No one can be blamed for associating Peter Elbow’s work first with antiestablishment movements in higher education and then with expressionist pedagogy in composition. These were real historical implications of Elbow’s writing and teaching, supported by strands, at least, of intention. Appearing in the midst of challenges to institutional authority of all kinds, even the title of Writing Without Teachers suggested that teachers and their institutional roles were the central problems writers faced. If teachers represent the constraints of academic discourse, writing without them must be nonacademic. Freewriting, without these rhetorical constraints, suggests that other kinds of writing are not free. And if we are not writing to tell others what we have to say, we must be writing to tell ourselves what we have to say. It is only a short step, then, to conclude that the value of freewriting must reside in this discovery and to call it self-discovery, self-realization, and self-expression.

Through a patchwork of quotations and inferences along these lines, James Berlin thus distinguished Peter Elbow as the central proponent of “expressionistic epistemology,” which, according to Berlin, “locates all truth within a personal construct arising from one’s unique selfhood that prevents these expressionists from becoming genuinely epistemic in their approach, despite their use of activities—such as the editorial group—that on the surface are social in nature” (53). In Berlin’s reading of Writing Without Teachers, even “cooking”—interaction and exchange—serves the purpose “of discovering the nonverbal reality of the self.” (Rhetoric 154).

Nearly thirty years after the publication of Writing Without Teachers, most of Elbow’s critics and many of his followers continue to view his work through this “expressionistic” lens. On his side of a “Conversation” with Elbow, in the February 1995 issue of CCC, for example, David Bartholomae characterized “free writing” as a nonacademic genre: “a first-person, narrative or expressive genre whose goal is to reproduce the ideology of sentimental realism” (“Writing” 69). Because they fail to acknowledge that this is a genre, Bartholomae argued, Elbow and others in his camp create illusions of freedom, through a naive “desire for an institutional space free from institutional pressures, a cultural process free from the influence of culture, an historical moment outside of history, an academic
setting free from academic writing” (64). By identifying writing with individual psychology, leaders of expressionist and cognitive trends in the 1970s derailed composition studies, in Bartholomae’s view, from more productive attention to the social, rhetorical contexts in which academic writing occurs.

If Peter Elbow’s reputation alone were at stake in this unresolved argument, I would let him speak entirely for himself, as he has done on many occasions, with considerable annoyance. In his 1991 review of Jeannette Harris’ book *Expressive Discourse*, for example, Elbow revealed both his desire to disentangle himself from the category of expressivism and the difficulty he faces in doing so:

> When I first discovered, thumbing through the book, that she wanted to get rid of expressive discourse as a category in our discipline, I was intrigued—even attracted. Not just because I don’t find the word “expressive” particularly central to my own lexicon, not just because I too wonder what the word means, but most of all, quite frankly, because I find these days that the term is mostly used as a stick to beat me over the head with. My hopes were dashed, however, when I found that she is only trying to get rid of the term “expressive discourse” but that she wants to keep the terms “expressive pedagogy” and “expressive theory” and “rhetorical expressionism” for people like me—for the general school of thought that Berlin gave that label to. Unfortunately, she seems to want to hang onto the term “expressive” so that she too can continue to beat “expressivists” about the head and shoulders. (84)

There is something odd, as Elbow implies in the passage above, about the persistence with which his critics preserve the category of “expressive writing” while denying its relevance to writing and teaching in the university. There is also something odd about the narrow, extreme rendition of expressivism that Bartholomae attaches to Elbow’s work, even though he knows that Elbow avoids such fixed, one-dimensional positions. As the anthropologist Mary Douglas observed in *Purity and Danger*, categories of order, power, and inclusion depend upon categories of disorder, weakness, and exclusion. This observation suggests that, as an excluded, denigrated category, “personal expression” is essential for maintaining certain institutionalized conceptions of “academic discourse.” If expressivism did not exist, social constructionists, among others, would have to construct it. Elbow therefore has good reasons to suspect that theorists who wish to maintain narrow conceptions of academic writing need “expressivists” like him to kick around—ones willing to represent the positions they need to exclude.

To the extent that Elbow and Bartholomae agree to maintain the distinction between personal expression and academic discourse, we can think of them as allies, even when, as in the CCC debate, they intend to disagree. *Abandoning* this distinction, as I’ll propose, would genuinely challenge ideas...
about academic writing that represent an institutionalized illusion. This illu-
sory notion of academic writing creates some of the most common difficul-
ties student writers encounter; it represents the main obstacle Peter Elbow
was trying to move beyond in his early work; and it continues to undermine
the potential value of this work for academic writers.

The institutionalized illusion I have in mind is a conception of the university
as a place of accomplished performance. In this view of the university, high sta-
tus results from being knowledgeable, original, and eloquent on demand. After
all, scholars are known and rewarded not for work in progress but for their per-
formances: their publications, teaching skills, public lectures, awards, and
grants. Students succeed through strong performances on writing assignments,
exams, and presentations, exchanged for the currency of grades. In this kind of
institution, we can think of “academic discourse” as a large category of textual
performances—accomplished writing and speech—that includes the books
and articles scholars publish, the readings they assign in their courses, prepared
lectures, and the assigned papers students submit for evaluation.

These products of academic work are indeed forms of academic discourse,
and there is nothing illusory about the values, rewards, and imperatives
attached to them. Writing, teaching, and learning are ultimately performing
arts. The goal of an academic writer or teacher, like that of an actor or musi-
cian, is to deliver a convincing, polished performance that demonstrates mas-
tery of the medium. And this performance should create for the audience an
illusion of ease that conceals the messy, experimental process of rehearsal, the
long ordeal of becoming accomplished. When such an artist is on stage, behind
the lectern or in print, we don’t want to observe the hesitation, confusion, and
labor from which fine performances gradually emerge.

But the university is an educational institution, not just a theater of accom-
plishment, and in some respects we conceal the process of becoming accom-
plished entirely too well—especially from our students. “My history professor
talks just like a book!” a freshman told me with admiration, and he seemed
disillusioned when I raised the possibility that this professor was talking from
his book, or delivering lectures he had rehearsed and performed many times.
Real teachers of the performing arts know that in order to create the illusion of
ease in fine performance their students need to be disillusioned in precisely this
way. Students need to spend most of their time learning the arduous process
through which actors, dancers, or musicians bring work to the stage. They
must be aware that professional actors, for example, are people who have
learned not just how to perform but how to rehearse: ways of developing char-
acters, coordinating their roles with others, and making productive use of per-
formance anxiety. This is what they teach their students.
For the sake of comparison, therefore, imagine a school of theater arts in which students are supposed to become accomplished actors by watching brilliant performances. Imagine that they are then asked to produce similar performances on stage, before critical audiences, without rehearsals, without formal training in voice and movement, without direction in the development of their characters. Imagine that assessment of their ability is based entirely on the strengths or weaknesses of those makeshift performances and that the whole process of preparing to be on stage is considered an individual, personal enterprise, not the focus of instruction in theater arts. Imagine that students in this school are allowed to believe that truly accomplished, professional actors can perform brilliantly without preparation and rehearsal.

This is the kind of place David Bartholomae best described in his essay “Inventing the University”: a place where student writers are routinely put on stage and asked to perform roles for which they are unrehearsed and, as often as not, miscast. In these performances, they are supposed to imitate the daunting figure of accomplishment: the “professor of English” (as Bartholomae casts himself), who already knows everything the student writer is struggling to learn.

If my students are going to write for me by knowing who I am—and if this means more than knowing my prejudices, psyching me out—it means knowing what I know; it means having the knowledge of a professor of English. They have, then, to know what I know, and how I know what I know (the interpretive schemes that define the way I would work out the problems I set for them); they have to learn to write what I would write or to offer up some approximation of that discourse. (140)

As Bartholomae says elsewhere in the essay, they have “to assume privilege without having any”—to write as though they were people they have not yet become, with kinds of authority they do not possess. And from Bartholomae’s perspective, this struggle occurs on stage, in the papers they have written which, along with the professional literature they read, constitute “academic discourse.” Through the window of the completed text, the teacher can see precisely what the writer was doing, because “A written text, too, can be a compelling model of the ‘composing process’ once we conceive of a writer at work in a text and simultaneously, then, within a society, a history, a culture.” (162)

Bartholomae’s account of the university closely mirrors the ways in which my students describe the challenges of academic writing. And while Bartholomae attributes these problems to “basic writers,” I’ve found that the difficulty of assuming privilege you do not have increases, in some ways, as tasks become more complex and as standards rise. When I ask students in an advanced writing class to explain what makes writing difficult, the majority include papers they write for unfamiliar, authoritative teachers as examples,
and they tend to describe this ordeal as a kind of performance for which they are unprepared. One student observed that writing the first paper for a teacher was like trying to make intelligent conversation on a blind date. Another concluded, “It is impressing others which cramps my thought processor.” This junior imagined herself on the dance floor with a stranger:

> Writing is most difficult for me when I am unsure to whom I am writing. I torture myself as I attempt to strike a balance between delivering to the audience what I think it wants to hear, and what I want to say. . . . Writing, in this sense, may be compared to dancing with a new partner. Initially, you do not know your partner’s style or experience. There is a fear of stepping on the other person’s feet or of trying a daring move. As a result, the dance is stiff and constrained. It is awkward and unnatural.

And this sophomore’s description of writing for teachers corresponds very closely with the rhetorical conundrum Bartholomae poses, of trying “to assume privilege without having any.” She also describes her effort to meet this academic challenge as a personal, emotional struggle, in terms of insecurity and self-consciousness:

> Since the majority of my writing is for professors, whom I regard in the beginning as impersonal entities—strangers—I am very insecure about my writing ability. I am constantly conscious of my need to hide my insecurity by writing to meet their approval. Thus, I feel my writing should be coherent, intelligently composed, and interesting in order to reflect some of my nonexistent characteristics.

Like Bartholomae, all of these students are referring to their “writing” entirely as the product of their effort, not the process. One exception is this junior, who describes his struggle to move beyond what Bartholomae calls the “imitation or parody” of the teacher’s accomplishment:

> I have the most trouble using language . . . when I am trying to write about something that a professor has discussed in one of my classes. I feel controlled by his words, somehow imprisoned by his thought, unable to reshape his ideas into my own. I have so much trouble taking the leap from my professor’s framework to my own interpretation of the ideas that the process of writing is like vomiting all night long, over and over again. I have to hammer out every sentence at least three times before I will accept it, and by the time I finish a paragraph, I already hate the first sentence all over again. But then I will think of something (usually in the middle of the night), a new slant—my own direction—and the paper will be redeemed. This is the most difficult writing, but probably the writing from which I learn the most.

Yet even this writer, one of the best in the class, was trying to produce the finished paper at every utterance, in a single draft. Like the other students, therefore,
he could not clearly distinguish the product from the process, the performance from the rehearsal. And like all of the students who wrote about their difficulties, he assumed full responsibility for figuring out how to get this writing done. In more than a hundred papers on this subject, I can’t recall a single writer who viewed the process of completing papers as an object of instruction—something one should expect to learn from teachers outside a process-based writing class such as mine. In other classes they were on their own, taking personal responsibility for their awkward efforts to reflect their nonexistent characteristics or to dance with strangers. If they were more accomplished like their professors, they assumed, they wouldn’t face these difficulties.

For teachers and for administrators, this is a very convenient view of academic performance and academic discourse. Placing the means to the ends of accomplishment in excluded categories of personal experience and personal responsibility relieves teachers from the most complex, time-consuming types of instruction and allows the institution to run more efficiently. It also allows scholars to maintain the appearance of being wholly accomplished, in departments where admissions of confusion or ignorance can be hazardous. In the chapter she wrote for Howard Becker’s book *Writing for Social Scientists*, sociologist Pamela Richards described the risks of showing early drafts to colleagues:

> If you give someone a working draft to read, what you’re asking them to do is pass judgment on your ability to think sociologically. You’re asking them to decide whether you are smart or not and whether you are a real sociologist. If there are no flashes of insight, no riveting ideas, what will they conclude? That you’re stupid. If she tells that to anyone else, it’s the kiss of death. (114–15)

If faculty are not showing this work to their colleagues, they are unlikely to use it for purposes of instruction. Very few of my students, even at advanced levels of undergraduate study, have ever seen rough drafts of their professors’ publications, research notes, rejected manuscripts, peer reviews, or other artifacts of work in progress. Because they are barely aware that such documents exist, students tend to assume that professional academic writing, like their own, is the accomplished thing itself, not the way that thing came about.

How do people and texts become accomplished? How do successful scholars acquire knowledge, prepare lectures, produce books and articles, and pass tenure reviews? How do undergraduates and graduate students become scholars and other kinds of professionals? How do “Student Writers,” in the title of Nancy Sommers’s 1980 study of revision, become “Experienced Adult Writers”? How do the unprivileged acquire privilege? How can writing come to reflect characteristics the writer did not possess at the beginning of the process?
To a great extent the answers to these questions lie behind closed doors, in realms of academic discourse that undergraduates rarely enter. As a consequence—even for graduate students, even for faculty in some disciplines—these appear to be personal questions about private dimensions of individual lives.

Yet these are really questions about academic work and academic writing, and they are the kinds of questions from which Writing Without Teachers emerged. In this initial form, Elbow’s work was simply an effort to demystify the process of getting things written, and I focus on this first book because it precedes the entangled theoretical arguments through which Elbow half became, as I’ll illustrate later, the expressivist his critics needed him to be.

As Elbow explained in an interview in Writing on the Edge in 1992, he knew very little about the field of composition when he published Writing Without Teachers, and he did not develop freewriting to celebrate personal expression or to renounce academics. His version of freewriting began, instead, as the last-ditch survival strategy of a young scholar, prone to writing blocks, who wanted very much to become an academic and has remained one ever since. As he explained in that interview, “The main attraction” of Williams and Oxford, where he was an undergraduate, “was the sophistication, learning to ‘pass’” even though these places made him feel unsophisticated, awkward, and inarticulate (“An Interview” 15). The challenge for him, as for the sophomore I quoted above, was to figure out how to produce writing that “reflected [his] nonexistent characteristics.” As a graduate student at Harvard and Brandeis, he said, “I was very self-conscious about writing, scared I couldn’t do it” (10). Writing Without Teachers emerged from the spontaneous notes he wrote to himself about his struggles, when writing seemed otherwise impossible. These were the tormented explorations he had in mind, no doubt, when he made this remarkable statement about authority in the preface:

The authority I call upon in writing a book about writing is my own long-standing difficulty in writing. It has always seemed to me as though people who wrote without turmoil and torture were in a completely different universe. And yet advice about writing always seemed to come from them and therefore to bear no relation to us who struggled and usually failed to write. But in the last few years I have struggled more successfully to get things written and make them work for at least some readers, and in watching myself do this I have developed the conviction I can give advice that speaks more directly to the experience of having a hard time writing. I have also reached the conviction that if you have special difficulty in writing, you are not necessarily further from writing well than someone who writes more easily (viii).

This “completely different universe” where people seem to write “without turmoil and torture” was the kind of university Bartholomae describes, where
Performance is all that really seems to count and where performance anxiety is therefore a way of life. And we can think of *Writing Without Teachers* as an attempt to develop a strategy for survival in this place. Through his own effort to recover from the performance anxieties this environment tends to induce, Elbow developed a phenomenology of writing as a productive activity. Writing “without” teachers simply means that to examine what we are actually doing in this process, we have to put the still illusory figure of accomplishment in parentheses, along with the illusion that brilliant products tumble effortlessly from the minds of brilliant writers. The “teacherless classroom” is the kind of place in which this investigation can occur, with or without teachers, much as lessons and rehearsals occur before a performance of music or theater. *Writing Without Teachers* examines what happens in the practice of writing, before the product of this effort reaches an intended audience.

Presented in the “tell it like it is” style of the period, the language of this analysis is conversational, often self-referential, but seldom expressivist. Elbow rarely describes writing as a means to “self-discovery” or “self-expression” in the terms Berlin attributed to the book. Instead, he continually uses the language of perception, cognition, physical movement, and physics, often to construct metaphors or models for understanding how writing itself comes about, takes direction, and transforms, or to explain how ways of thinking interfere with this process. In reference to “summing-up” what one has already written, for example, he uses terms of movement and energy to explain a common misconception:

The essence of this approach is to change your notion of what it means to try or attempt or work on a piece of writing. To most people it means pushing as hard as they can against a weight that is heavier than they can budge—hoping eventually to move it. Whereas of course you merely get tireder. You must create mechanical advantage so that “trying” means pushing against a weight that you can move even if that only moves the main weight a small distance (20).

Even a term such as “growing” does not refer to “personal growth” but to words, sentences, and ideas themselves. Like “cooking,” this concept is relational. It refers to the evolving relations between writers and words, words and other words, ideas and other ideas, writers and other writers. “Believing” and “doubting,” introduced at the end of the book, are not personal feelings or matters of opinion; they are intellectual choices and cognitive conditions. In *Writing Without Teachers* there is very little sense of the writer as a unique individual, and conceptions of the “self,” to the extent that they appear in the book at all, seem insubstantial—certainly not romanticized or reified. The writer seems little more than an occasion for writing to happen—or the locus of concepts that keep
writing from happening of its own accord. Far from representing any fixed notion of the self, “Writing is, in fact, a transaction with words whereby you free yourself from what you presently think, feel, and perceive.” (15)

More than any other book I know about, Writing Without Teachers examines what happens in the writer’s reference frame. Within this reference frame, freewriting is not a variety of personal expression. Instead, this exercise demonstrates the point of departure for all writing—in a kind of coordinated movement both physical and intellectual, which Elbow has often described as the use of a writing “muscle.” This account of writing as an embodied activity—a matter of knowing where you are in the process and what you are doing—directly addresses the sense of disembodiment, dislocation, and stage fright my students describe. Elbow’s work has also been enormously helpful in my work with graduate students afflicted by writing blocks, which the university encourages them to perceive, as Mike Rose observed, “as a mysterious, amorphous emotional difficulty.” Writing Without Teachers illuminates the nature of these obstacles as patterned features of the writing process that all writers encounter and can move beyond.

Elbow formalized, expanded, and in some ways clarified these ideas in Writing With Power, which also precedes Berlin’s taxonomy of rhetoric and the debates that followed. In the index to Writing With Power, terms such as “expression,” “discovery,” and “personal” do not appear at all. The word “self” occurs only in a few references to “self-evaluation.”

If in his first two books Elbow was not the expressivist Berlin imagined him to be, how and to what extent did he become such a figure in composition theory?

In the Writing on the Edge interview, Elbow acknowledged that his view of writing, especially his own struggle with writing, is in some ways psychological, “in the sense of figuring out how my life works.” He added that “When Writing Without Teachers came out, a lot of people said, ‘Well, this is too therapeutic. This is too much about feelings.’ So in a way I was always trying to prove it was all academic, not too psychological” (25).

To this extent, perhaps, Elbow does maintain expressivist interpretations of his own experiences as a writer, and the fact that he views his early difficulties as emerging from personal problems explains in part why he has never entirely refuted charges that freewriting and other kinds of exploratory writing are forms of personal expression.

But there is another reason, rooted in the intellectual foundations of Elbow’s contributions to composition theory. Elsewhere in the Writing on the Edge interview, Elbow described the best candidate for a central theme that runs throughout his work: not expressivism, but “embracing contraries.” “I want to
define it as one of my life’s works,” he said, “to work out an intellectual justification for going in two directions at once, for maintaining things that look irreconcilable to be—if not reconcilable, at least both true, both deserving one hundred percent affirmation” (16). Even in this strong statement of purpose he said “one of my life’s works,” leaving room for other goals, other positions—what we might call Elbow-room. When he notices that one perspective has become dominant, he usually promotes the opposite, not instead but as well.

As a consequence, it is almost impossible either to pin Elbow to any single position or to exclude him entirely from any position. Because he hates exclusion and hates being “pigeonholed,” as he often says, there is an underlying pattern to the way he responds to criticism or to characterizations of his work, even when we can’t predict exactly what he will say. Told that he is or is not A, he will reply vigorously that he is A, but also B, its opposite. Told that this kind of thinking makes a virtue of ambivalence, he would probably reply, Yes, but I don’t want to be just ambivalent. I also want to be very definite!

Through this pattern of response, Elbow has routinely argued that people misrepresent him by half, and in his tendency to “embrace” whatever critics say he is or is not (along with its opposite), he has embraced expressivism more explicitly than he did at the beginning of his career. To understand why Elbow has been engaged in this unresolved argument for so many years, we have to acknowledge the extent to which he has agreed to represent “personal expression” against the rigors of “academic discourse,” the figure of “the writer” against that of “the academic,” and the “private” domain of writing against the “public” domain of texts that have reached an intended audience. In his arguments against his critics, Elbow partly adopts the roles he has been assigned and stubbornly refuses, as often as not, to say what I want him to say.

On his side of the “Conversation” with Bartholomae in CCC, for example, I wanted Elbow to say “No, David, you’ve missed the point altogether. There is nothing essentially personal or nonacademic about freewriting, and a dimension of the writing process is not in itself a genre.”

But Elbow did not challenge Bartholomae’s notion that exploratory writing represents a genre of first-person narration or argue that most academic writing is initially exploratory. Instead, he set up an opposition, “Being a Writer vs. Being an Academic,” and defended the open, exploratory role of the writer against a narrow, ambiguous conception of the academic. Students must learn to be writers first, he argued, before they become academics, and meanwhile, especially in the freshman year, teachers should maintain the illusion of context-free discovery that Bartholomae criticized: “Indeed,” Elbow said, “much of my behavior is an invitation for them to pretend that no authorities have ever written about their subject before” (“Being a Writer” 79).
In his essay “Reflections on Academic Discourse,” Elbow maintained similar distinctions between the writer and the academic, nonacademic and academic varieties of discourse within academic contexts. He argued, for example, “for one kind of nonacademic discourse . . . that tries to render experience rather than explain it. To render experience is to convey what I see when I look out the window, what it feels like to walk down the street or fall down—to tell what it’s like to be me or to live my life” (136). In this passage he referred to types of writing, more or less literary: “autobiographical stories, moments, sketches—perhaps even a piece of fiction or poetry now and then” (137). In the next paragraph he argued that “we need nonacademic discourse even for the sake of helping students produce good academic discourse”—now referring to the kinds of exploratory writing that lead to finished essays or reports.

What is “nonacademic” about writing used to develop understandings or positions for course assignments? For that matter, if teachers assign autobiographical narratives, fiction, or poetry, isn’t that writing, in that context, academic? We could understand these distinctions more clearly, perhaps, if we knew what Elbow meant, exactly, by “academic discourse.” But in his effort to define the personal or expressive side of this false dichotomy, the academic side becomes blurred. In different parts of the “Reflections” essay, Elbow defines academic discourse as writing based on “reasons and evidence rather than just opinions, feelings, experiences” (140) or as “the discourse academics use when they publish for other academics” (135). Although he refers to many general features of academic writing (such as “detachment,” “explicitness,” and also “inexplicitness”), he argues in turn that “we can’t teach academic discourse because there’s no such thing to teach” (138). If genres of academic discourse are too diverse to distinguish as a category of writing, as he then argues, how can we distinguish “nonacademic” writing from them? And what is the point of doing so?

In the same fashion, Elbow has become an advocate for the types of writing readers associated with his work. Writing Without Teachers did not promote personal writing as an expressive genre, in opposition to academic discourse. Nor did Writing With Power. Yet in 1990 he edited an issue of Pre/Text devoted to “expressive writing,” represented in this issue as a loose assortment of narratives, letters, dialogues, and essays with little in common beyond a casual, self-referential style and a tendency to refer to others by their first names. In his foreword to the issue, however, Elbow did not just present this work on its merits. He used the occasion to argue that this kind of “personal expressive writing can do the work of academic discourse.” (“Foreword: About Personal” 13).

Considering that Pre/Text is an academic “Journal of Rhetorical Theory,” we might assume that the pieces contained in the issue are already doing the work of academic discourse. It is difficult to imagine, when reading them, what
other kinds of academic work they might be doing in other contexts, or what, exactly, this kind of writing has been excluded from. In the following passage from his preface, Elbow’s sense of opposition and exclusion appears to serve the main purpose of supplying contraries for him to embrace, an excluded position he can defend in the interest of restoring balance between opposites:

Thus, I constantly read passages that simply assume without any argument that since Elbow is interested in the personal, private, and individual dimension, he must be working against what is social, against the idea of the social construction of meaning and reality. With this comes, of course, the assumption that if the social is good, then personal and private must be bad: that people who stick up for what is personal and private must be advocating the cause of solipsism. (13)

With one hand, therefore, Elbow proudly points to the label he tries with the other hand to remove.

While this effort to avoid fixed positions annoys Elbow’s critics, I should acknowledge that it has often broadened and enriched the field of debate in composition theory and pedagogy. The brilliant distinction between the “doubting game” and the “believing game” has helped to resolve crippling dilemmas for teachers who feel they must choose between opposite values and roles in the classroom. By alerting us to the uneven “war” between reading and writing, Elbow has encouraged us to balance these distinct yet related dimensions of learning. As a rule, I greatly appreciate the kind of binary thinking that has led Elbow to these insights.

Some contraries, however, are more useful than others, and the effort to embrace a false dichotomy creates more confusion than it resolves. To the extent that Elbow has agreed to defend personal expression against academic discourse, he has helped to keep essential dimensions of academic writing in the closet of expressive discourse and individual psychology.

“What’s at stake here?” Elbow often asks, and in conclusion I should explain why I consider it so important to dissolve, not embrace, this dichotomy between the personal and the academic.

One reason is primarily conceptual: an inclination, very different from Elbow’s, to make single kinds of sense out of ideas I find useful. Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae are among very few composition theorists who have closely examined what student writers are actually doing, along with the ways in which teachers and institutions are implicated in the problems these writers encounter. Yet it is very difficult for readers in our teacher training programs, for example, to see that Elbow and Bartholomae are describing different dimensions of the same phenomena, the same kinds of writing problems in academic work. The impression that Elbow defends personal writing, while
Bartholomae describes academic writing obscures the complementary values of their insights into the ways in which writing comes about and into the broader rhetorical contexts in which writing occurs. Because both theorists create these impressions to some extent, I find that I need to make their work mutually useful through selective interpretation.

Other reasons are pedagogical. As I noted above, I often use principles and passages from Elbow’s work to give blocked writers alternatives to the hopeless conclusion that their problems result from personality disorders, irrational fears, and other personal or emotional factors best understood through psychotherapy. The emphasis on embodied movement and direction in Writing Without Teachers and Writing With Power directly addresses blocked writers’ sense that they are paralyzed, as they often say, or mired, derailed, disengaged, or lost. These conditions arise in the contexts of their academic work, not just in their minds. Most of the obstacles they encounter result from misconceptions of the writing process (including the idea that it is “psychological”), ineffective methods, or rhetorical and social factors that make writing virtually impossible, such as graduate committee members who have conflicting expectations. I do not want composition theorists to tell these writers that their problems or the solutions are “personal” after all.

Freewriting exercises also hold very limited value in a writing class if my students think of this kind of writing as personal expression, as opposed to academic writing. These contraries correspond entirely too well with categorical distinctions my students bring with them to college, find reinforced when they arrive, and apply to the types of writing their teachers assign. Because they have been led to believe that the formal, impersonal essays they submit to teachers fully represent academic writing, they assume that informal writing they do not submit to teachers is personal and “expressive.” If they are not writing for teachers, they assume they are writing about themselves, even when they are not. Like Bartholomae, and like Elbow himself on some occasions, my students also tend to identify all spontaneous, exploratory writing with genres of autobiographical writing and literary description. Without help, they cannot find a bridge across this divide, between the material they generate in freewriting and the papers they turn in to teachers. Many of my colleagues run into similar obstacles when they assign “reflective journals,” which their students imagine to be a distinct variety of personal expression akin to a diary, even when their entries about course material include wonderful observations they could expand in assigned papers.

When we encourage students to place exploratory writing in a nonacademic category of personal expression, they also become blind to the real foundations of academic writing and research, and this is my main concern. For
scholars in English, who have the most direct influence on students’ conceptions of writing, academic texts are about other texts and are therefore implicitly about reading. Writing based on direct experience and observation, memory, perception, or dialogue represents the genres of fiction and nonfiction scholars in literary studies write about and therefore seems nonacademic. This distinction appears to draw a clear line between academic writing and writing based on personal experience, and it is possibly one reason for which Elbow distinguishes “the writer” from “the academic.”

But the line is not so clear in other fields, which include most of the ones my students choose as majors. In my collaborative work with teachers throughout the disciplines, I continually encounter varieties of academic writing based on direct experience, observation, description, and memory. Some of these forms represent essential stages of investigation or phases of the writing process. Some are narrative or descriptive or contain dialogue. Yet the terms “personal writing” or “expressive discourse” would misrepresent them completely. Laboratory notebooks, for example, include extensive narration and description based on direct observation in the process of doing research, yet for professional scientists these are also public, legal documents. A botanist’s field journals consist largely of descriptive writing, often supplemented with drawings. In many other fields, too, direct experience can be another word for “data.” Both in research notes and in publications, psychological or sociological case studies include extensive writing based on first-hand experience, often with interview material presented in dialogue. “Writing from experience” does not necessarily mean literary nonfiction. Nor does it necessarily “reproduce,” in Bartholomae’s terms, “the ideology of sentimental realism.”

Many ethnographers, for example, depend on a version of freewriting in their research. To record as much as possible of what people are doing or saying or to recall this information before memory fades, they write continuously without pausing to think about what they are writing. For similar purposes, in a course on social research I often assigned what I called “descriptive freewriting.” I asked students to situate themselves in any kind of social context and describe what was going on, by writing continuously for at least five pages. Is this kind of writing personal or academic, private or public, subjective or objective? Analysis of this descriptive writing helped to illustrate that such dichotomies obscure more complex, useful questions about the relations between the observer and observed and about the choices observers make in writing—questions essential to research and writing in the social sciences.

When they become involved with our writing programs, teachers in the disciplines develop a wide range of assignments of this sort: assignments that engage undergraduates in varieties of academic discourse that occur prior to
the completion of published literature in their fields. This work is often informal, exploratory, or collaborative. In some cases teachers read and evaluate this work; in other cases they do not. Sometimes students work on these projects in groups, exchanging drafted material and suggestions for the next move before teachers see what they have done. In an ecology class, for example, students spend an afternoon writing down dozens of questions during field observation near a pond. During the next class, they work in groups to sort through these questions and identify the most interesting ones they might be able to answer through research. When they have selected questions for further study, they begin to design research methods, conduct literature searches, and exchange drafts of research proposals. Teachers remain on the edges of these activities, which closely resemble those Elbow described in the “teacherless classroom.”

Teachers involved with interdisciplinary writing programs develop these assignments because they represent versions of disciplinary practices, acknowledged forms of academic discourse. When disciplinary practices become instructional practices, as they should be, students begin to understand the otherwise hidden, mysterious ways in which knowledge, accomplishment, and finished writing evolve from confusion, exploration, collaboration, false trails, repeated experiments, and hard work. They can experience the process through which observation of social phenomena, for example, becomes the literature and knowledge of sociology. Engaged with their teachers in these kinds of academic discourse, students no longer feel that as writers they must assume privilege and authority they do not possess.

In this respect, Peter Elbow’s early work on the evolution of texts holds the greatest potential value among writing-intensive courses in the disciplines where teachers are often predisposed to think of exploratory, observational, and collaborative writing as essential forms of academic discourse. His work will not reach these teachers and students outside English, however, if composition theorists, writing program administrators, and Elbow himself continue to associate this work with literary genres and processes of “personal expression.”