Writing With Elbow

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To truly educate in America, then, to reach the full sweep of our citizenry, we need to question received perception, shift continually from the standard lens.

Mike Rose

The scene opens in a frontier classroom. In bursts our lone, logocentric super-hero on his galloping steed. Dismounting, he proceeds to preach a rousing, anti-intellectual sermon on the virtues of voice and personal writing. “Throw away your textbooks!” he shouts. “Celebrate bad writing! If you’ve ever stopped freewriting in order to correct your grammar, come forward, repent, and be saved! And most important of all: Freewrite! Freewrite! Freewrite!”

The students, all solipsistic and conservative, smile and nod approvingly. This teacher will demand little of them. He will not push them toward excellence. All they will have to do this semester is freewrite and make little collages. They smile, content in their neo-Platonic isolation, happy to be free from the burden of intellectual inquiry. Things haven’t been this good since kindergarten.

A cluster of social-epistemic composition theorists spy through a window, nodding knowingly. “Ahah! There he is—Peter Elbow! Undermining our attempts to promote academic discourse, to critique traditional humanism. Promoting truth as a private vision of an autonomous self. Lowering standards. A threat to the academy and to the nation!”

Cut to a first floor classroom in the University of Hawaii’s Webster Hall, February 1996. The class is divided into noisy groups of four, as all students take turns reading their drafts aloud. Peter has asked his students to note which bits have “life,” are “real,” powerful, strong? Where are the moments of energy?

Today I’m observing Michael, Martin, Megan, and Angela. They’re working on their “descriptive scenes,” helping their readers to see something in vivid detail. Though my friends in the education department might say they are “occasionally off task,” they do seem to be finding plenty of “moments of energy.” Megan is reading.
She’s a confident writer, and her essay grows out of a personal experience, her semester abroad in Italy. She reads about a field in Tuscany. “I expected to see waves. How do Italians figure out where they are when they are surrounded by all this land? Everywhere you look, land, as far as you can see. . . .”

“That is so weird,” says Angela, “to look as far as you can see and not to see any water. I’ve never seen that!”

“Yeah, I bet they’d think it was weird if they came here and couldn’t see very much land. . . .”

Pretty soon they’re off task, Megan’s essay having led to a lively discussion about how people in Hawaii are perceived by people elsewhere. “People are so stupid, they actually think we live in grass shacks.” “Yeah, one time somebody from the mainland asked me, ‘What kind of money do you use?’” “This tourist comes up to me and goes, ‘Do you speak English?’” “Yeah, and you go somewhere, and when people hear you’re from Hawaii, they think all you do is surf. You tell them you go to the University of Hawaii, and they’re, like, surprised that people in Hawaii even study.”

Terms from my seminar in colonialism circulate through my mind—core/periphery, marginalization, Orientalism, exoticizing. Just because these freshmen aren’t using those terms doesn’t mean they don’t understand the dynamics; they live them every day of their lives. These issues have certainly led to a moment of energy for this group. Though student discussion has moved off their papers, I change my notes—these students are not off task at all.

The discursively constructed “Peter Elbow” of my opening scene is a caricature, created characterizations made by several of Elbow’s most vocal critics. I. Hashimoto has characterized Elbow as an “evangelist,” calling him “zealous,” “overemotional,” and “anti-intellectual” (73–83). David Bartholomae has dubbed Elbow’s classroom a “frontier classroom” and has called his teaching “logocentric,” “conservative,” and “retrograde” (70–71). James Berlin has typed Elbow as a Thoreau-like solitary figure, “isolated” and “cut off from community,” a teacher whose pedagogy is “Neo-Platonic” and “solipsistic” (146). And Lester Faigley calls Elbow “Romantic,” with a capital R (530). The image of Peter Elbow that emerges in contemporary composition literature is a mixture of iconic figures ranging from John Wayne and Newt Gingrich to Thoreau, Plato, Sigmund Freud, Jimmy Swaggart, and Billy Graham. Those who have directly experienced Elbow’s teaching, however, feel a dissonance between the discursive Peter Elbow that emerges in composition literature and the actual Peter Elbow who is their teacher. After taking graduate classes from Elbow when he was visiting Citizens Chair at the University of Hawaii from 1995 to 1996, I myself experienced such a sense of dissonance. This led me to observe
the freshman English composition course Elbow taught at UH in spring 1996, in order to discern what his classroom practice actually entailed.

Two things emerge when observing Elbow’s teaching. First, his classroom practice is rhetorically complex, emphasizing at various points all elements of the rhetorical situation—writer, reader, language, and subject matter—through an ongoing, dynamic process that actively shifts among the various interacting elements. Second, Elbow’s teaching is voice-centered rather than textually centered. That is not to say that Elbow construes voice as singular, “authentic,” or as issuing from an “autonomous” and “genuine” “self.” Though some assume that voice-centered approaches to composition pedagogy must be philosophically naive and politically retrograde, the implications of a voice-centered pedagogy—that is, a teaching approach that places people rather than words at the center—hold the potential to be more potentially radical and transformative than discourse-focused pedagogy, which places language at the center.

It’s a sunny Tuesday in January, a little before noon. Peter arranges the chairs into a circle as students filter in. Most appear to be local Hawaii students of mixed Asian and/or Polynesian ethnicity, and there are a couple of Caucasians, slightly more males than females. It’s still early in the semester, and there’s not a lot of chatter before class begins.

Class begins with students calling one another’s names. “I’m Linda, and that’s Peter.” “Sue, Linda, and Peter.” “Kimo, Sue, Linda . . .”

After six years in college, I’ve been through class introductions more times than I can count. What makes today different is that it’s not the first day of the class; it’s the fourth. And from my experience as Peter’s student, I already know what these students will soon learn: almost every class begins with students calling one another by name, from now until the end of the term. Peter explains his philosophy: “This is something we’re going to do at the beginning of every class. . . . It seems to me, you’re not really present until you’ve been named. And we want you to be present. Good news, anybody?”

Another Elbow ritual. Whether you’re an eighteen-year-old freshman or a forty-something Ph.D. candidate, Peter wants to know who you are. And he doesn’t just want us to talk—the listening is even more important. In Hawaii, it’s called “talking story.” Kimo tells us he went surfing over the weekend. Martin has landed a role in a university play. Peter heard from his children in college.

Jenny walks in—she’s late. “Give us some good news,” Peter says. “That’s your penalty.”

“I got my assignment done on time!” Laughter.
Peter gives today’s assignment, a freewrite on names. He passes out copies of the Cree naming poems, “Rain Straight Down” and “Quiet Before the Thaw,” and reads them out loud before students freewrite about their own names for ten minutes. Students share in pairs, then Peter gives his minilecture of the day. Today’s subject: Private versus public writing. He elucidates the debate in the composition field, without using professional jargon. “Some people think that everything we write, even when it’s supposed to be private, is really in a sense public. And they make a good point, since language is a social phenomenon, and our languages come to us from our cultures . . . but for now, let’s just assume there are times where we’re really writing just for ourselves, even if we decide to share it later. Is there some way to turn that private writing into public writing?”

Peter relates this issue to the way the course is structured. Students keep journals, and he checks periodically to see that they are filling the pages. But he won’t read them. Some teachers, he explains, require journals and call them “private”—then proceed to read them, sometimes even grade them. In this class, he tells students, your journals will be private—but you might sometimes want to look at them, think about the issues you raise to yourself—and think about ways to turn those concerns into public writing. Public writing is more formal, more geared toward the needs of an audience—but that doesn’t mean it can’t still have its roots in the personal.

The one believable element in my imagined “frontier classroom” scene is the command to “Freewrite! Freewrite! Freewrite!” Elbow admits to being “something of a cheerleader” on this score, and anyone who has studied with him at any level knows she will write, write, and write some more, sometimes freely, but at other times not so freely. Elbow constantly pushes his students, not simply toward more writing—though he does do that—but toward increasingly better writing. Moreover, Elbow’s reader-responses to students demonstrate that he takes their texts seriously, reading them as carefully as a literary scholar would read a published text. Freewriting does not represent an “open” classroom in any static or permanent sense, but instead enables student writers to clear a temporary space for generating ideas, a momentary withdrawal from internal and external censors in order to begin the process of getting words onto paper. This clearly is the point where Elbow chooses to start, though it is not where he stops.

Elbow uses personal topics in the same manner—as a point of entry rather than as a point of rest. For, to a considerable degree, Elbow’s pedagogy also emphasizes audience. One important audience for students, of course, was Elbow himself, who provided reader-response feedback by taking students’
texts seriously. Meanings between writers and audiences were also negotiated through the use of groups and class publications, and students were encouraged both to make use of peer responses when undertaking revisions and to enter into the minds of others by listening actively and attentively to the writing of their fellow students.

Interestingly, though Elbow initially achieved recognition for a book entitled *Writing Without Teachers* and though he is often associated in the literature with “de-centered authority” and “student-centered” teaching approaches, Elbow exerts considerable authority and influence in this classroom, but he chooses to exert it over how students behave (for example, by enforcing punctuality and putting full effort into revisions) instead of using his authority to “rank” student writing by assigning reductive grades or restricting students to a singular writing style. Elbow graded this course by entering into a contract with students, which guaranteed certain letter grades for specific tasks, rather than by making subjective assessments of quality. But, as Elbow expressed to me, “My 'style of teaching' or 'my presence in the classroom' is anything but self-effacing. To put it bluntly, to run a workshop, you tend to have to be very pushy . . . and be a very strong presence in order to clear space.” (Personal correspondence—Elbow) Paradoxically, for a teacher to distribute power in the classroom in the way Elbow does suggests that the teacher is actually exercising more authority, not less—a paradox further convoluted when the teacher in question is most well known for a book called *Writing Without Teachers*.

I’m thinking about Elbow’s own comments on “authority” while reading through some of his detailed written comments to students. To Sue: “My definition of a good essay is one that figures stuff out and gets somewhere. (Lively voice is not the main thing—despite my interest in it.) I like especially the way your essay ends up somewhere different from where it started; you see there was something wrong with your initial feelings. That gives a kind of drama to it—something actually going on before our eyes.”

To Dave: “It’s great to see how much you did in revising. Lots of thinking here. . . . You are continuing to THINK, WONDER, turn the gears. Try to remember the feeling and how you got yourself to do that. That will be the key to writing you have to do at the university (and after): just trying to have more thoughts, figure out more things, explore more.”

To Dave and Brad: “When you talk about the rise in wages for women compared to men, you forget to mention one little fact: that women still get paid MUCH LESS than men for the same work!”
To Karen and Gary: “My main reaction in reading. There’s something quite weird about your paper. EVERY EXAMPLE of racism that you talk about is an example of thinking or behavior by members of a targeted group, blacks or Hawaiians. NOWHERE IN YOUR PAPER do you ever give an example or seem to acknowledge the more pervasive racism of groups with more power. In short, you are making the point Y, and it seems a valid point—except that by failing to make the more obvious point X, you end up sounding very racist yourself. It’s as though you think that only blacks and Hawaiians are racist. Did you mean to do that?”

To Adam and Mark: “You make a bunch of statements that are kind of illogical—that no one you know is gay. (You better not be so sure.) That everyone you know who is gay is messed up. (I thought you didn’t know anyone.) That once someone is gay you can’t see them the same. (Well how can you trust your perception when you know you go into this gear?)”

Students often write things that are uncomfortable to read—and maybe there’s more risk of that when they know they won’t be graded on what they say.

On the other hand, if students harbor these thoughts and feelings, perhaps it’s better to get them out on the table where they can be addressed directly. Peter asks them to think through things more deeply. Would this be happening if instead, they had told him what they thought he wanted to hear, because they knew their grades depended on his opinion of what they were saying? Can students hear the teacher’s opinions more clearly when they don’t come with a grade attached?

At least students won’t be able to complain that Peter graded them down because he didn’t like what they were saying. In a way, that makes him more free, when he disagrees with something, to say so—to enter into dialogue, converse about the issues at stake, in the hope of bringing hidden assumptions and prejudices to the surface.

Grades, on the other hand, have more of a silencing effect: “This is a C paper; I’m the teacher, and you’re the student. End of discussion.”

Though Elbow exercises his own authority as teacher to encourage writing habits and classroom behaviors that he finds most effective, “authority” in the sense of authorship clearly remains in the hands of students. And, Elbow clearly retains allegiance to the idea of authorship, which has opened him to criticism by compositionists of the social-epistemic school such as David Bartholomae, who asks, “Should we promote the notion of authorship in their classrooms at a time when the whole concept of authorship is under attack in every other realm of the university?” (70). It is important to note, however, that while Elbow believes in authorship, he does not define “author” as singular, static, isolated, autonomous, and uniquely gifted. Elbow makes clear to his
students that he believes no one functions autonomously, and no one writes in a vacuum. What emerges in Elbow’s classroom is a revised notion of authorship as plural and dynamic, allowing for more people, from all walks of life, to develop their authorial potential. Elbow works toward authorizing more voices and in more linguistic registers (such as Hawaii Creole English), a move that challenges elitist notions of authorship. The space Elbow makes for students’ home languages, multiple linguistic registers, and discursive alternatives can be conceived in Bakhtinian terms as encouraging both the centripetal, unifying forces of standard English and the centrifugal, disruptive forces of heteroglossia. It is the dynamic tension between the two that keeps language alive, enriching ongoing conversations through the participation of as many voices as possible and facilitating the possibility of social change. For writing students, encouraging the discovery of their voice(s) helps them develop the power to enter into society’s conversations, moving among the full range of multiple voices and linguistic registers available to them, “taking the word and making it [their] own.”

On a Thursday in February, Peter asks students to discuss their reactions to the first class publication, a collection of the students’ “self-as-writer” collages. At first there’s the usual quiet, feet shuffling, papers rustling. Mark breaks the silence. “The thing I noticed is how lots of people complain they can’t write, but their papers are pretty good.”

Karen adds, “There was so much funny stuff. Like the pidgin—it sounded like the person, you could just hear the person saying it.”

Now they’re jumping in eagerly, talking faster, overlapping. “Yeah, it’s like gossip, I like to hear what’s in other people’s minds.” “I like the way Kerry thanks her mother for helping to teach her there’s times and places for different kinds of language.”

“Well, it’s not just the pidgin, it’s other kinds of street talk. Like Robert, it’s not pidgin, but when he’s in the factory with those Polish workers, it’s not like standard English, it’s street talk, it sounds really real.” “And Karen’s is funny and sarcastic.” “I liked where Megan said she’d have made an excellent beatnik.” I feel as though I’m in a theatre lobby at intermission, immersed in an electric buzz. Peter has to raise his voice, like a judge calling for “order in the court,” so he can give the assignment for next Tuesday.

In Kerry’s “self-as-writer” collage, she moves back and forth between standard English and pidgin, which she describes as her “natural” language. “It is not that different from standard English,” she says, “but some people have a hard time understanding that dialect. Being here at Manoa, I have become a better English speaker. When I return to my home on the Island of Kauai, the pidgin-English
language flows naturally out of my mouth. It’s actually so weird, I write standard English better than I speak it.” She writes about her mother in the language she most associates with mother, family, home. “Mom, you teach me dat dea times when propa foa speak pidgin and times foa speak propa English.” To her favorite high school teacher, she writes in standard English: “I didn’t enjoy writing before I had you. I want to thank you for opening up my eyes. Your compassion has brought many students to believe they can write.” To her mother she writes again, “Oh, ma, I wish I was back home foa speak my natural language.”

Jenny writes in a process letter about having an “on-off” switch. “Pidgin for your friends and family, English for your teachers.” Peter writes in his feedback, “I agree, it doesn’t have to be this either/or thing.”

Voice is one of the most important elements in Elbow’s pedagogy. However, the concept of voice Elbow promotes is neither autonomous nor isolated. With his emphasis on group work, reading aloud, and responding to the work of others, Elbow’s concept of voice comports easily with Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism:

The idea lives not in one person’s isolated individual consciousness—if it remains there only, it degenerates and dies. The idea begins to live, that is, to take shape, to develop, to find and renew its verbal expression, to give birth to new ideas, only when it enters into genuine dialogic relationships with other ideas, with the ideas of others. (In Morris 98)

While Bakhtin does not view utterances as emanating from individuals, he grants that utterances are issued through individuals. Thus, a Bakhtinian view of voice acknowledges both the human dimension of language and the social processes by which knowledge and meaning are created. Judging by my observations of Elbow’s English 100 course, “dialogic interaction” is an excellent characterization of the classroom dynamics that result from his teaching. Listening to others was as important as writing and reading one’s own work. In group work, for instance, students spent seventy-five percent of their time listening to others and only twenty-five percent reading their own work. The small groups never proceeded to assess any writer’s “authenticity” or “sincerity”; instead, the techniques of showing, summarizing, pointing, and relating “movies of the mind” allowed for reader response and negotiation of meaning between readers and writers. The collaborative writing assignment provided for meanings to be negotiated between writers (often with contradictory viewpoints) as well. Once again, Elbow’s extensive oral and written feedback allowed writers to consider readers’ reactions in more detail than would have been provided with mere letter grades.
Elbow further encouraged dialogic interaction through his emphasis on using voice to engage in public discourse. Those wishing to earn an “A” in the class had to submit class publications and write one explicitly public piece of writing, and most assignments asked students to consider how their private writing might be reshaped into public writing geared for an audience—once again demonstrating that the personal and autobiographical was a starting point, not an ending point. Personal narratives allowed students to position their own subjectivities, while feedback groups enabled them to consider the subjectivities of others. One assignment called for students to engage with group identities explicitly, and all assignments fostered increased student awareness of their own social positions. As a result, the students’ writing teemed with issues regarding how differences play out in the cultural and ethnic landscape of Hawaii, a place where the legacy of colonial conquest and domination is still very much alive. Extensive abstract theorizing was hardly necessary, given the depth of the students’ own perceptions and experiences of their complex multicultural location.

A Thursday afternoon in March. We’re inside Peter’s office on the sixth floor of Kuykendall Hall, waiting for the first student to arrive for her biweekly fifteen-minute conference. By the end of the semester, each student will have had about eight conferences.

The main purpose, Peter tells me, is for the students to read their drafts out loud; it helps if a piece of writing is heard, not just read. As students read their own work, they can often hear mistakes for themselves. And when teachers listen without reading along, they can temporarily put aside copyediting concerns and hear the total “shape” of a piece.

Today, students will be reading about identities. This assignment started with an in-class freewrite about “any aspect of any of your group identities,” then carried over into a collaborative research essay written with a partner. But before students get together with their partners or start poring through the library, Peter thinks it’s important for them to explore their own thinking and experience.

Sue, a somewhat shy eighteen-year-old, is first. As I listen, I think of the cliché that “still waters run deep”; her writing has a lively voice, considerable energy, undertones of anger. She writes about attending private school, about being a girl—how public school kids assume she’s a rich snob, how her parents give more privileges to her brother. She writes of being second-generation Chinese-American, of traveling in China for the first time, of finding that the Chinese people she met didn’t consider her Chinese at all: “They were insulted when I said I was Chinese. I’d never felt more American.” She discusses the slurs used against
those of Chinese descent in Hawaii and recites one of the derogatory rhymes she heard other kids chanting when she was little, feeding into the stereotype that the Chinese are “cheap.” Breaking away from her text, she tells Peter, “I don’t really believe it, you know.”

“Right,” says Peter. “But it’s sort of like some of the rhymes black kids have had to hear, some of the slurs—nowadays it’s outlawed, but you’ve still heard it. It’s still in there.”

“Yeah,” Sue agrees, returning to her essay. She reads about being Catholic. It’s part of her identity, part of her family heritage, and though she’s not sure how much of the church doctrine she believes, she intends to keep practicing. “The Lord knows I’m not a great Catholic,” she reads—a breezy statement that could be read either as slangy and humorous or as a serious religious admission. Peter points out the nice potential double meaning: “Did you do that on purpose?”

Sue laughs. “I don’t know . . . maybe I did!”

In Pedagogy and the Politics of Hope, Henry Giroux draws upon Bakhtinian theory to formulate his own concept of pedagogy that questions the status quo and works toward what he terms “radical democracy.” The element that Giroux identifies as missing from most pedagogies, whether ostensibly conservative or liberal, is voice: “Both radical and conservative ideologies generally fail to engage the politics of voice and representation—the forms of narrative and dialogue—around which students make sense of their lives and schools.” He further points out: “While this is an understandable position for conservatives or for those whose logic of instrumentalism and social control is at odds with an emancipatory notion of human agency, it represents a serious theoretical and political failing on the part of radical educators” (120). Voice, then, is a concept that need not be limited to a conservative pedagogical agenda; it is a tool that can and should be used in the service of a radical, liberatory pedagogy as well. A voice-centered approach allows for differences, such as gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, to come to the forefront; accordingly, Giroux calls for the “discourse of lived experience” to be brought into the classroom as a way of challenging the orthodoxy represented by academic discourse. This is exactly what Elbow accomplishes.

A voice-centered pedagogy tells the students that they matter, that their own experiences and perceptions are worthwhile: worth writing about, worth being read about and heard by others. In Giroux’s terms, Elbow’s students encounter a pedagogy that engages “the forms of narrative and dialogue around which students make sense of their lives and schools” (120). “In this class, you are not a number but a student,” says one of Elbow’s students in her end-of-semester review. Elbow provided each student with considerable individualized attention.
in the form of conferences and written feedback. Small group interaction and collaborative writing projects also contributed to a classroom in which students got to know each other, as well as their teacher. Even Elbow’s policy of beginning every class by having students call on one another by name contributed to this sense of student engagement, presence, and investment; Elbow insists on student presence, and his students sense his own presence and investment in their narratives and respond accordingly. End-of-semester evaluations included comments such as “He cares a lot about his students,” and “He is a sympathetic man who shows great concern for us.”

Giroux calls for a “border pedagogy” that empowers students to “cross over into borders of meaning, maps of knowledge, social relations, and values that are increasingly being negotiated and rewritten” (147). His ambitious goal, education in service of “radical democracy,” empowers people across various boundaries, such as race and gender, without obliterating differences. While Giroux identifies himself as a culturally left critic, he also notes a current tendency toward defeatism in culturally left criticism: “Radical education theory has abandoned the language of possibility for the language of critique” (120). Giroux proposes that those with an interest in transformative pedagogy rediscover what he calls “the language of possibility”; it is crucial, he says, to “create conditions within particular institutions that allow students to locate themselves and others in histories that mobilize rather than destroy their hopes for the future” (161). After a full semester of observing Elbow’s classroom methods and individual conferences, reviewing student papers, and reading Elbow’s written feedback, I concluded that Elbow’s pedagogy is exactly what Giroux is calling for: an education that empowers students to make connections between their lives and the world around them, to expand their own critical powers, to “locate themselves and others” in narratives that are still unfolding, and not least of all, to give students a sense of hope, possibility, and individual agency through the process of becoming more powerful writers with more control over both their writing process and their written products.

“Frontier” may be associated with tropes of gunslinging cowboys in the Wild West, but it is also a synonym for “border.” If we reconceptualize what kind of frontier we are talking about, Peter Elbow’s classroom is indeed a “frontier classroom”—not the caricature classroom of our gunslinging cowboy evangelist, but a site for “border pedagogy” in Giroux’s sense. The freshman English course I observed in spring 1996 helped students to learn and implement “the language of possibility,” to write “with power” and “without teachers,” in the process “mobiliz[ing] rather than destroy[ing] their hopes for the future.” This was a “frontier pedagogy” that the academy needs more of if we are ever to work toward the “radical democracy” of which Giroux speaks.