particular—the irreversible nature of indwelling, tacit knowing, and belief—that Polanyi and Elbow part company.

Insofar as the late 1960s began the last three decades of intense scholarly activity in the field of rhetoric and composition, Elbow is one of the founders of that field. He worked out some crucial concepts for the discipline in reaction to Polanyi’s thought; like all founders, he got many things right and some wrong. Polanyi functions here as a similar authority in another field, an epistemologist who got certain things wrong and many right—for example, his later work with Harry Prosch on literature and metaphor (in M) is frustratingly unsatisfactory: he could have learned a lot from Elbow. My own experience using Elbow’s theories and practices in the classroom over the past fifteen years has convinced me that they work—and not because of Elbow’s account of how they work, but because of Polanyi’s. I’m also convinced that it’s a matter of some importance that we figure out not only that Elbow’s methods work, but why.
In the eight theses above, I’ve argued that Elbow drew on Polanyi for his formulation of the doubting and believing games, in *WWT* in particular. In *Embracing Contraries*, a collection of essays written between 1965 and 1986, Polanyi’s influence is still clear: he is cited only five times throughout *EC*, but as in *WWT*, his thinking leaves its mark throughout. And the final essay in that book, “Methodological Doubting and Believing: Contraries in Inquiry,” in its very title reveals the continuing debt to, argument with, and backing away from Michael Polanyi’s thought. The project of “attacking” doubt has been softened in the second version (contrast “MDB” 258 with “DGBG” 149); the emphasis on hermeneutics, the interpretation of texts, as paradigmatic for all knowledge has been heightened. Elbow has a more assured sense of his epistemological project in the second version (300), claiming that in the absence of certainty, our task is to find “valid” or “trustworthy knowledge” (296—the echoes of Booth are strong here). However, what seems from the essay’s title to have been meant as a great stride forward—believing and doubting systematically, methodologically—was in fact present in the earlier essay (“Believe all the assertions,” 148; cf. p. 10 above)—and underscores the major differences between Elbow’s views and Polanyi’s.

Polanyi worked to accredit a scientist’s trained intuitive ability to select, to ask good questions, and to identify worthwhile problems: any systematic attempt to believe everything would be irresponsible, a waste of scientific resources (*PK* 124). Polanyi argues that we have to accredit our ability within our individual disciplines to recognize what counts as a serious hypothesis within our field and to make decisions—decisions which, of course, could always be mistaken—about which hypotheses deserve further investigation. Elbow’s emphasis on believing as a systematic game disregards the limitations on our believing time and energy.

Unlike Elbow, Polanyi warns us from the start that “Personal knowledge is an intellectual commitment, and as such inherently hazardous” (viii). Precisely because of the bodily roots of all thought, the way we place our bodies in space and time makes irreversible changes in us—we arrive at discoveries already committed to them:

> The change is irrevocable. . . . Having made a discovery, I shall never see the world again as before. My eyes have become different; I have made myself into a person seeing and thinking differently. I have crossed a gap, the heuristic gap which lies between problem and discovery. (143)

Further, once we *do* see differently, nothing can relieve us of the responsibility of acknowledging the assumptions on which we rely to guide our thinking from that point on. In his section on “The Critique of Doubt,” Polanyi argues
that modern science is a system of beliefs just as circular and unassailable by
doubt as the superstitions of the Azande tribe (288 ff.); nevertheless, he affirms
that he and his fellow scientists believe that the framework of contemporary
science offers them a closer relation to reality than the beliefs of the Azande do.
He does not argue that he and his fellow scientists are wrong to do this—only
that they must responsibly acknowledge that they cannot themselves (and
could not, ever) prove irrefutably all of the scientific assumptions upon which
they rely. Further, within the framework of modern science, controversies
develop that cannot be solved by carefully presenting one’s irrefutable data:

Formal operations relying on one framework of interpretation cannot demonstrate
a proposition to persons who rely on another framework. Its advocates may not even
succeed in getting a hearing from these, since they must first teach them a new lan-
guage, and no one can learn a new language unless he first trusts that it means
something. (151; cf. SFS 45)

Thus, Polanyi argues, it can be extraordinarily difficult to “persuade others
to accept a new idea in science”:

[T]o the extent to which it represents a new way of reasoning, we cannot convince
others of it by formal argument, for so long as we argue within their framework, we
can never induce them to abandon it. (PK 151)

No list of good reasons (cf. Booth)—no matter how full, how long, or how
good—is ever sufficient to force someone across a logical gap into a new intel-
lectual framework. Elbow may be right that only a stance something like what
he calls the believing game—some imaginative willingness to indwell a new way
of seeing, to take the time to learn a new language—may allow such changes to
take place. Indeed, Polanyi suggests something similar, an “intellectual sympa-
thy” enabling others to “listen sympathetically...to a doctrine they have not yet
grasped” (151); Martin Buber describes it as physical action, a “bold swinging—
demanding the most intensive stirring of one’s being—into the life of the
other” (“Elements” 81). But systematic, methodological attempts to believe
everything that is difficult or impossible to believe are unrealistic: Elbow gives
too much away when he uses the word “believing” in this way. Intellectual
beliefs are life-changing; Polanyi speaks of them as “conversion[s]” and “self-
modifying act[s]” (PK 151). Elbow’s critics are correct when they refuse to
accept his proposal that the believing game is safe or reversible—it is neither.
And it cannot be a game. Crucial issues are at stake about how we are going to
invest our limited life energy and time.

At many points, Elbow seems close to admitting this (see “MDB” 270); at
one point, he seems almost to be answering an objection from Polanyi: “Am I
seeming to say that there is nothing about commitment in the believing game? Not quite” (284). But he always ends up claiming that the beliefs can be temporary (270, 284).

Polanyi disagrees: “We must now recognize belief once more as the source of all knowledge” (PK 266). Our beliefs can be mistaken or inadequate, and they can certainly change; our next beliefs may replace or build on or complicate or challenge our current beliefs—but our current beliefs are not simply reversible: they influence our behavior and our subsequent beliefs; they have consequences over time.

I have tried to demonstrate that into every act of knowing there enters a tacit and passionate contribution of the person knowing what is being known, and that this co-efficient is no mere imperfection, but a necessary component of all knowledge. (312)

Polanyi insists that belief is prior, is the root of all knowing, is the essential power of the mind:

The learner, like the discoverer, must believe before he can know. . . . Such granting of one’s personal allegiance is—like an act of heuristic conjecture—a passionate pouring of oneself into untried forms of existence. (208, as quoted in “MDB” 264)

Elbow relies on Polanyi’s discussion of indwelling and the structure of tacit knowing in the final chapter of WWP, citing for the first time there Polanyi’s example of pouring oneself into a tool, a probe, indwelling it, and making it an extension of one’s body in order to use it successfully (368–73). But while Polanyi develops this example to analyze the structure of tacit knowing and thus to give us a larger definition of rationality (see TD, esp. 17–18), Elbow associates it with magic (368), further heightening his association of “the non-rational, the unexplicit or tacit and the magical” (xxvi).

I’m torn, however, because Elbow’s pulling back here from the full implications of Polanyi’s thought may indeed have been both strategic and effective. By not requiring us to go all the way with Polanyi’s argument for the priority of belief, by pulling back to a binary we’re comfortable with—the familiar opposition between rationality and magical thinking—Elbow has, I think, succeeded in getting a much wider range of scholars to try out freewriting in their classrooms, assuming they could always pull back and critique it or dismiss it later. They were free to consider it a mere strategy, a technique that couldn’t possibly commit them to a particular epistemology or theory about the nature of reality (although, of course, James Berlin argued otherwise—“Contemporary” 776). In my own experience, however, the results have been so reliable that it would be irresponsible to attribute the change in my students’ writing to “magic.” Nor could it be attributed to my requiring students to systematically believe and
then doubt all assertions because I have never made any such requirement or even suggestion.

Studying the change in my students’ writing brought about by varieties of free and exploratory writing (see Sargent, “Errors,” “Mapping,” and “Peer”) has led me to hypothesize that something else is going on here—and to decide that I want to spend 90 percent of my energies on this something else because it is more productive and more intellectual, richer in ideas, concepts, thinking, than any other theory or practice I have tried in the classroom. Elbow’s theories of systematic believing and doubting don’t account for what I see happening in my students’ writing with such regularity. Polanyi’s theory, on the other hand, does.

Elbow chooses William Blake’s “Without contraries is no progression” as one of three epigraphs to open EC; and throughout both versions of the doubting and believing essays, Elbow insists that these contrary games, doubt and belief, are equally weighted and equally important: his deepest argument is for the fruitfulness of the dialectic between them, for Embracing Contraries. This dialectic remains central—even though Elbow’s most eloquent and forceful passages are critiques of doubt, convincing illustrations of how academic doubt can paradoxically reinforce credulity, the unexamined belief of ideas we already hold (“MDB” 263). This dialectic remains central—even though Elbow also writes powerfully about the believing game as a way to the truth and about our culture’s fear of belief (“DGBG” 176, 183). In the end, Elbow always returns to the balance of opposites: he presents doubt and belief as equally important, both necessary and balancing each other. In Polanyi’s epistemology, on the other hand, while doubt has an essential role to play, it is always a subsidiary, dependent, secondary role. It can test what believing has made or discovered, but it can never make or discover anything on its own.

Many of us have turned to Elbow’s doubting and believing essays for help in our teaching, particularly when students trained in glib forms of critical thinking refuse to enter into any work of literature or theory with energy; we’ve pointed out to these students how skilled they are at holding new ideas at arm’s length, at distancing techniques that are ultimately self-protective and self-indulgent. We owe Elbow an enormous debt of gratitude for expressing this dynamic so forcefully and convincingly. But the insistence on the “tacit” as a form of magic shows Elbow’s continuing uneasiness with belief and with Polanyi’s thought. The structure of tacit knowing as Polanyi describes it—of focusing, say, on where the hammer head hits the nail instead of on where the hammer handle touches our palm—is not magic. It’s simply how the mind works. Elbow’s turn—in the last chapter of WWP as well as in his 1998 introduction to it—back to the old binary of emotion versus reason, of mystery and
chaos and magic and the tacit versus analysis and control and care and the explicit (xxvi), allows too many to dismiss or disregard his groundbreaking work as irrational or unintellectual or “deeply flawed” (ECW xvi; see Covino on Winterowd and Young’s dismissal of Elbow’s “magic”⁸). The tension between equal opposites can often be productive for our thinking, but—as Elbow himself acknowledges in “The Uses of Binary Thinking”—we shouldn’t necessarily “balance every dichotomy we encounter” (52). I would argue that the dichotomy between doubt and belief is one Elbow needs to revisit. Even while he admits that he’s been partisan—that he’s been preoccupied with generating, with freewriting, with private writing, that he’s “campaigned [his] whole career for the believing game” (68)—he nevertheless insists that he’s only fighting to get his view heard equally, not to conquer or win over the opposite emphasis on criticism, control, audience, and doubt. He wants an epistemology of dialogue, dialectic, not just rhetoric (69–73), and he can’t understand why people misread him as someone who doesn’t value critical thinking and doubting. Why do they “see me as one-sided . . . when I preach over and over this theme of embracing contraries”? (69).

My criticism, however, is that Elbow hasn’t been one-sided enough, that he hasn’t campaigned hard enough or far enough for believing. Perhaps those who resist his position are sensible because, in the end, these matters don’t fit into equal binaries—those who critique and doubt will always feel themselves embattled and at risk at some level because they are secondary, subsidiary. Elbow can’t argue that generating words and then critiquing or revising or editing those words are completely equal oppositions; as he states them, one is absolutely prior: if there is no generating, there are no words to critique or revise or cut. Similarly, Polanyi makes clear, belief is the prior and essential condition for doubt—the very operations of the mind that allow us to doubt are absolutely dependent on belief, on our prior ability to pour ourselves into and learn various symbolic languages in order to do our thinking and our doubting. However, simply because a practice or perspective—like doubting—is secondary and dependent upon some prior activity—like believing—does not mean that it is therefore expendable or wrong: its continuing strong presence may be necessary and productive and, in the case of doubting, crucial for the growth of human knowledge.

Polanyi’s life work was a refusal to abandon the words “knowledge,” “objective,” and “reason” to those who would equate them only with empirical, explicit, impersonal skepticism. He fought for the word “knowledge” to include intellectual passions, belief, commitment, and the tacit—and not as secondary, occasional, barely tolerated, marginal, or exceptional extras, nor as equal balancing opposites, but as central, necessary, prior. Elbow’s appreciation
of binary thinking has blinded him to the fact that linking the tacit and emotion with magic lets his critics off the hook too easily. They are not forced to confront the full complexity of his thought and practice as serious knowledge claims. Appeals to magic, emotion, and the personal can be laughed out of court (cf. Winterowd in n. 8 below or Hashimoto, quoted in ECW 147) in a way that serious, thoughtfully argued and supported knowledge claims usually cannot be. And Elbow’s critics have rightly sensed that if his methods work, their own methods are called into question. In his theory, Elbow wants the field to be large and generous, able to hold opposing but equal contradictory views (ECW xiii-xxiii)—I do too. I just think this particular binary cannot be one of them.

Note the hesitations in Elbow’s introduction to Part I of Everyone Can Write as he talks about his “philosophical foundations”:

It might be that the believing game underlies everything else. . . . Yet since I also love doubting, criticism, and logic, binary thinking may lie deeper than the believing game. (ECW 3)

However, he also acknowledges that “someone’s conscious or unconscious theory of knowledge is less real and important than how they act, and especially how they behave toward their students and colleagues and staff” (3). I would argue exactly this: that Elbow’s practice, as opposed to his theory, reveals his profound commitment to Polanyi’s more disturbing, thoroughgoing, and radical conception of rationality. Elbow creates in the body of WWT a powerful heuristic, a practice, based on a Polanyian theory of knowledge, but then wavers in the theoretical appendix: the belief enacted in the way he teaches writing suddenly, in his theory, becomes not the ground of all knowing and discovering but a game, make-believe. However, he trusts the power of writing—it is the deepest truth in his life. And in his teaching and his writing he is steadily operating not in the framework described in his wavering theory, but in a Polanyian framework—which is, I would suggest, why the practices he suggests (freewriting in particular) work.9

Elbow’s critics are right to feel threatened by his work; just as our students learn more from what we do than from what we say, Elbow’s critics sense behind his words the fully operational reality of a new conceptual framework, a framework in which their old forms and distinctions and ways of working are all at sea. They can’t be argued out of their paradigm into a new one; and even Elbow himself hasn’t completely accepted—in his theoretical writing—his new location. But he writes and he teaches writing from a larger, more inclusive conception of rationality, a theory of knowledge that he hasn’t yet consciously, consistently, and fully described. It is not a theory of knowledge
that requires him, as his Lewis Carroll epigraph might suggest, to believe impossible things (before or after breakfast)—unless the necessity of belief itself as the ground of all knowing is that impossible thing.

NOTES

1. It’s not clear if Elbow read more of Polanyi’s work between 1973 (WWT) and 1986, when Embracing Contraries came out, but he did read Booth’s Modern Dogma during that interval and expresses his debt to that work (280–81) in EC’s alternative version of the doubting and believing essay—which is thus influenced by Polanyi’s thought as mediated through Booth. Elbow returned directly to Polanyi’s work again, however, in the late 1980s, chairing an MLA session on Polanyi at my request in 1987 and then giving a paper on Polanyi at MLA 1988 in a session I chaired and organized (see Wallace).

2. Tertullian’s thinking on these issues was far from Augustine’s (cf. PK 266, TD 61). I’m indebted to Professors Dale Cannon (Western Oregon University) and Richard Lord (Willamette University) here.

3. Elbow’s development of the believing game seems to owe as much to Carl Rogers as to Polanyi (see his new Preface, WWT xxix). However, in contrasting Rogers to Polanyi, he inadvertently suggests that Polanyi’s thinking was less disciplined, perhaps even “sweet, soft and fuzzy,” an implication I’m sure he did not intend. Rogers and Polanyi were, by the way, interested in each other’s work and participated in a televised dialogue together (cf. Coulson and Rogers).

4. Though Elbow speaks of a “mechanism for knowing,” neither he nor Polanyi think of knowing as a mechanical process: both Elbow and Polanyi root their epistemological projects in the findings of Gestalt (see, for example, “DGBG” 167–68 and PK vii).

5. These correspond closely to Polanyi’s discussion of the operational principles of language—the Laws of Poverty, Grammar, Iteration, Consistency, Manageability (PK 77–82).


7. Is my objection simply a semantic one?—that is, would I object less if Elbow had referred instead to “make believe” (he does use the word “pretend” a few times, “MDB” 277) or to “the holding-at-arm’s length game” vs. “the empathy game” (a la Carl Rogers)? Probably—though the insistence on systematic methodological game playing would still strike me as a nonproductive reach toward rigor. Certainly, since Elbow framed the debate in Polanyian terms, the words doubting and believing were loaded from the start. Further, Elbow insists that believing is what he has in mind, especially when he accuses Coleridge of “ben[ding] over backwards to avoid the word ‘belief’ itself” in his “rubber-gloved double negative”—the “willing suspension of disbelief.” Elbow insists that “opening and
restructuring of the mind . . . don’t usually occur unless the attempt to see is fueled by some kind of assent. . . .” (“MDB” 279).

Believing, as a term, covers two related but at times separable realms here—the realm of belief systems (believing in, focusing on, ideas that can be articulated) and the realm of existential belief, of skill, behavior, or action (believing as skillful tacit knowing, as indwelling, as pouring oneself into a tool—like a hammer or language—in order to focus on something else, in order to accomplish a focal task). Polanyi at times used the word belief to cover both meanings, but increasingly extended the notion of indwelling and tacit knowing in his later work, especially in *The Tacit Dimension*, to reduce his reliance on terms like commitment and belief when talking about tacit knowing. Elbow doesn’t turn to the deep rationality of tacit knowing to anchor his discussions of the believing game, thus opening his position to the following critique from Polanyi scholar Dale Cannon:

> Sometimes one can find persons who become so enamored with this kind of experimental believing that they never come down anywhere—nothing ever is wholeheartedly believed by them, nothing ever becomes the object of full commitment. The resulting position is a variety of postmodern romantic irony: believing becomes a game only, intellectual passion is enervated, and any deeper respect for the integrity and profundity of genuine belief gets lost. Even though Elbow may not be such an ironist himself, his position affords little if any leverage to critique that intellectual posture. (unpublished e-mail, 10 Oct. 2000)

Significantly, this critique is leveled by a philosopher; it’s highly unlikely that anyone in the field of composition and rhetoric, knowing Elbow’s work and reputation, would notice this weakness in Elbow’s position or ever think of him in terms of ironical detachment.

8. Covino quotes Winterowd’s critique of Elbow’s belief in magic in *WWP*, that writing involves “access to a mysterious power that may or may not materialize the ‘right’ words” (153, n.2).

9. A parallel essay could be written about Elbow’s use of Eugene Gendlin’s concept of “felt sense” (cf. Sargent, “Thinking”); Gendlin’s work in epistemology corroborates Polanyi’s findings and gives us a convincing and nonmagical explanation for the effectiveness of methods like freewriting and Sondra Perl’s composing guidelines (recommended in Elbow and Belanoff, 32–35).