BOOK REVIEWS


Reviewed by Ruth Mirtz, Ferris State University

One reason Peter Elbow has helped so many of us become better teachers of writing is because he doesn’t make things easier and yet, somehow, he does. He keeps teaching and writing complicated while making it all so clear, often pointing out the hidden contraries we hadn’t seen before and then showing us how to embrace them both: how to write to an audience while ignoring an audience, how to teach academic writing by way of personal expression, how to teach through assessment. His collegial we’re-all-in-this-together, thinking-it-through voice gets us to the heart of each problem by modeling reflective questioning of even our best teaching. The essays in Writing With Elbow do a similar job of keeping Elbow clearly in the forefront while clarifying and complicating our understandings, misunderstandings, and diverse applications of his ideas.

The book as a whole does what its title implies: the essayists write with Elbow, not against him, by taking Elbow seriously, believing and doubting him as they go. The essays are sharp, thoughtful, well-written, and mindful of a diverse audience who may not have read Audre Lorde or Michael Polanyi (or not read them lately). The writers find objective, academic, textual, and experience-based reasons for Elbow’s influence, despite the constant negative criticism his work has received over the years. Rather than trying to reverse that negative criticism (although acknowledging it on many planes), they expand on his ideas, pushing us to apply Elbow’s ideas further and further. The essays are also highly complementary, with subtle thematic connections, such as the recurrent mention of Elbow’s deep listening in several essays. Two essayists point out how he has over- or understated his positions, while agreeing with his purpose and methods. Another two essayists disagree with each other in fascinating ways, one clearly wanting Elbow to be less expressivist by “dissolving” the distance between personal and academic writing (Keith Hjorshoj, “Dissolving Contraries”) and a second wanting Elbow to advocate for expressivism more forcefully as central to his political work in the way it “actively resists complacency and pushes for change, growth, and awareness” (Irene Papoulis, “Pleasure, Politics, Fear, and the Field of Composition” 168). Overall the essays rely heavily on his early work, especially Writing without Teachers (1973) and Embracing Contraries (1986), but they also cover his entire range of work in areas such as assessment, academic writing, voice, and his latest Everyone Can Write (2000).
The eighteen essays and collages are divided into four clusters: “Contextualizing and Categorizing,” “Exploring Contraries,” “In the Classroom,” and “Voice and the Personal.” Each section centers around a theme and is introduced with a short essay by one of the editors. “Contextualizing and Categorizing” places Elbow’s ideas into specific conversations about the history of composition studies, the debate over sentimental discourse, and the movement of ideas between antimodernism, postmodernism, and feminist expressivism. For example, Richard Boyd’s essay “Writing Without Teachers, Writing Against the Past?” explores Elbow’s early connections with the conscientious objectors movement, a past that I hadn’t known about and that illuminates the radical presence of teaching I find in Elbow’s subsequent work. Elizabeth Flynn, in “Elbow’s Radical and Postmodern Politics,” gives a rich look at the way that Elbow’s work has changed, how it is “considerably more politically progressive than it might at first seem” (34), and how it fits with other dynamic movements in composition studies. In the section titled “Exploring Contraries” are two strong essays that re-read Elbow in light of more complete (according to the essayists) and contextualized takes on his sources, Freire and Polanyi. The other two writers in this section look at Elbow through the lenses of ordinary language philosophy and non-dualist Eastern wisdom traditions. The “In the Classroom” cluster includes Kathleen J. Cassity’s direct observations of Elbow’s own classroom practice (haven’t you wanted to know whether Elbow practices what he preaches?), the Hjorshoj and Papoulis essays mentioned above, and two additional essays delving into teacher response and Elbow’s complicated relationship to writing assessment. The final cluster, “Voice and the Personal,” includes essays on Elbow’s physical metaphors, Anne Herrington’s take on the issues surrounding the need for writers to “render” experience, and an essay by Wendy Bishop on how she sees Elbow’s and her own work as a “balancing act,” with perhaps the best explanation of how Elbow comes by his “guru-gadfly” role. The section ends with two collages, one by Sondra Perl describing some of the scholarly and personal lives she has shared with the man Peter Elbow and a second one by a group of Elbow’s former students.

The final section of the book is the most personal, both in the way the essayists approach their subjects and in the work of Elbow they address. For this reason, some readers might prefer to read the essays in reverse order. However, I found there are two other, overlapping categories of essays in the book: essays that take Elbow’s ideas into new territory and those that disturb our old readings of his ideas. Some of the essays in the first group, those that take Elbow’s work in new directions, include Tom O’Donnell’s essay “New Uses for Doubting” and Jeff Sommers’s “Spoken Response: Space, Time, and Movies of the Mind.” O’Donnell teases out the problem of knowing when to play the doubting game and when to play the believing game, particularly in student texts. He points to a kind of doubt-within-belief that appears as a “dissonance” in the text that reader and writer need to “pounce” on in order to find out what exactly is believed and what is doubted. Sommers describes how and why Elbow’s reader response method, “movies of
works with tape-recorded responses, emphasizing the temporal nature of the response and the benefits students derive from hearing the teacher’s voice. I can easily generalize his point about tape-recorded responses to include all “real time” movie-of-the-mind responses, which can mean peer responses during class or teacher responses during office conferences since access to tape recorders is a problem, although not an insurmountable one, as Sommers explains.

The second category of essays, the ones that agitate Elbow’s work and force me to reread his words, include Kate Ronald and Hephzibah Roskelly’s “Embodied Voice: Peter Elbow’s Physical Rhetoric,” C. H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon’s “Pedagogy for the Bamboozled” [emphasis theirs], and M. Elizabeth Sargent’s “Believing is Not a Game: Elbow’s Uneasy Debt to Michael Polanyi.” Ronald and Roskelly analyze Elbow’s “erotic” in the sense that Audre Lorde uses the word—that is, the way his bodily metaphors and physicality “[become] the argument, a way of seeing the whole of his message about readers, writers, and writing rather than its discrete parts” (211), which has often been misinterpreted as the “personal” aspect of his writing. They realize that Elbow’s consistent emphasis on writing as an act that takes place between physical bodies is “both power and problematic in a profession that at once understands and values the personal location and mistrusts its use in scholarship” (219). Physicality pervades his work: eating, wrestling, using muscles, and seeing become ways to talk about nourishment, balance, struggle, power, and surrender in the act of writing and reading, all concepts that contain what Ronald and Roskelly call “oppositional tension,” the source of power (221). The “double perspective” of Elbow’s metaphors is part of his argument about thinking and writing: “the mind needs to be able to handle conflicting data, to use data that doesn’t easily mesh” (221). Knoblauch and Brannon take issue with Elbow’s reluctance, in “Pedagogy of the Bamboozled,” to see an unmediated version of Freire’s critical pedagogy moved from rural Brazil to American universities. They think Elbow sets impossible standards for American teachers, not because of the teachers’ lack of will or skill, but because of institutional and society realities and, thus, Elbow makes critical pedagogy equally impossible to conceive as a “meaningful ‘contrary’ to embrace” (67). Knoblauch and Brannon show how Elbow’s reasoning doesn’t take into account the possibility of adapting Freirean principles for American writing instruction. In another critique, Sargent discusses the concepts Elbow has derived from Michael Polanyi’s work with the tacit dimension of knowledge. Elbow has always acknowledged his debt to Polanyi’s thought, but Sargent clearly reads Polanyi differently than Elbow. In fact, she sees Elbow’s practice as profoundly aligned with Polanyi’s theories but sees his explanation of the doubting and believing game as different from Polanyi’s idea of belief in important ways: Polanyi describes belief as an irreversible commitment to seeing the world a certain way while Elbow identifies belief as one aspect of a dualism to be embraced, something to be tried on temporarily.

In our field today, we don’t regularly hear about the Believing and Doubting Game or teacher-less classrooms but, as this book attests, simply scratch the
surface of our field’s thinking and there’s Peter Elbow, bright and shiny like the new skin a snake regrows underneath the worn and scarred old scales. I haven’t thought too much about Elbow as I’ve prepared for my first-year writing classes in the last few years; however, when reading Writing with Elbow, I felt compelled to pull out my copy of Writing without Teachers and found that the first five weeks of my class, possibly the entire semester, is from Writing without Teachers. As awful as the metaphor is, this book does help us shed our superficial skin of peer conferences and portfolios and get back to what matters—why we have peer conferences, why we use portfolios, why we know what to say to students. That these essayists found Elbow’s ideas historically significant, generative of new ideas, and worth reclaiming through close re-reading shows us how much more we have yet to learn from him.

Those of us, and I include myself in this group, who had Elbow at our sides as we found our way to and through composition studies as a major field of study will be enticed and delighted by this book. However, those who find Elbow inexcusably personal, pedagogic, and non-academic will not find enough here to change their minds about his work. The same qualities of thought and writing style that irritate Elbow’s detractors are what intrigue and prompt the essays in Writing with Elbow. Indeed, most of these writers disagree with James Berlin’s assessment of Elbow as an apolitical expressivist. And while many of the essays re-categorize or get to the heart of a categorization issue, the more helpful purpose of this book is to extend, clarify, and complicate Elbow’s work, to “demonstrate,” as the editors note, “the diversity of responses to ‘Elbow and Elbowisms’ within the discipline of Composition and Rhetoric” (xii). That goal is admirably accomplished in the book. Yet many of the essays hint at another purpose: to illuminate the dismissive nature of some reactions to Elbow. Bishop, in “My Favorite Balancing Act,” describes Elbow’s work as “plate-spinning” of the type performed by Chinese acrobats on the Ed Sullivan show. She aptly gets to the heart of why so many of us admire Elbow’s work: it comes from his teaching; it has “acrobatic integrity” (252) in the way it keeps possibilities in the air rather than stretching for closure; it’s “textually gregarious” (250), taking us on a long journey with many side trips, “looking for a new place to stand, an unexpected and productive view” (247). Yet while Bishop and other essayists can point to people who denigrate and dismiss Elbow, they have only partial explanations about why people dismiss Elbow. Some of the essayists, such as Knoblauch and Brannon, and Sargent, get at specific lines of disagreement. Thomas Newkirk, in his contribution “Sentimental Journeys: Anti-Romanticism and Academic Identity,” describes, among other things, the difficulty our profession has with the power of sentimental discourse, which ultimately becomes our own struggle between belief and skepticism. The collection as a whole makes me wonder if this struggle may be one our colleagues project onto Elbow’s work, making them unable to read generously or write with him.

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“It’s never been particularly safe to praise pedagogy, often its downright dangerous,” Wendy Bishop points out in the introduction to In Praise of Pedagogy: Poetry, Flash Fiction and Essays on Composing, co-edited with David Starkey. In celebrating classroom teaching, however, this rich collection does just that. Bishop, Starkey, and foreword author Ken Autrey offer several compelling reasons why a collection of creative writing about teaching is salient to our teaching lives, among them that a “richness . . . results when we think and write creatively about our lives in the classroom” (Autrey xiii), a depth of reflection that may get lost in more expository prose. Further, they hope that the collection will call teachers back to their own writing. In Praise of Pedagogy fulfills all of these worthy goals, but what’s more important is that, taken as a whole, these vignettes offer a rarely glimpsed portrait of our classrooms and students painted by those who inhabit and teach them.

Much has been written about the cliché-ridden popular image of today’s classroom perpetuated by movies and television, reinscribed by news reports and those ubiquitous letters to the editor wondering “what’s going on (or not going on) in today’s classroom?” Yet with a few exceptions, one voice is absent from the cacophony of noise and image that comprise current renderings of education—that of the classroom teachers themselves. In Praise of Pedagogy finally gives voice to the teacher. Moreover, unlike Haswell and Lu’s Comp Tales, which offers a more audience-specific portrait of the many faces of the composition discipline, tailored specifically to those who teach it, In Praise of Pedagogy expands the conversation significantly. Classroom veterans and novices alike will recognize themselves in these pieces, but ideally those outside the teaching profession may benefit from reading them as well.

Autrey, Bishop, and Starkey frame the discussion with an introduction, foreword, and afterward that weave exposition with their own pedagogical musings. In the six sections—From and For Classrooms; Language and the World; Of Writing, Teaching, Being Taught; Advice and Observations; Memories of Our Children and Families Learning; and Remembering Those Who Taught Us—we