AN UNEASY RELATIONSHIP: FEMINIST COMPOSITION AND PETER ELBOW

Feminist scholars in rhetoric and composition have been troubled in their attempts to wrestle women from the confines of traditional scholarship and to create a field that is free of oppressive qualities. The trouble often appears during the process of developing feminist scholarship and looking for voices that can support a line of argument without reinscribing the patriarchal thinking being resisted. In this context, Audre Lorde’s mantra that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” seems to serve either as a reminder to avoid using for such support patriarchal language, thinking, and scholarship or an admonishment against incorporating any of the above in feminist work (366). Adhering loyally and absolutely to this ideology, however, means ignoring much theory that has value for feminist scholarship and teaching. Paulo Freire, Kenneth Burke, and Michel Foucault are just a few mainstream male theorists whose work and/or approach has proven both helpful to and problematic for academic feminism, as I will discuss briefly in the first section of this article. A close look at the tensions inherent in this situation supports a pragmatic use of Lorde’s idea as a reminder to teach ourselves and our students to be able to recognize what is now subtly biased, sexist language in order not to use it against ourselves, thereby making available for critical appreciation the groundbreaking, forward-thinking work of such individuals.

Surprisingly, Peter Elbow falls into this category. While he may not have been always “mainstream,” over the course of his career, his work has profoundly shaped the field of composition and has heavily influenced the work of feminist compositionists. Yet, a rhetorical analysis of portions of his work shows avoidance of gender issues as well as cursory referral to and blatant misappropriation of feminist work. Because of his importance to the field of composition and to the work of feminist compositionists, the realization that his work on voice (and other issues germane to women and writing) ignores
women is disconcerting and disorienting. As a result, the use of his work in the scholarship and pedagogy of feminist expressivist composition as well as postmodern feminist composition can be troubling. Yet because of the tremendous influence of his ideas, it is essential that we find a way to approach the problem. In this article, I will present instances of Peter Elbow’s patriarchal language and rhetorical strategies that may be difficult for feminist compositionists to reconcile with the commonly acknowledged affinity between his ideology and feminist composition theory. By the end I hope to be able to propose a way to continue to appreciate and make use of Elbow’s ideas, such as those on voice, with greater awareness and more pointed relevance to scholarship and teaching today.

“MALESTREAMERS” AND FEMINIST SCHOLARSHIP

Perhaps the most notable example of the conflicted character of interactions between progressive theorists and feminist scholarship is the exchange between bell hooks and Paulo Freire. In Teaching to Transgress, hooks writes about the moment in her education when, energized by Freire’s liberatory pedagogy yet troubled by his sexist language, she publicly asks him about the sexism in Pedagogy of the Oppressed as well as “why he had not seen that this aspect of earlier work be changed, be responded to in writing by him” (55-56). She says, “He spoke then about making more of a public effort to speak and write on these issues” (56). In Pedagogy of Hope, then, Freire does graciously “own his sexism,” as hooks says, acknowledging this flaw in his work and thanking all of the women who brought it to his attention. He states, “Discrimination against women, expressed and committed by sexist discourse, and enflashed in concrete practices, is a colonial way of treating them, and therefore incompatible with any progressive position. . . .” (67). Emphasizing the tremendous power and potential of rhetorical choices, he continues, “The rejection of sexist ideology, which necessarily involves the re-creation of language, is part of the possible dream of a change of the world. . . . Changing language is part of the process of changing the world” (67-68). Consistent with his idea here, the act of making this public statement allowed feminist compositionists to make positive use of Freire’s liberatory pedagogy, principally advocating in their writings and incorporating into their pedagogies his ideas of experiential and student-centered content, dialogic method, and critical consciousness and praxis. Now, composition classrooms (feminist or otherwise) have all but abandoned “the banking method” and at least try to become more student-centered. In the case of hooks/Freire interchange, feminist composition scholarship and pedagogy have benefited significantly from Freire’s decision to attend to how gender colors his discourse.

The tension that arises when feminist scholars use mainstream male theorists to support their arguments is discussed more recently with reference to Kenneth Burke and Michel Foucault. Phyllis Japp’s contribution to Kenneth Burke and the 21st Century, “ ‘Can This Marriage Be Saved?’: Reclaiming Burke for Feminist Scholarship,” “echoes concerns posed by many women scholars as they assess the relationship between the traditions of their disciplines and their experiences as women” (113). Japp shows the relevance of much of Burke’s writing and influence in the fields of rhetoric and communication for feminist scholarship. Here, she describes the process of feminist reclamation of patriarchal texts: “If the vocabulary for human communication encoded into our theoretical texts, Burke included, was borrowed from only part of human experience, that of elite males, feminist critics must demystify or secularize the terms, borrowing them back for women by modifying them to include women’s experience” (116). This process of reclamation seems to me an argument against Lorde’s statement of the futility of the feminist use of patriarchal language; it is possible to reclaim the ideas of mainstream male scholars that are pertinent and useful. Additionally, Susan Hekman’s collection Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault is part of the series “Re-Reading the Canon,” by The Pennsylvania State University Press, dedicated to offering feminist reinterpretations of the writing of major figures in the Western philosophical tradition (series editor’s note). Like Japp on Kenneth Burke, Hekman’s collection addresses the struggle of feminists with the decision to appropriate the theories of what she calls “malestream” theorists. Like Burke, Foucault can be used to enhance feminist theory in that his “redefinitions of truth and subjectivity” encourage the close analysis and rejection of formerly accepted truths (Hekman 1). More specific to composition, their work on language as an event, rather than a thing, has supported process theory and reinvigorated the study of rhetoric. Part of feminist reclamation as Japp describes it, however, is first taking a close look at the places where theories diverge from the experience of women as well as remembering the context within which the theories appear.

UNCOVERING ELOMB: CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE OF COMPOSITION THEORIES

As composition is a relatively young field in the academy, many articles and collections have been published that seek to define and describe it (Winterrowd, Phelps, Connors, Berlin, Lunsford, Gage). In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, academic feminism has had diverse faces and multiple goals, some of which coincide with those of composition studies. Susan Jarratt and Lynn Worsham’s collection Feminism and Composition Studies: In
Other Words explores the many areas in which feminism and composition studies influence each other. In the introduction to the collection Jarratt says:

Feminisms overlap composition studies, developing a growing body of work on discourses and practices of difference, representation, and the social construction of knowledge and its subjects; composition studies speak to feminist inquiry where it investigates gendered differences in language, teaching, and learning. . . . These, and many more touchpoints between feminisms and composition studies, suggest the rich possibilities located at their intersection. (3)

One of these touchpoints is the much-contested concept of voice and all its contiguous parts: personal narrative, authority, and empowerment. In another collection, Kathleen Blake Yancey’s Voices on Voice, Susan Brown Carlton (“Voice and the Naming of Woman”) compares the two fields with respect to voice, saying, “One explanation for the dominance of metaphors of voice in feminism and in composition studies is that both the student writer and the woman find their ‘voicing’ of opinion, experience, analysis, and passion restricted because of their positions in the social order” (226). She points to the position of relative powerlessness of student writers and women (as a subset of student writers?) and the subsequent silencing they experience as a place of inquiry for both fields. And, of course, the majority of the people doing such inquiring are a mixture of women writing teachers, women writers, and graduate students. Because of the many areas of intersection and overlap among the subjects, the subject matter, and the subjectivity of the inquirers, I would speculate that most people interested in voice probably have (or have had) problems with voice.

In “Illiteracy at Oxford and Harvard: Reflections on the Inability to Write,” Peter Elbow himself narrates his own troubles with voice, trying to write for the academy and failing, then returning to his Ph.D. work, and in the process coming to many of the realizations about writing that he reveals in Writing Without Teachers. The irony that his article title signals—that someone smart enough and privileged enough to attend two of the best universities in the world had difficulty writing—“complicate[s] our notions of best and worst student” (25). Despite his privileged circumstances, he manages to align himself with those of us who have had our voices silenced because of our social positions as students, women, and minorities. He wants to help student writers find their own writerly voices chiefly through personal narrative and freewriting, two developments in composition studies that have been mainstays of feminist pedagogy because of the affirming nature of sharing personal experience and the relatively safe, pressure-less environment of freewriting.

It does not take long for any composition-related text to refer to Elbow’s work, especially in the context of expressivism. Not surprisingly, he is the most frequently cited person in Yancey’s Voices on Voice. In her introduction, she uses Elbow in outlining expressivist (expressivist) theory, saying:

Expressionists have made explicit an inextricable connection between voice and authority, one that all writers on voice will claim. For expressionists, such authority means three things: the right to speak, which is a given (Elbow); a source of individual truth leading to authenticity; and the ability to speak, which is developed naturally, acquired as a matter of course if allowed to develop outside of intimidating and overly conventionalized discourses. (xi)

Feminist composition pedagogy makes this definition pertinent to all students by understanding that the right to speak is not a given for many people. Expressivist feminist teachers, then, first help students claim their speaking/writing voice in order to speak/write with authority, authentically. In “Elbow’s Radical and Postmodern Politics,” Elizabeth Flynn further shows areas where Peter Elbow’s work touches that of academic feminism by paralleling what she terms Elbow’s anti-modern theoretical alignment with feminist expressivist composition:

Feminist expressivist compositionists emphasize . . . that writing is the expression of a relatively autonomous self. For them, writers will develop best in encouraging environments that emphasize the process of writing and rewriting over criticism of the final product. . . . They often recommend pedagogical strategies such as journals, freewriting, and preliminary writing activities. . . . Their work has been influenced by feminists Nancy Chodorow, Mary Belenky . . . Carol Gilligan, and Sara Ruddick, scholars who identify and valorize women’s different developmental, intellectual, and ethical perspectives and who advocate collaborative learning and the creation of nurturing environments where connection rather than competition is emphasized. (37-38)

The autonomous individual, revision, and freewriting are all associated with Peter Elbow, placing him and feminist expressivist composition in a distinctly pre-postmodern position, but Flynn similarly notes Elbow’s growth toward postmodern qualities. Foreshadowed by “Elbow’s discussion of the importance of both the doubting and the believing games in Writing Without Teachers,” Elbow’s later work more widely acknowledges the importance of considering both sides of the composition coin: the social and the individual nature of language (45). Postmodern feminism’s attention to the diversity of women’s
experience, translated into an emphasis on personal narrative and collaboration in the composition classroom, can also be viewed as a parallel growth from the earlier feminist assumption of homogeneity. Both descriptions of Elbow’s evolving positions as they relate to academic feminism further emphasize feminist composition’s ties to his work, even amid shifting ideologies.

Yet, there are places where “Elbovian” and feminist composition diverge. In “Feminism and Composition: The Case for Conflict,” Susan Jarratt advocates “a more rhetorical composition theory, one providing a model of political conflict and negotiation” (112). She shows that feminist expressivist composition teachers especially enact pedagogies that avoid conflict and promote nonjudgmental, receptive stances among students in order to create a supportive environment for writing. She recognizes that “although the expressionists are displacing authority and thus enacting a feminist goal, expressive pedagogy presents problems for women and for feminism” (110). As an example, she cites Elbow’s “heavily gendered language,” showing that “female readers . . . are positioned differently in relation to these instructions. Demanding that our female students listen openly and acceptingly to every response from a mixed class can lead to a discursive reenactment of the violence carried on daily in the maintenance of an inequitable society” (110-111). In avoiding argument, she maintains, teachers do a disservice especially to female students by not preparing them to deal with oppressive situations. Carlton comments on Jarratt’s piece, saying, “Elbow’s call for [students’] total receptivity [toward one another’s opinions] might be valuable for male students who are unlikely to be practiced in taking noncombative stances, but women students are hardly in need of yet another forum in which to listen, accept, wait, and comply” (239).

Expressivist theory as advocated by Elbow, then, works counter to the feminist tenet of resistance by avoiding the study of rhetoric, of making logical, well-supported arguments in the face of conflict.

As Jarratt indicates, Elbow, like Freire, can be legitimately criticized for not considering his language and his theories with an awareness of the difference gender makes. A rhetorical analysis of portions of Elbow’s most recent major work, Everyone Can Write: Essays Toward a Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching Writing, makes clear his avoidance of any real treatment of gender, even though much of his work is especially suited for feminist pedagogies. In this collection of old, new, and revised essays, he mentions gender considerations or feminism and feminist scholarship only parenthetically and intermittently. First, I will show examples of his skirting the subject of gender as it relates to voice, betraying an odd, almost anachronistic refusal to acknowledge an area of considerable scholarship. In the process, I detail instances of his misappropriation of feminist work to discuss “universal” voice, which intensify the discomfort and dismay of at least this feminist composition-

ist. Then, by looking more closely at the ways Elbow’s ideas about voice have influenced feminist scholarship and composition classrooms, I hope to be able to conclude that when we are hyper-aware of the pitfalls in “malestream” texts such as his, the positive aspects can be used without reservation in the interests of feminist composition scholarship and pedagogy.

**Elbow’s Avoidance of Gender and Misuse of Feminist Scholarship**

Over the last three decades, Peter Elbow has wrestled with some of the same issues as feminist compositionists, such as voice, empowerment, and rigor, yet without significant concern for how gender affects or might even enhance his theories. Old, new, and revised sections of Everyone Can Write treat gender concerns as afterthoughts, frequently in parentheses, and usually as questions not meriting lengthy reflection. He cites the seminal feminist texts of Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule’s Women’s Ways of Knowing and Carol Gilligan’s In A Different Voice and even quotes Adrienne Rich’s poetry, but he does so within the context of defining written voice, not looking at how the concept of voice, however he defines it, differs for women and men. This is troubling since the works he cites as well as much feminist composition scholarship have shown that spoken and written voice for women is not only different, but also more problematic and perhaps more meaningful for women. And as more recent poststructuralist feminist scholarship has shown, these texts must now be approached with an awareness of their own places and purposes in history.

The following examples of Elbow’s almost token treatment of gender as it relates to his work on voice betray a subtle bias against such topics as well as lost opportunities for real consideration of them, which in turn actually point to the affinities between Elbow’s theories and feminist pedagogy. In his chapter “What Is Voice in Writing?” published previously in Landmark Essays on Voice and Writing (1994), Elbow describes five different definitions of voice as audible, dramatic, distinctive, authoritative, and resonant (or “real”), with almost all gender concerns about voice confined to the category of authoritative voice, apparently having nothing to do with identity of self. His words:

Voice with Authority — “Having a Voice.” This is the sense of voice that is so current in much feminist work (see, e.g., Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule in Women’s Ways of Knowing). But the sense is venerable, too. Indeed, the phrase “having a voice” has traditionally meant having the authority to speak or wield influence or to vote in a group. (“Does she have a voice in the faculty senate?”). . . . Notice that this sense of voice, like all the previous ones, does not entail any theory of identity or self, nor does it require making any inferences about the actual writer from the words on the page. (204)
His word choice in the sentence "But the sense is venerable, too" clearly communicates Elbow's non-attitude or even aversion to gender concerns, telling us that despite the connection with current feminist work, the concept of voice with authority is time-honored and, therefore, valid. In fact, this sentence effectively distances him and his ideas from feminism; he distinctly puts "those feminists" in the category of them while he is squarely in the category of us. Further, because of his divided definition of voice, he seems to imply that authoritative voice does not touch at all on his area of expertise: resonant, sincere, authentic, "real" voice, which, he says, communicates the essence of the author through the words. But the concept of voice, whether defined as audible, dramatic, distinctive, authoritative, or resonant, is tied to the essence of women writers, whose existence has often been a silenced one or one where "real" voice is hard to come by. The text he cites, Women's Ways of Knowing, in fact, makes a connection between voice and identity. In their research, the authors noticed that most of the women they interviewed consistently used coming to voice metaphors in describing their own intellectual and personal development: "We found that women repeatedly used the metaphor of voice to depict their intellectual and ethical development; and that the development of a sense of voice, mind, and self were intricately intertwined" (18). Even with a poststructuralist wariness of this text, we can still acknowledge that for many women, and at least for the sample of women described in Women's Ways of Knowing, identity, voice, and authority are all three intimately connected for women—often all at the same time—and rarely exclusive of each other, as Elbow implies.

Elbow's brief acknowledgement of gender as shown above is an improvement over the bulk of his work, yet even here, in the newly written introduction to Everyone Can Write, he treats gender considerations or feminism and feminist scholarship incidentally by placing it in parenthesis, often passing over areas that could be developed further, such as this portion of his argument for nonrefutational rhetoric:

Businesses are discovering that mediational modes are cheaper and more effective than litigation—precisely because of the adversarial, zero-sum nature of litigation. (We are also benefiting from exploring the relationship between this zero-sum behavior and gender roles. The determining link between males and adversarial [sic] competition may lie not so much in gender itself but rather in a history of dominance by males. That is, only a dominant group finds it advantageous to settle conflicts in an adversarial way. Progress and creativity in nonviolent and nonadversarial methods tends to come from nondominant groups.) (xx)

The argument that the refutational mode in composition scholarship is adversarial because it is advocated and perpetuated by the male-dominated academy is a compelling argument worth exploring, but it ends where Elbow leaves it, in parentheses. Its sporadic inclusion seems like an afterthought or an editor's suggestion dutifully accommodated.

Elbow's practice of non-adversarial methods of instruction includes the use of "ally readers" for peer editing, which he discusses at length in a new essay for chapter two of Everyone Can Write called "A Map of Writing in Terms of Audience and Response." An ally reader, says Elbow, "is someone who cares more about the writer than about the writing," a person he says is hard to find:

And yet perhaps ally readers are not so rare as we might think. . . . That is, most teachers naturally slide into being ally readers when a student hands in a piece of writing that is a serious call for help or a cry of pain. When we respond to this writing, we don't usually ask ourselves, "How can I help the writing?" We ask, "How can I help this person?" Indeed, as some feminists have been reminding us (see Noddings, Schweickart), it is not so rare to read as a person who cares about, cares for, values, or even loves the writer. (35)

As Elbow indicates, some feminist composition scholars find resonance in the non-threatening, supportive environment he describes, often referred to in feminist pedagogy as creating a "safe space." But for all his talk about supporting student voices with this environment, nowhere does he acknowledge women students' particular need for this support. The closest he comes, again, in parentheses, is a 1998 essay included in the volume:

I think I see adolescents and adults trying to hide their brilliance. They see that the price of brilliance is isolation; they feel they have to choose between being brilliant and being connected to others. (This is related to Carol Gilligan's finding about adolescent girls: that they have to choose between feeling their own experience and being connected to others.) This helps me understand better why so many school-aged children and their parents hunger for "gifted and talented" classrooms. They hunger for brilliance-as-connection and solidarity instead of brilliance-as-isolation. (13)

Here is a place for Elbow to say that creating a safe space where female students can share their brilliance is also a way of encouraging voice in their writing, but he immediately relates the experience of adolescent girls to all school-
aged children. This is a serious flaw when studies show that girls’ isolation in particular is damaging to their sense of self and, therefore, their ability to tap into an authoritative writing voice. Further, it is true that from time to time he employs feminine pronouns rather smoothly, but nowhere does Elbow really explore or even address voice with an awareness of the particular difficulties and benefits to women. What seems like a natural progression for scholarship in *Everyone Can Write* so often becomes a dead end.

Like many feminists, Elbow encourages resistance to academic norms, but he does not align it with or compare it to feminist resistance to sexism in the academy. He writes about learning “fruitful or healthy ways to resist” because “we can’t learn well without resistance” (18), and he urges us not to be wary of student resistance but to allow students to resist authority in safe ways and places, ideally through freewriting. Composition teachers often use ungraded freewriting journals as a place for students to resist ideas that seem hard to face. He further says, “The implication is that students need resistance for the sake of healthy learning because learning so deeply requires giving in” (19). But in the following segment, Elbow barely touches on the idea of feminist resistance:

Look at writers who resist the conventions and refuse to give in. . . . Such writers write the way they want or the way they think best; they push aside the needs of readers. They may lose readers, yet a few are so skilled as to win wide readership. James Joyce managed to persuade readers to do the interpretive work that we usually only do for our own children. (He allegedly said that the only thing he wanted from readers was for them to devote their lives to trying to understand his words—what every baby and toddler simply deserves, but a writer has to earn.) French feminists like Kristeva directly link the conventions of language and writing with the oppressive structures of society and culture (the “law of the fathers”). (18-19)

It would be reasonable here to discuss resistance to patriarchal language and structures (e.g., academic language), which, of course, is what his first year writing courses do, but he stays with the idea of allowing students safe places to resist the teacher’s authority through freewriting (a key concern in feminist pedagogy is the teacher’s authority). Most startlingly, he chooses as an example a canonical male writer, failing to mention all the women writers who, even in the very act of writing, “resist convention and refuse to give in.”

His nod to diversity early in his book similarly falls short:

Let me conclude with a brief thought about the relationship of my whole story with issues of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation.
what we produce scarcely counts as real writing (the heart is plucked out of it). (205)

What Elbow fails to see or to communicate here is that, especially in Woolf’s time, all women were expected to be deferential to men, and most women probably were. That makes writing with any type of authority monumentally difficult for women writers in her time; it is not just a matter of finding gumption or experts to quote. In Woolf’s case writing in her “real” authoritative voice meant going against the deep grain of society’s expectations of women, which absolutely has everything to do with identity and which is a correlation that Elbow denies. The “she” Woolf refers to in the above passage from Between Ourselves: Letters Between Mothers and Daughters is a fictitious late Victorian “Angel of the House”: a very real and powerful ideal of womanhood Woolf had to name and figuratively kill in order to be able to write with authority. Today the difficulty for women to write with authority or with their true selves behind their words may be subtler, but it is certainly as real.

Critics of my argument may say, Why should Peter Elbow acknowledge gender difference in his work? Nowhere does he openly align himself with feminism. He chooses not to look at his theories with gender differences in mind—we can’t force him to address these issues, right? Of course not, but the importance of his reluctance or refusal to deal substantively with gender is located in the fact that many feminist compositionists have long used his expressivist theories in their classrooms, successfully. The connections are there and have been there, in practice and theory, for years, yet there has not been an acknowledgement by Elbow, only brief, superficial citations. It seems that this refusal not only deserves attention, but also points to the need for compositionists to consider his work with gender in mind.

FINDING THE FEMINIST IN ELBOW

Fully aware of Peter Elbow’s theoretical and rather dogged blind spot with regard to gender (and race and class), feminist compositionists can begin to reconsider Elbow’s theories to determine what is pertinent to their pedagogies. In order to reclaim Kenneth Burke, Phyllis Japp adopts a strategy used by feminist theologians to make Bible passages pertinent to women: “Reclamation is a strategy midway between acceptance and rejection, affirming the value of the text for a . . . community while simultaneously reworking and reshaping that text and its accumulated contexts of interpretation to better serve all in the community” (114). Since this strategy is successful with one of the most stubbornly revered texts in the world, it can conceivably be applied to the revered texts of Peter Elbow as well. Thus far, I have contextualized Elbow’s work within the fields of composition and feminist composition, showing affinities that affirm its value and divergences that call it into question for feminist composition. After analyzing several instances of Elbow’s inattention to gender and misappropriation of feminist work, it remains to be asked how can we now approach Elbow’s work for the benefit of feminist composition? How can we assume that what is good for male students is also good for female students and vice-versa, when we know that so often both sets of students come to college with very different ways of writing and thinking about academics and about themselves and each other. In short, under what circumstances and in what contexts can Elbow’s theories be used strategically to help female student writers?

As Jarrett and Carlton point out, the peer evaluation climate that Elbow advocates universally is rarely what women need in the context of a mixed classroom, but women still need to hear their own voices, to write about personal experience, to experience ally readers/safe spaces, at least initially. They also need to be encouraged to resist oppressive norms by making well-supported arguments. The variation of writing instruction from which women can benefit is something Peter Elbow does not address. There is a distinct absence of women’s voices and a distortion of women’s experience, resulting in silent and silenced women in Elbow. It is important, then, to look at the contexts surrounding these texts and find what speaks to women, while naming what speaks against them. Fundamentally, Elbow’s target is patriarchal systems—but he doesn’t name it. At their core, Elbow and feminist composition work against patriarchal education, yet his gender bias blinds him to the fact that this means different things for women than for men.

Ultimately, however, Peter Elbow has a hopeful and positive pedagogy about empowerment, stated succinctly in the introduction to his Everyone Can Write: “As teachers we can empower our students. We can help them like to write. We can help them trust themselves, work with others, find voices, and be more forceful and articulate in using writing in their lives. We can help make their school experience liberating rather than deadening or oppressive. Indeed, we can help students be better people and help make a more just society” (xv). He has and encourages a creative, inventive, “ya-saying mentality” that follows the principle of having and communicating high expectations of students (xiv). In all these ways I think Elbow’s pedagogy is useful for feminism. If he thinks he sees students’ brilliance fade when they are hurt or anxious, and he sees it shine “when teachers look for their brilliance, treat them as smart, and support them in dealing with what is trying to cloud them over” (13), then a feminist pedagogy of caring is its parallel. If Elbow thinks that especially girls try to hide their brilliance in fear of isolation, a parallel feminist goal is to treat intelligence as desired and something brighter when shared. Elbow’s rhetoric is always personal sounding, as women’s can often be. His book starts out
with a personal narrative about failure, in which he is honest and forthcoming and vulnerable. Elbow defends the neglected: freewriting, private writing, multiple trait scoring, portfolios, collage, silence, personal expressive writing. Why not women?

Conclusion: An Uneasy Relationship

In the end, the uneasy relationship between Elbow’s composition theories and feminist composition theory remains. After decades of feminist movement that insists on the recognition of difference, difference among women as well as difference between men and women, it is disconcerting that a major theorist whose work fits so well with the feminist work of voice recovery consistently fails to consider his theories with gender in mind. And Elbow’s appropriation of feminist texts to make “universal” generalizations is startling. It doesn’t merely ignore gender; it erases it altogether.

Feminist scholars reluctant to use mainstream male theorists in their work should show similar reluctance about Peter Elbow when we get beyond what we think we know about his work and take a close look at his language. Still, I think that compositionists can take what they need from Elbow, armed and informed by a critical awareness of the problematic nature of using “the master’s tools.” His radical statement against traditional academic authority Writing Without Teachers, his constant work on voice, and his willingness to “embrace contraries” has added to the pedagogical repertoire of many composition teachers, to the benefit of countless students.

As a way to close without an authoritarian, single-minded prescription, consider bell hooks’s reflection on Freire’s sexism:

There has never been a moment when reading Freire that I have not remained aware of not only the sexism of the language but the way he (like other progressive Third World political leaders, intellectuals, critical thinkers such as Fanon, Memmi, etc.) constructs a phallocentric paradigm of liberation—wherein freedom and the experience of patriarchal manhood are always linked as though they are one and the same. For me this is always a source of anguish for it represents a blind spot in the vision of men who have profound insight. And yet, I never wish to see a critique of this blind spot overshadow anyone’s (and feminists’ in particular) capacity to learn from the insights. This is why it is important for me to speak about sexism in Freire’s work; it is difficult to find a language that offers a way to frame critique and yet maintain the recognition of all that is valued and respected in the work. It seems to me that the binary opposition that is so much embedded in Western thought and language makes it nearly impossible to project a complex response. Freire’s sexism is indicated by the language in his early works, notwithstanding that there is so much that remains liberatory. There is no need to apologize for the sexism. Freire’s own model of critical pedagogy invites a critical interrogation of this flaw in the work. But critical interrogation is not the same as dismissal. (49)

While difficult and complex to enact, hooks’s critical interrogation of Freire can be applied to Elbow as well. As Elizabeth Flynn and others have done in the new retrospective collection Writing With Elbow, situating Peter Elbow’s works in their historical and disciplinary contexts helps highlight the radical and politically valuable aspects of his theories. At the same time, and after decades of feminist movement and strong growth in feminist composition scholarship, it is important to read Elbow critically, with an awareness of his blind spot, and use only what jibes with what we have learned in our study of how gender affects writing and learning.

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Notes

1 I owe a great debt to Elizabeth Flynn’s piece “Elbow’s Radical and Postmodern Politics” from the 2002 collection of essays Writing with Elbow. In it she provides a useful description of the derivation of various schools or movements of composition studies from larger intellectual traditions and shows Elbow’s position in relation to each.

2 See Laura Brady’s “The Reproduction of Othering” in Feminism and Composition Studies: In Other Words, which problematizes the uncritical citation of Chodorow, Gilligan, and Women’s Ways of Knowing in light of these texts’ “essentialist” assumption of a universal concept of “woman” and use of narrative as synecdoche rather than metonymy.

3 In the first chapter, “Silence,” Women’s Ways of Knowing chronicles what happens to the voices of women who are isolated. Carol Gilligan’s In A Different Voice points to the connection between silence and connectedness in adolescent girls. Also see Gender Gaps: Where Schools Still Fail Our Children commissioned by the American Association of University Women Educational Foundation (1998) for a more recent look at girls and silence in schools that takes into consideration race and class differences. In addition, the idea of an authentic voice has been complicated by postmodern scholarship, such as Kathleen Blake Yancey’s Voices on Voice: Perspectives, Definitions, Inquiry, which recognizes the changing nature of a writer’s voice across time and space.

Works Cited


