Writing With Elbow

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The best advice I ever got came during a presentation Peter was giving on levels of assessment—low stakes vs. high stakes. The first level, he said, was liking writing—not marking it, not grading it, just liking it. What a simple but extraordinary insight—that our first job as teachers of writing is to enjoy what our students produce! I never fail to think of that idea when I sit down to read a set of papers. It doesn’t make the pile any smaller, but it certainly improves my outlook. It reminds me of why I became a writing teacher in the first place.

Bruce Penniman, Amherst Regional High School

Christmas Break, 1975, University of Hawaii, Manoa. Peter Elbow’s first workshop to promote *Writing without Teachers*. Never heard of Peter Elbow or his book; I attend with the vague hope of keeping up on professional developments. *Without Teachers?* Will I be Elbowed out of a job?

No *pre*conceptions = no *mis*conceptions. I like young Dr. Elbow’s low-key delivery. I especially like freewriting and the conversational way it reads. In ten quick minutes I write more than I usually do in an hour. How easy to just pour words onto paper!

Although he doesn’t present it quite this way, I conceive of freewriting as calisthenics and am fascinated by the possibilities. Athletes run windsprints. Musicians play scales. Artists draw sketches. Shouldn’t writers freewrite? I walk two miles home, sucking tamarind seeds and wondering what would happen if my students freewrote for five minutes every day. Universal fluency? Greater creativity? Confident, natural-sounding prose?

We write *The Journal Freewriting Handbook*, begin *The Read-Along Handbook*, name The Golden Triangle and show it to other schools. We must be having fun because before we know it, it’s 1995, twenty years after Peter Elbow’s workshop. I’ve read and admired his follow up *Writing with Power* but never attempted to contact him.

The University of Hawaii English Department sponsors a Citizens’ Chair to lure distinguished faculty from other campuses for a year. For 1995 it snares internationally known writing guru Peter Elbow from Umass-Amherst. It’s bad luck to ignore serendipity; I send Professor Elbow a description of The
Performance English Program-in-progress and explain how its seed was sown by his 1975 workshop. I invite him to lunch with us in our office. He calls, accepts, and later pedals over from Kuykendall Hall on a bicycle.

*James Harstad, University of Hawaii, Manoa*

I remember being on dish duty at the Amherst soup kitchen when two men burst through the double-swinging doors from the dining room, crashed to the floor, and proceeded to pummel one another violently. I was happy to have a series of sinks between me and them and everyone else in the kitchen quickly backed away. All except Peter. He moved in directly and put himself between them, forcing them to stop.

Later, when we all exclaimed at his bravery, he shrugged it off and said only, “the interesting thing is, they were fighting about language.”

*Erika Scheurer, University of St. Thomas*

In class recently an undergraduate student questioned me about the assignment to bring “one page of freewriting about their topic” to class. “What,” she wanted to know, “do you want? What should we include?” I give a little laugh, a kind one, and say as I have a thousand times in the past, “It’s freewriting. You know, you’re free to say anything you want. It has to be about the topic, but that’s the only limit. With freewriting, you can’t do it the wrong way. Everyone’s page of freewriting will be a success.” She replies that she’s “just checking,” implying that she can’t really believe what I’m saying is true. It’s early in the semester without enough time for her to psyche me out as a teacher. She’s looking for the catch and the trick. It makes me sad that students have been so thoroughly, yet necessarily, taught to distrust, to be suspicious and doubtful. I hope freewriting will stand up to the test. Not only do I intend for it as a strategy to affect her writing process, but I hope its practice, her writing and my acceptance of what she brings, will shape the relationship between us as student and teacher.

*Jane Danielewicz, University of North Carolina*

I was pleasantly surprised recently to overhear a group of students in a British Literature course exclaiming in a discussion group that they liked the word “ambiguity,” a word and concept that I interject quite frequently in my courses and that I have relished since my initial reading of Peter Elbow’s *Embracing Contraries: Explorations in Learning and Teaching* (1986). Since then, I have gently, at times, and not so gently at other times, urged students to consider the literary selections we are studying from a multivalent perspective.

For example, in discussing the title character in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” our discussion initially took a traditional—a
“safe”—slant by considering the Ancient Mariner from the mythological perspective. We embraced Elbow’s “defending attorney” position as the students and I argued in support of the Mariner, underscoring the universal role of the storyteller, the Mariner as the wisdom figure and prophetic voice, the “wanderer” who seeks forgiveness for committing a reprehensible deed and reintegration into the community who alienated him, the “teacher” or “mentor,” if you will, who serves as a disturbing voice at times but who ultimately alerts the “audience” to the need for confession and regeneration.

But knowing that Peter Elbow also invites the instructor and students to be tugged in a seemingly opposite or contrary manner enabled me to become simultaneously the prosecuting attorney just at the moment when students seemed comfortable and smug with the wind-down to the discussion. Students soon discussed the role of the Ancient Mariner as interrupter and as the catalyst who forces the audience to confront demons that render us sad and immobilized. Thus, we embraced both aspects of the Ancient Mariner. Elbow’s view of the instructor as both prosecuting and defending attorney was well enacted during that discussion. Such divergent viewpoints, based on textual proofs, provide a perspective on ambiguity that anticipates, welcomes, and balances the healthy tension that comprises so much of life, whose preparation, ultimately, is the goal of education.

Mary Theresa Hall, Thiel College

Dhira Mahoney, a colleague, conducted a workshop focusing on “The Open-Ended Writing Process” (50–58). She opened the session by paraphrasing Elbow’s advice: “When you’re freewriting, the editor should be out of the room.” After writing the guidelines for open-ended writing on the board, she noted that its goal was to help “in the search for the as yet unthought thought.” To get everyone in the room started on the voyage out, she offered the following statement: “The heresy of heresies is common sense.” My own voyage out, not so surprisingly, looked like this:

Yes. That is it. I know this well. This is the aphorism that all academics should keep in mind—if they are to please P&T committees. Write about basic research, and for Pete’s sake, don’t ever write about classroom practice. What happens in the classroom will do nothing for you. You will never get tenure that way. Write about that which is of no use to anyone. Be esoteric, arcane. Don’t be practical. Do exercises that demonstrate your mind’s ability to do mental gymnastics. Do those difficult gymnastic moves. Impress the judges. Above all—impress the judges.

Much of what I publish must be considered heresy among literary folks. Composition? That’s too practical. You can be esoteric, arcane, impractical. I wonder how people like Linda Flower, Peter Elbow, Nancy Sommers, and Sondra Perl are viewed by colleagues (literary folks in their departments?)
For my focus or voyage in, I asked the naive question: “Why do literary folks have such low regard for composition scholarship?” Then on my new voyage out, I pondered:

Perhaps this is a silly question. It all relates to the history of the profession. Until 100 years ago there was little literary scholarship, and rhetoricians had little respect for literary scholarship because literature seemed to have no structure, no discipline. As literary folks rose to power, they maintained a protective paranoia, which later turned to smugness. Interesting. Very interesting. Will the pendulum swing back? I see signs that it might be beginning to do so, but it’s too early to tell.

Duane Roen, Arizona State University

December, 1984. In the newly formed Writing Programs at Stony Brook, where Peter was Director, he talked about a whole new way of thinking about the teaching of writing: process pedagogy. Freewriting, multiple drafts, collaborative writing groups, and the like. At one of the meetings, he noted that publishing student writing often resulted in improved texts, since the students knew the work would be made public.

Taking Peter’s words to heart, at the end of the first semester, I published an anthology of writing by students in several classes of EGC 100, a pre-freshman composition course for mostly non-native speakers with little experience in writing in English. I gave a copy to Peter to look at. He returned it to me with a note. It read, “I (and Cami) were so touched by your books of writing from 100. Lovely. That piece about parting from the stone-faced grandmother: what a knockout. And even the illiteracies, rare, are touching. I’m very pleased that you have made such a spirit in your classes. Thanks for all you are doing.”

I stared at it and reread it several times, almost in disbelief. Thanks for all you are doing? I was confused. Finally, I understood. It occurred to me that in the twenty-five years I had been teaching, no one in any school, from junior high to high school to the community colleges I worked at, no one, other than my students, had ever thanked me, for anything.

Peter’s note exemplified how much he honored, respected, and valued these students and their writing, the teachers and the teaching of writing. He continued to notice and express his appreciation for the work I and others were doing, and it was not long before my teaching practice was transformed.

Peter used to say “a happy teacher is a better teacher.” A simple statement, but oh, how profound. His ongoing appreciation of our work provided the support and motivation for five of his seven original faculty to continue working together in the Writing Program for the next fifteen years.

Fran Zak, State University of New York at Stony Brook
Somewhere in the recesses of the 1980s, when Peter was director of the writing program here at Stony Brook, I recall feeling very much burned out teaching—semester after semester—the basic comp requirement, EGC 101. It had begun to feel as though I was processing students, rather than encouraging process in their writing. An assembly line. With Peter, a casual “How’s it going?” in the hallway could be answered honestly. The idea of being collaborators was more than just talk.

“Not great,” was my reaction one particularly dispiriting day. “I feel like I need to change something.”

“Why don’t you try EGC 100?” This was then largely, unofficially, an ESL course. Territory I was unprepared to explore.

“I don’t have any training, any experience with ESL students,” was my reflex reaction.

“Just get them to do a lot of writing,” was Peter’s parry to my caution.

I did, I loved the course, and that simple sentence has resonated in my writing head ever since. Skeptical at first, I soon found that the freewriting, the loopwriting, the emphasis on deferring the impulse toward “correctness,” toward separating the generative process from the editing process, was exactly what these students needed—so bent on grammar, vocabulary, so afraid of making surface mistakes long before they even had a surface. At semester’s end, their course evaluations became pleasantly predictable. Asked what had changed the most, I would see again and again, “I’m not afraid to write anymore,” “I feel less tension,” “I don’t have that anxiety when I start writing.” Of course. It made perfect sense. What held these writers back was the stark fear of making mistakes. They all could recite defining moments of embarrassment, of humiliation in their writing histories. Remove that pressure (not always easy), and there’s the possibility for richness and voice in the writing. It wasn’t, of course, a universal response. Just those who were willing “to do a lot of writing.”

Ron Overton, SUNY—Stony Brook

*Journal entry 4-1-85 (My second semester in the doctoral program at Stony Brook).*

The Writing and Thinking Institute at Bard College [this past weekend] was a tremendous reinforcement for both my teaching and writing. I was familiar with most of the techniques and strategies of “the Elbow method,” but my participation in the workshop showed me that periodic “practice” of the strategies can be very helpful. The workshop participants were mostly secondary and middle school teachers, some of whom were attending for the second or third time, reinforcing what they had learned at previous workshops. Their interest and enthusiasm about writing and the workshop was contagious. There was a strong sense of community and involvement in all the sessions.
Participants were divided into three groups—two social science groups and one English group. In the English group, we were introduced to freewriting, loopwriting, reader-based and criterion-based feedback, process writing, focused freewriting, and text-rendering. . . . Everybody actively participated in all the activities. In fact, we all become so immersed in what we were doing and in our own writing that questions about classroom implementation became secondary. . . . On Sunday, Leon Botstein, the president of Bard spoke to the group. His commitment to the Writing and Thinking Institute and to getting students involved in their education was inspiring. He explained that Peter Elbow had started the Institute four years before and how it has continued in its commitment to help both students and teachers in the areas of thinking and writing. Botstein and the faculty have high regard and respect for Peter’s work, something that was evident throughout the institute. I was so proud that I had him as a teacher and that I was working with the “demi-god” that they were all worshiping.

Pat Perry, Virginia Commonwealth University

Peter’s stubbornness: I show up to Peter’s office and we sit side by side, looking out at the tennis fields and the hills beyond. I say something despairing: “I can’t write—I’ll never get this chapter done” or “I’ll never finish by June” or “If I do finish it’ll be crap” or “I don’t belong in the academy” or “The people who hired me must have made a mistake.” With extreme patience (only now do I realize how much patience!) and allowing no contradiction, Peter firmly insists: “No, you can write—you will get this chapter done” and “Yes, you will finish” and “No, it will be great” and “Yes, you do belong” and “No, they made the right choice.” Somehow his willing it makes it so.

Erika Scheurer, University of St. Thomas

When Elbow first came to Stony Brook, his idea was to hire writers to teach writing . . . not PhD’s in English but writers, those who practiced what they were to teach. Others said to me, “You don’t have a chance of getting that job,” but to their surprise Peter hired me, a fiction writer, to teach freshman composition, and I’ve continued for eighteen years. In Peter’s program I found myself immersed in a community of talkers. In those first years, led by Elbow, we turned inside out a subject that we’d always taken for granted, posing epistemological questions about the nature of writing, becoming better writers and applying this thinking to teaching. Far from seeking the one true way to teach composition, Peter created a group of experimentalists willing to engage students in a messy and variable process, stressing the importance of this process more than the students’ actual written product. Elbow is a true revolutionary.

Carolyn McGrath, SUNY—Stony Brook
One day I’m worrying a lot about voice and off the shelf I slide Writing With Power. Peter opens the voice chapter by talking about being in a men’s bathroom, how the echo in the marble stalls (he had been humming) makes him think about resonance. The black box seems to him like a violin, and violins must be broken in by frequent playing before they resonate richly. This leads him to thinking about voice and writing. I read on, caught by the idea of resonance.

But later, much later, I get to thinking about the bathroom part, about how odd and at the same time how remarkable yet unremarked upon it was. In the essay “Me and My Shadow,” Jane Tompkins became notorious for mentioning in mid-text that she had to pee. I found it rather intriguing, though I didn’t (and don’t) know what to make of the fact that Writing with Power appeared in 1981 long before Jane Tompkins produced the essay “Me and My Shadow,” published originally in 1987 (and reprinted frequently thereafter).

In Voice Lessons, Nancy Mairs talks about the feminine, being female, language, the body (French stuff), and how she is a female writer, not the male academic sort. With academic irony, I’m anticipating the day when Peter gets dismissed because he’s a feminist; perhaps the connection might explain the rancor I’ve heard directed against him in professional circles, a subconscious backlash against feminism. On the other hand, maybe being interested in personal writing is damning enough.

The body, voice, authority, being female, giving way to voice, to the pleasures of making text that connects me with others—and I found myself (some five years after reading the bathroom sentence) writing a book about identity and pedagogy that included sections of autobiography about my life as a teacher and teaching a new course on women’s personal writing. I finally recognized that for those of us who write it’s permissible (maybe even necessary, if we wish to make things happen), although it goes against all our academic training, to try things we’re not sure about, to have conflicting views, to work with stuff that slides around, to get personal.

Jane Danielewicz, University of North Carolina

Elbowing the EGC 100 class at Stony Brook produced dividends I could never have anticipated. It was easy travel to distant places, a primer in the various ways a language could be constructed, it was my education in cultural difference. I learned not to take personally the silence-instead-of-class-discussion. I learned not to force small group readers and listeners closer than their index for personal space allowed. That “thumbs up” was not globally positive. That speakers of Mandarin may sit together, and speakers of Cantonese will muster on the other side of the room. And, for the first time, I realized to what extent contemporary American English now depends on idioms, catchphrases, buzzwords, slang. Cool can mean hot, bad can mean good. Is the
antecedent for “it” in “Go for it!” (Thank you, Rocky) the same as the one in “Just do it!” (Thank you, Nike)? We still drive on parkways and park in driveways. Can we say, “It goes without saying”? Can an amateur be proactive? “It’s as easy as a piece of pie” is close, but no cigar.

Peter’s challenge to open up the writing workshop, to (first) write with abandon after kicking the editor out of the room, to understand the process of composition as something far richer and more mysterious than templates like the Baker Essay, than strategically placed thesis statements and well-behaved conclusions—all this made language come alive, made curiosity and discovery possible for all of us and our clashing languages. Moving to the margins of the class, away from the center—writing without teachers—I had more time, a better perspective, to notice, to listen to their language, to mine. As a poet, I became fascinated by how close the twist (the “English”?) some students put on expressions resembled the defamiliarizing work of poetry. A writer describes how she left her elders at the dinner table as “I walked out of their conversation,” and you want to know why that sounds right, sounds even better because it’s “wrong.” Another reflects back on his football mentor: “Coach was an angry man with a Jeep,” and you want to know why that bluntness works so well. “We ran under the raining day.” Do you correct that? Steal it for a poem? (Finally, I stole it.)

EGC 100

At the end of the story about letting go the giver of feedback sternly writes:

You are crazy
You ran under the raining day
You will get cold

I have nothing to teach either of you.

The words are good, the concern is right, as is the pleasure to be taken from the raining day.

And who am I to correct Li Ming who begins:

Time flies fast away
It is the unexpected syntax
of truth,
of poems.

Ron Overton, SUNY—Stony Brook

Peter often talked with some urgency about his desire to help students see themselves as writers. Of all the things we do as teachers, perhaps this—the cultivation of our students’ identities, and they of ours—is most central and sustaining. Writing and the teaching of writing are identity-making processes, acts that lead to becoming (not only writers, but any persona or self we can imagine). Few of my students have become writers (the published kind), but all have become someone. Writing and writing teachers have nudged this development along.

The January day I write this it is raining, a freezing rain that minute by minute coats every branch and leaf, every house and car, every rock and street-light pole. The accretion of ice, glitter, beauty, is slow, almost imperceptible, like the growth of these pieces, another word or phrase, another idea, and the shape appears, an outline against the page, the way the dark branches are illuminated by the thin, silvery cover that makes each one distinctive and dimensional. Their shape and meaning emerge in the process of raining and writing.

Jane Danielewicz, University of North Carolina