Writing With Elbow

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Peter Elbow the person was my first introduction to the field of composition. It was in the early 1980s; I was a few years into my graduate degree in literature at SUNY Stony Brook; and Peter took over our writing program. I had barely, if at all, been aware of a field called Composition, but I taught first-year composition regularly, usually by lecturing on how to write arguments. Fascinated by literary theory, especially feminist theory, I was feeling somewhat resistant to the field of literature, because of my growing awareness of the discrepancy between what I thought of as my political consciousness and what seemed to me to be the pseudopolitics I was learning in literary studies.

I got to know Peter through his books, which I began to read after attending his first meeting with graduate students (where, in a sequence of prompts that has since become second nature to me, he introduced us skeptical graduate students to freewriting, focused freewriting, and process writing), through the study group on composition theory he convened, and, not least, through the calm but relentlessly insistent way he imposed his views on the graduate students and his colleagues at Stony Brook. Many years later I still learn from Peter, and I want here to describe how my own thinking about teaching composition has evolved as a result of my exposure to his ideas and also to speculate about the strong reactions he tends to evoke in people in our field.

Peter’s approach—kind, willing to listen, often appearing to be a bit undecided, yet in fact totally unshakable in terms of the things he really believes in—deeply interested and delighted me from the start. For example, I remember how he dealt with one first- or second-year graduate student, very earnest but uninformed, who had found her way into our composition theory study group, which was made up mostly of faculty and more experienced graduate students. Her understanding of the subject at hand—it was collaborative learning, I remember; we were reading Ken Bruffee—seemed to me limited and useless to our group discussion. I did not know much about the issue either, but therefore I felt obligated to keep my mouth shut. I seethed inside, listening to my fellow student speak in a hesitant and querulous way. I barely
refrained from rolling my eyes, willing her to finish what she was saying so the group could go on with what I was sure was a much more sophisticated discussion than she could appreciate. However, Peter listened to her very carefully and kindly and said something in response that revealed a very interesting and provocative question in what she was saying. From within her struggle at articulation he pinpointed the deepest insight and made the group see that she was actually raising an issue that was very engaging for all of us.

While I do not remember the specific issue, I do remember how startled I was at Peter’s ability to listen so well and to respect the opinions of anyone who gave them. In addition to the important lesson about teaching it gave me, Peter’s attitude gave me permission, ultimately, to express my own hesitant views in the study group too; without his generous listening, I may well have remained silent. I have seen Peter attend gracefully and productively to many seeming-at-first-to-be-insignificant perspectives since then; such attention is an intrinsic part of the way he approaches the world and by giving it he expands his own perspective and others’, immeasurably. To me, it is a political act, in the sense that Peter uses his position of authority to bring out the views of people whom others might not otherwise listen to. He never does it in a patronizing way—his action grows out of a deep and genuine curiosity and out of the knowledge that people inevitably, no matter who they are, do in fact have something useful to tell him and others.

As a result of having the wonderful luck of being in a position to think with Peter about teaching writing, I ended up all but abandoning my field of literary studies and redefining myself as a composition person. Watching Peter work, I realized that attention to pedagogy was crucial for anyone wanting to find ways to effect political change within established classrooms. While I rarely heard Peter talk overtly about politics, his ideas answered a yearning in me to have a practical grounding for the theoretical framework I was developing, a framework that grew out of feminist and postmodern theories, resistance to hierarchies, concern with fairness, championing of the marginalized, and attention to women’s experience. The kind of classrooms Peter urged us graduate students to create, I realized, was the kind in which such ideas were enacted in practice.

For example, our classrooms resisted the view that writing classes should mold students into exactly the kinds of writers that faculty in other departments wanted them to be. While I did instruct students to an extent in meeting the requirements of specific discourse communities, my overall interest was in getting them to articulate their unique responses to their subjects. Teaching writing came to seem to me to be political work in that if I refused to impose a way of thinking or writing on students, I felt I was allowing them to resist established hierarchies and power structures and gain access to their own
unique ideas. Those ideas, I thought, should be brought from the margins of the classroom to the center, and they would ultimately enable students to assert their own power in the world at large. It was a feminist act, I reasoned, to require that my classes open up time and space to listen well to each view, particularly those of quiet women students, whose voices ordinarily were silenced. I now understand the naivety in my thinking; systems, of course, are more entrenched than any individual. Nevertheless, I still believe that encouraging individuals to speak from their own convictions enables them to get along better within systems and to be in a position to effect profound change. In his abiding interest in finding ways to allow students, and everyone, to speak for themselves, I think, is the heart of Peter’s political power and is also the threat he represents to the established order, even the academic established order.

It was only after getting my first full-time teaching job, as a lecturer in the composition program at the University of California, Santa Barbara, that I came to discover that Peter did not define the field of composition as I had hoped he had. Though ubiquitous in his influence, I realized, he served, as many of the essays in this book attest, as an object for many very mixed and complicated emotions in the field at large. I found that colleagues referred, and some continue to refer, to people like me as “Peter-Elbow-people,” which meant to them that I was out of touch with the hard realities of the real academic world, naive about the nature of institutional power, and “touchy-feely” in the sense of wishing to serve as a therapist of sorts to students. Many people, I found, could not get past this stereotypical view and could not take me, or my perspective on writing, seriously. To me and to many others, the field of composition in the late 1980s was a place where one had to take sides in what we now tend to see as false dichotomies—personal vs. social, expressivist vs. social constructionist, etc. I had many debates about teaching writing in those days, but they tended not to be fruitful on either side because, as I came to see later, I too falsely stereotyped the “other side” as being overly and blindly obsessed with a rejection of the “personal” in the name of the “social” and as being too cowed by the idea of “academic discourse” to be able to effect real change.

I came to be fascinated, though, by the deeply negative emotional reaction that some people had against what they imagined as Peter’s perspective. At UCSB, and in the field at large, I encountered many people whose emotion toward Peter was enthusiastic appreciation and gratitude, of course, but there seemed also to be a critical mass of people whose reaction went the other way, toward passionate negativity. Peter seemed to stir up some sort of deep fear in the latter people, fear that often seemed to be based on a cursory reading of some of his work and an irrational judging of it as somehow less than academic. At the time I did not understand that reaction, as I knew Peter was nothing if
not rigorous and philosophical, but at the same time I myself came to feel surprisingly ambivalent about those who spoke so strongly against Peter.

While my peers always saw me as representing the “Peter Elbow” side, my teaching was in fact deeply affected by the strong arguments of my “opponents.” Though in theory I believed that “empowering” students, in the sense of “helping them gain access to their unique opinions,” was to their greater benefit in the long run than “teaching them how to write academic discourse” in a more didactic way, in practice, in spite of myself, I began to change. This happened out of the sense of guilt I felt when I listened to people I respected, who disdained what they saw as Peter’s views. They convinced me that perhaps I was in fact doing my students a disservice when I simply invited them to explore their own ideas. Perhaps my methods were naive and not rigorous enough, I worried; perhaps I would do better to initiate students into the harsh realities of academic discourse, by requiring that they write the way that I, in my role as a representative of the university, considered most academically effective. After all, my training in literary studies had given me an abiding appreciation for academic discourse in the strictest sense, the sense of being based, always, on texts and on clearly structured arguments questioning and probing those texts. I began to worry that perhaps freewriting and other unbound explorations of students’ own ideas were simply too pleasurable, and the part of me that was worried about rigor was deeply suspicious of pleasure. Didn’t I want students, I asked myself, to take their place as members of an academic discourse community? How could I do them such a disservice as to engage them in “fun” writing that blinded them to the harsh realities of the academic world?

In answer, I turned away from assignments that invited students’ unique responses, began to use *The World of Ideas* and then *Ways of Reading* as texts, and began to require academic argument in my composition classes. I even stopped, for a few quarters of teaching English 1, inviting students to do any freewriting. I returned to the sort of teaching I had done before I met Peter, focusing on argumentation, except that I retained what I had learned about peer groups and let students read and respond to each others’ essays. My students would read a selection of relatively difficult academic essays, and I, like countless other first-year composition teachers everywhere, would assign writing based on the assignments given in the book.

This teaching practice put me in line with what many of my colleagues were doing and assuaged the part of me that, in spite of my theories to the contrary, bought into the “Peter Elbow is a naive idealist” argument. Yet I was not at all content. Another part of me, the “if Peter Elbow is a naive idealist then I am too, and besides, the only way to effect real change is to push for the perspective I believe in” part felt extremely uncomfortable. I was undecided and conflicted; I
told myself that teaching students—and at the time I was teaching in a voluntary program of composition classes for students considered “at risk,” in addition to my work with “mainstream” students—to write academic discourse was perhaps in fact more powerful politically than doing otherwise. Yet my doubts and hesitations grew. I found that I did not relish going to class as much as I had when I had required writing that was more centered in the students’ own experiences, and I was alarmed to find that I was bored reading much of my students’ writing. At the same time, inevitably, the students seemed bored too. It was clear that they were dutifully, with varying degrees of effectiveness, obeying rules and doing what they were supposed to do, but their hearts did not seem engaged. Instead of the joyful desire to share their work with others that I had noticed in students assigned writing about issues growing out of their own thoughts and feelings, I noticed a weary seriousness that did not seem fruitful. I remember one student in particular, a very friendly, thoughtful, outgoing, opinionated first-year student, struggling in my office to shape his ideas into a clear essay. Writing, for him, was agonizing, completely unrelated to his natural gregariousness. He had so much to say in class, but when he wrote, his sentences were inevitably pinched and awkward. I sat with him in conference many times, suggesting ways that he could restructure and revise in order to formulate a clearer argument, but as I did so the conviction grew in me: he needs freewriting, he needs to choose his own topics. Those things alone would cause him to blossom as a writer, because they would connect the fluency he had in speaking with his writing. Instead, he saw writing as unrelated to talking; he struggled to construct and reconstruct each sentence, and he was stifled. My methods, I realized, were preventing me from getting him to experience the pleasure of expressing in writing the ideas he was passionate about. I knew I could help him experience that pleasure if I taught more in the “Peter Elbow” way that I had put aside. Yet I was constrained by my syllabus and by my stated goal that the course involved writing essays on the academic texts I had chosen and on the issues I had provided. I felt trapped, too. Could this possibly be the best way to empower the student? I wondered, and my answer was “no.” I imagined him having the same clenched experiences writing for other classes, even as he tried so hard to do well. His fate, it seemed to me, would be to finish college—if he did finish—with a mediocre record at best, in spite of his considerable intellectual energy and enthusiasm. Instead, though, if he learned to connect his own lively thinking and opinions with his writing, his fate could be very different. Painstakingly showing him how academic essays should work, I felt, was not the way to help him make that connection.

As I thought further about this, acknowledging my sense of what that student and many others really needed from a composition class, I gradually realized, for
the second time, that teaching analytic arguing in a way that did not engage students’ personal interests simply did not work for me. My expressivist inclination, my belief that the best thing I could teach first-year writers was to develop the confidence and skill to articulate their own deepest insights, took over again. At first I tried to combine Elbow-type approaches with more argumentative ones. I began requiring that students buy *Writing With Power* in addition to their text of readings, I had students focus-freewrite before essay-writing, and I put more time and energy into making peer-responding more serious and effective. In spite of my worry about not being rigorous enough, I began to think about how methods aimed at getting to students’ personal reactions were necessary to the most powerful academic work.

Peter’s philosophy had led me to think about the fact that effective professional academics do tend, while constructing their arguments, to write out of genuine personal interest in the material. Before my students can really argue in their chosen fields then, I decided, I needed to help them get a sense of pleasure and confidence in their own ideas. The pleasure needed to come first; it would propel them to write in a more engaged way. This meant that if I wanted them to analyze academic texts, I would assign not fixed questions from the book, but, say, a series of informal responses designed to help them to come up with their own particular angles on the material.

From there, they could construct theoretical essays that were much more personal in the sense that they were heartfelt. As the semesters went by, I came to assign fewer texts to read and more writing that grew out of students’ interests. I came to work in class with raw drafts of students’ writing, focusing on helping them find ways to create clear and formal structures from within their informal writings, instead of making use of already established structures.

Meanwhile, I had a chance to experience Peter’s style of work from the perspective of a participant in a group led by a student-centered teacher, when I got involved with the National Writing Project in Santa Barbara. I experienced the great pleasure and growth that occurs when students (who in this case were all teachers as well) get to write together, work in groups, and use writing as an intrinsic part of group discussions. Realizing firsthand what a pleasure it could be to work with peers in such a community energized my teaching, as it made me see that I was creating ways for my students to experience the same thing. The pleasure was also a large part of my reason for becoming an Associate of the Institute for Writing and Thinking at Bard College, in 1991 when I moved back to the east coast.

Peter started the latter institute in 1980 as a three-week summer program, taught primarily by faculty from other colleges, for students about to enter Bard College. Invited to do so by Bard’s president, Peter developed a program
in which faculty and students wrote together frequently and where faculty—
each in charge of a class of about twelve students that met for about five hours
daily for the three weeks—lived together in a dormitory, away from their fami-
lies, and collaborated intensively on theoretical frameworks as well as on class
planning. The way he started this institute—gathering friends and associates
from all over the country, who he felt would be effective and interesting collabor-
orators and asking them to recommend others in a grassroots way—is vintage
Peter, as is the way he led the institute, always open to anyone’s feedback, but
insistent on certain parameters, like his rule that everyone write together in the
dining hall before breakfast.

By the time I got to the institute in 1991 (Peter actually worked there for
only two years, and the institute has evolved since, but it remains true to many
of his founding principles) it had become a well established place for faculty
development for teachers from all over the country, as well as continuing to
house the three-week program for entering first-year students. As a faculty
member there for the student summer program as well as the teacher work-
shops, I worked intensively in teaching groups that grew out of Peter’s philoso-
phy of teaching. When associates of the institute get together, at meetings that
last anywhere from an hour to an intensive weekend, with groups ranging
from a handful of people working on a particular issue to the larger group of
about fifty associates, we inevitably write together and hear our writing around
the table, as a way of beginning or continuing our discussion.

Writing together, I found, through these experiences with peers, is a pro-
foundly fruitful experience for practically any group of people. Having experi-
enced it so intensely and repeatedly, I now try to get people to write, with
varying degrees of success, whenever I am at any meeting with colleagues.
When I do so, I remember Peter’s gentle but firm insistence on writing; often
colleagues, like students, grumble when they have to write on demand, but
they usually are pleased after they have done so. It is amazing how quickly peo-
ple can get to know each other when they write together and how present peo-
ple feel in a group once they have read their writing aloud around the table
without feedback until everyone is heard. This practice—requiring, say, that all
participants write their thinking on a particular question and listen to all the
others before talking—can seem unnecessary and ponderous for those who
have not experienced it. Someone will usually say “can’t we just all talk?” But
once people write and are forced to listen to everyone before talking, they
begin to realize that the process not only allows views to come forth that other-
wise could easily be swept aside, but also saves time because it forces everyone
to articulate a position briefly. It decreases the instances of tiresome filibusters
by people wanting to get their opinions heard. Further, it helps people figure
out what their positions are more productively than talking can. Seeing the transformative effect of writing in practice on a regular basis with my peers confirmed for me that requiring my students to write and share informal writing together was crucial to my own teaching. Peter’s work on freewriting has immeasurably helped me and countless others define our classes around writing more than texts. I came to see that the more deeply personal people could be in writing, the more alive their writing in any genre became, because they had access to the scariest and thus usually most interesting parts of their ideas.

If one purpose of this book is to encourage people to delineate “their” Peter, in the way reader response critics might talk about “their” Pride and Prejudice or “their” Beloved, “my” Peter is a strong believer in the self, while the “real” Peter is perhaps more hesitant about the primacy of the personal, as seen by his discomfort about the way he has been pigeonholed as an expressivist (see Elizabeth Flynn’s article in this book). At times, I wish that Peter would enact more of “my” sense of him, which, I realize, contradicts in some ways what I am calling the “real” him. Knowing this, I find that I want to push harder for some of the things that Peter is thought of as advocating, even, sometimes, when he himself does not necessarily wish to advocate them.

The real Peter would be the first, I’m sure, to celebrate this desire of mine to take his theories wherever I want, even if he does not necessarily agree with me. In fact, the real Peter has always given me, as well as so many others, the permission, and the tools, to articulate my own most unique ideas. When it is working best, freewriting gets us in touch with our scariest and most interesting thoughts, and even very experienced freewriters need to be reminded regularly of this. How many times in the last almost two decades have I sat with my writing and said “I have nothing left to say; I don’t know what I have to say” and then, remembering Peter’s techniques, stopped that useless train of thought and said, “no, go with it, keep writing, close your eyes, don’t worry about audience, just articulate what’s there.” How many times have any of us done so and taught our students to do so and heard students say “wow, this really works”?

So, having freewritten about it, I will describe some of my current thinking about teaching first-year composition as it takes up, moves beyond, and comes back to Peter’s ideas. Though I define myself without reservation as an expressivist, I am beginning to take another turn, one that questions student-centered learning even as it continues to embrace it. I find that sometimes—especially working, as I am now, with mostly economically privileged students—students do not necessarily seem as enlivened as I would want them to be by the opportunity to explore their own ideas in writing and to share them with others. After I had introduced freewriting to a class on the first day one recent semester at Trinity, for example, a student came to me and said, “I had freewriting in high
school, so I really don’t think I need this course,” as though such writing is yet another task to do for the teacher, instead of an ongoing practice for self-knowledge and communication! Many of my students see school as a place for doing what the teacher wants and meeting specific conditions; they understand the teacher’s requirement that they “think for themselves” as simply another thing they should do for the teacher. “Okay, I’ll think of more feelings to add to the essay; where should I put them in?” was a response a student made recently to a comment I made on his essay that I wanted to know more about his views.

So what happens to student-centered learning when the students do not, cannot, or simply do not wish to serve as the center? What happens to my desire to effect some sort of political change through my classroom practices? Faced with the kind of students I have now, I still sometimes wonder if the techniques associated with social constructionist composition pedagogy might be the best ones to push students out of their complacent attitudes. Yet I resist teaching theoretical critique in my composition class, as that seems best suited for sociology or political science classes. What I have to offer as a composition teacher in particular, still, is an experience of using writing both to better experience self and, a necessary corollary, to become, in parallel, better able to listen well to others. My task now is to find ways, through better and more demanding informal writing assignments and better-structured insistence on extensive revision, to push past my students’ complacency and to encourage them to explore themselves more deeply and at the same time to be increasingly responsible for listening well to others’ views. I have also been thinking again about argumentation, about how to encourage students to argue well by pushing against the traditional parameters of argument—for example, by using emotions in their arguments instead of putting them aside in the name of rationality.

In short, there is a paradox here, and, of course, the man who embraces contraries invites such things. I want students to think for themselves, but, if they don’t want to, I want to use writing to force them to think for themselves and to move beyond their initial thoughts and discover more. Implied in “my” Peter’s work is a strong authority, one that can say “you must freewrite, NOW!” and I want to be very explicit about that authority. Yet faced with students like the ones at Trinity, my temptation nevertheless is still strong, I find, to capitulate and tell them what to do. They are excellent obeyers of rules, and most are at least fairly competent, so if I just require that they read academic essays and give them some good instruction on established forms, they will leave my classes satisfied and, if all goes according to plan, well equipped to write essays in their other courses. So why don’t I just do that? Why do I bother with trying to free the students from something they may well have no wish to be freed from?
My answer is that my political beliefs force me to resist the status quo and to teach in a genuinely student-centered way. And I cannot simply create the structure and let the students do the rest, as I may be able to do in other contexts—for example, when working with engaged teachers. With my undergraduates, I have to be much more forceful about what “student centered” means. Paradoxically, I want to compel students to let their own unique ideas out, to listen well to others’ ideas, and to let their essays take forms that grow out of their thinking. “Student-centered” can thus not really mean what it initially meant—i.e., growing out of the interests and desires that the students bring to class with them. As I said, the desire many students bring is to be told what to do. So my current sense of “student-centered” means that I must first cajole students into allowing themselves to gain access to their intellectual desires and deep interests and then find ways to help them cultivate those. If they are not interested in those desires, they have not looked deeply enough into themselves, and I need to find ways to help them do so. This, to me, is political work, in that it actively resists complacency and pushes for change, growth, and awareness.

I need, then, to take a much more authoritative stance than I used to, in my gentle and perhaps overly nice encouragement that students explore their own ideas. I now put forth a more judgmental or critical stance, one that can seem different from Peter’s, as it attempts to chasten students, for example, with messages like “you’re not writing what you really think: shame on you!” The imposition of such a stance in the classroom, for me, lies in the systematic and insistent use of certain well known techniques. To me, such techniques, Peter’s techniques, are more powerful in themselves than theories, because they effect change on a practical, even visceral level. The most important of these is focused-freewriting, which I am coming to insist on ever more stringently. In the midst of class discussion, say, I ask students to stop and write regularly, interrupting our talking, and afterwards I force everyone to read out loud at least something from their writing, to get a range of views out and then to ask the class to consider all the conflicting views. The more students write together and share, paradoxically, the more they realize that informal writing is not merely an exercise for the teacher, it is a practice for life, a way to sort out and deepen their tangled ideas and communicate them. The key to making informal writing work effectively is in the prompts, which must cause students to probe and question. One of my favorite kinds of informal writing assignments in class, though, is very simple—the question “what did you hear” after students have heard a diverse collection of their classmates’ views. It obliges them to listen carefully and to consider and pinpoint other views. From there comes the prompt “how has your thinking changed, even if only a little, as a result of our discussion?” When it is time to write an essay, students always have plenty
of notes and informal writings to draw on, and from there they can construct a more nuanced essay—one that actually grows out of their own changing thinking—than they would have otherwise. I used to simply say “look at your notes and write a draft,” but now, again, I have a much more engaged approach, which involves having the class look together at a few students’ informal writing and talking extensively about what potential structures emerge, followed by peer group work that has strict rules to encourage students to help each other find the essay structures that work best with each writer’s ideas. While I used to demonstrate responding to writing and then let peer groups find their own way, I now give them response sheets and require them to be much more accountable for their work. This move toward explicit demands, I have found, enables more growth on the part of the students than does greater freedom.

These ideas are familiar to many composition teachers; they are quite simple. To me, they seem more powerful lately because of my newfound approaches to them. I no longer smile understandingly when students want to talk from their writing instead of reading it aloud or when they refuse to write; I am more insistent. That insistence enables me to require that students explore their ideas and discover their own structures.

Intrinsic to the expressivist view, I would say, is a welcoming of essay structures that grow out of writers’ ideas, and a resistance to the belief in instructing students in explicit structures. Even though theoretically I know this, I find at the same time that part of me, still, is scared of my own methods. In spite of Peter and of all I believe, I still have the impulse within me toward a more traditional way of teaching composition. It’s odd—I still struggle a bit, on some level, in spite of my strong belief to the contrary, with the idea that I am supposed to be requiring extensive readings in first-year composition, leading class discussion about them, and assigning specific essay questions that grow out of issues in them. After all, that is still what most of my colleagues continue to do. In spite of this lingering worry, of course, the part of me that actually writes my syllabi is moving farther and farther away from such assignments. I want more and more to force the students to write out of their own interests, not mine, and to allow those interests to shift and change as a result of others’ views. That, to me, is real academic work. As a result of the fact that my students’ reading skills, even at a relatively elite college, are often quite poor, I feel that I can’t take a great deal of time in a writing class to work extensively with them on how they read. I differ with my colleagues who say that learning to write and learning to read are inseparable, and I think the composition classroom, while I make use of readings at times, is a place to focus on writing. So I find myself making use of assignments that call upon the student to chose
something with significance to them—“I-search papers,” interviews with a faculty member, analyses of some issue they are thinking about—in short, the kind of essays that Peter has assigned all along in his composition classes. I converge with Peter here, in my view that while students will write academic essays in many courses, what a composition course is especially equipped to give them is a sense of pleasure in their own ideas, as well as many ways of accessing and articulating those ideas.

Of course, the dichotomy I have set up throughout this essay, between traditional teaching and “Peter Elbow teaching” is a false one. Those who explicitly teach academic discourse may well use informal writing and peer groups in their classrooms; and, of course, expressivists, myself very much included, ultimately do help students write academic essays. I would not teach the way I do if I did not believe that my aim of encouraging students to take pleasure in their own ideas and in writing those ideas enables them to write better in any context.

Yet, like Peter, I like to think of both sides of a dichotomy as distinct, sometimes, because it helps me clarify my ideas. As I look back on the nearly two decades that I have been teaching first-year composition, I see that the conversation within me about methods has been formulated as one between the side of me that feels completely connected to Peter’s theories and the side of me that is skeptical and cynical in the face of them. This other side makes me begin to understand those in our field who resist Peter’s views and who, consciously or not, see him as a threat to the established order. He is a threat to the established order, and that is probably what draws me to him most strongly even as it scares me a bit. Implied in Peter’s work is the old feminist dictum that “the personal is political,” and, to me, his methods too are feminist in nature, in that they honor some of the traits and values traditionally associated with women, like listening, nurturing, and attending to feelings. Those traits can be very dangerous in the academic world.

I have noticed a resistance in composition theory to our association with women’s work. To make our field more “legitimate,” it seems to me, and less “womanly,” some of us, including, paradoxically, some who have a feminist theoretical perspective, attempt to make composition more rigorous and theoretical in the traditional sense of the word. Thus we feel moved to work in abstractions and to do so in a way that resists the practical, womanly reality of looking at each student, seeing who they are and where and how they are sitting, and insisting that they speak their truths. I, too, feel this pull toward abstraction, even as my practice counteracts it.

By insisting on what I am calling the womanly realities, Peter serves as an object of fear to many people in our field. I have been trying, lately, to understand why it is that some people react so deeply against Peter’s ideas. With my
psychological orientation, I cannot help but think that his attempts really to come to terms with, as well as question, academic discourse and other matters simply are too threatening to some people. While I have a conscious delight in Peter’s ideas and a less conscious resistance, for others the conscious reaction is aversion, due, perhaps, to unexamined fears that are not all that different from mine because they are a function of a fear of not being rigorous enough or not playing by the rules. I am especially struck by the fact that many of the people who are so averse to Peter’s ideas believe in the theoretical perspective underpinning them. They might say, for example, that classrooms are politically charged, and they work to find ways to instruct students in the nature of power and in attempts to overcome that power. Meanwhile, Peter’s ideas help countless people deal with their own powerlessness, yet he gets criticized on theoretical grounds for being less than political. Is the threat he poses to the academy simply too great? Do his ideas necessarily undermine the status quo? Is the action-oriented nature of his politics too scary?

The “real” Peter, I would say, has great respect for academic discourse and has written about that respect. He seems to me not to want to push hard and ask why, for example, we need to hold on at all to any definitions of such discourse. I find myself wanting him to be more radical, more brazen in his theories, since for me his theories contain a kind of brazenness that I find exhilarating, even as it scares me. I suppose the best way for me to apply what I have learned from him, then, is to try to be a bit more brazen myself.