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“I’M AN ENTHUSIAST. I think that everyone can write better and with less frustration and anxiety if they harness the enormous powers of their vernacular speech: speaking onto the page for the early stages of writing and reading aloud to revise during the late stages of writing.” (Vernacular Eloquence 317)

Introduction: The Democratizing of Written Rhetoric

On December 8, 1975, a very disturbing essay appeared in Newsweek called “Why Johnny Can’t Write.” This essay was unsettling because it publicly exposed America’s literacy problem. The title would lead any reader to believe that the problem lies with the child, but in the following decades of research we have seen that the problems associated with literacy lie not with the child but rather the system the child learns from and society’s view of what constitutes good writing. For his entire career, Peter Elbow, recently retired from The University of Massachusetts-Amherst, sought to correct this perception of the student as the problem. As the capstone to a long and prolific career, Vernacular Eloquence (VE) amasses much of Elbow’s research and experiences in teaching literacy through orality, contributing to the field a philosophy of writing that is timely, needed, and exceptionally eloquent in its own right. Elbow’s views on writing first came to national attention with his 1973 volume Writing Without Teachers, a work that challenged many assumptions about how students learn and how the process of writing unfolds. Such a radical challenge to the conventional notions of literacy and the teaching of English has not been without political consequence in academia.

As early as the 1960s, competing methods for literacy instruction were critiqued just as quickly as they were presented. Edward P. J. Corbett’s method used principles drawn from classical rhetoric to provide a humanistic method for writing, while Richard Young, Alton Becker, and Kenneth Pike introduced tagmemic rhetoric as an alternative way of teaching writing. Not long after, Linda Flower and John R. Hayes employed empirical research from cognitive psychology to introduce the field to problem-solving strategies of writing. These and countless other works contributed many valuable methods to the field of composition studies, but adopting these methods did not come without public debate and discussion. Elbow took to the task of defending his method
throughout his career. Most notably, in 1995 Elbow and his colleague, David Bartholomae, engaged in a spirited dialogue over their opposing methods, demonstrating how such dialogue can stimulate great intellectual production. Over time, Elbow’s views gained support by offering a sensitive understanding of writing, particularly highlighting its close relationship to speech.

Approximately forty years after *Writing Without Teachers*, Elbow provides a late statement, one that bookends his nascent efforts to challenge our notions of literacy and how to teach it. The fruits of his life’s work, the wisdom drawn from his career-long experiences, are lucidly captured in *VE*. Rather than be a cynic who carps criticism on the deficiencies of present writing approaches, Elbow offers a framework to help learners draw upon speech abilities—or traits which come much more naturally to most of us—as a platform not only to create effective prose, but also to revise prose, a task central to effective writing. This is not a how-to-write “textbook,” but *VE* offers an approach so elegant in its simplicity that its application appears to be an obvious extension of everyday language practices.

America has changed greatly since discovering Johnny’s (and Janie’s) literacy problem. Now, America is a more diverse country, no longer having one Standard English (if it ever did) but many competing, plural “Englishes” that give shape and expression to wide-ranging thoughts and sentiments. Elbow’s *VE* recognizes that America is a country of diversity and provides a method that facilitates not only multiple expressions of diverse voices but also ways to help writers reach a larger body of English speakers. That is, while there may no longer be one Standard English, there is a larger shared common form of English, and *VE* helps writers move from their own dialects to those more common, shared conventions of English writing or grapholect. (A grapholect is a written language based upon a spoken dialect or, as Walter J. Ong explains in his 1982 work, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of The Word*, the grapholect permits an oral dialect to be written out and become the literate standard). That the diversity of our literacies grows more pronounced—especially as a variety of non-standard “Englishes” compete for expression—only reveals further that this grapholect approach is anything but obvious to American educators. The close relationships among speech, reading and writing may seem apparent to non-experts, but many educators and scholars have done a masterful job of Balkanizing themselves so that the fluidity of these communication processes are all but lost in our teaching and research. In short, reading and writing, speaking and listening are often treated as distinct and autonomous communication activities. For many decades, these fiefdoms did an effective, if not ironic job of not “speaking” to each other . . . until recently. However, efforts to break down isolating walls have resulted in innovative approaches to learn-
ing effective communication, both oral and written. As illustrated throughout VE, Elbow’s position endorses orality as our solution:

When “illiterate” children learn to write by speaking onto the page, a principle of profound simplicity emerges: writing comes naturally before reading! Very young children can write before they can read, they can write more than they can read, and they can write more easily than they can read. For they can write any word or sentence they can say. (320)

The key to understanding why Johnny and Janie can’t write lies in an understanding of the oral vernacular and the power of literacy. Issues involving writing and speech are not unique to us or to our time; in fact, knowing the history of rhetoric can help us identify cultures that faced similar issues and, in identifying their struggles, we might better identify and solve existing literacy challenges.

**A Historical Perspective on a Current Problem**

Scholars studying the history of rhetoric have recognized that many cultures have facilitated writing by drawing upon the heuristics of their oral vernaculars. Ong’s previously mentioned final volume, *Orality and Literacy*, confirms this, as does Eric Havelock’s *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present*. Elbow examines how Ong, Havelock and other distinguished scholars culminated their respective careers by realizing the historical patterns and relationships that exist between speech and writing. Elbow draws upon the insights gained from these historians of rhetoric to address current literacy problems in relation to the vernacular. That is, what seems natural in speaking can enhance the necessary, critical skill of effective writing. It is widely acknowledged that writing came into existence as an aid to speech and memory but, over time, writing became an art unto itself, one dictating the “proper” mode of written and then spoken address. In our email correspondence with him in the summer of 2014, Elbow argues that the opposite ought to be the case, pointing out that “after a while, the rules for writing began to dictate what is acceptable or correct in speech” (Elbow “Re”). The natural mode of addressing others in oral discourse, as Elbow argues, should be used as a basis for refining writing. In truth, this process does happen naturally when speech habits begin to modify writing rules, but the transformation is often met with great resistance from guardians of the English tongue, decrying our loss of “good” English.

As mentioned above, the rise of the vernacular and its competition with proper English is hardly unique. Rather, it represents the latest version of a
phenomenon that has historical precedent, and recognizing historical antecedents can give us a valuable perspective on the present problem of a Standard English that is incompatible with the diverse literacies of our society. One of the benefits of VE is that it provides many historical illustrations, the most dramatic being the literacy crisis that Italy experienced in the 14th century. At the peak of the Renaissance, Latin was the standard language for written communication, even though classical Latin was far removed from the everyday vernacular of Renaissance Italians. Elbow uses Dante as a prime example of a luminary who broke with convention by writing in his vernacular instead of Latin. Many of Dante’s contemporary Italian philologists were outraged with his departure from Latin despite the fact that he wrote just as eloquently in his native Tuscan dialect. Even today, Italy remains a country of many, many dialects. Yet, Dante, Boccaccio and, yes, Petrarch (whom Elbow treats as an opponent) wrote so well in their vernacular that their works eventually attained high literate status. This historical example illustrates the impact of transforming to the vernacular not only in the mundane practices of everyday life but in high art as well. Understandably, Latinists of the 14th century were shocked and some appalled when Dante and other writers elected to depart from Latin as the mode of high literature and poetry and write in his Italian vernacular, the Tuscan dialect of Florence. There was, as a consequence, great resistance to this movement, but his vernacular was so eloquent that writing in Italian dialect(s) soon became tolerated, then acceptable, then preferred. When Italy became a nation and selected one of its many dialects to be “Italian,” the vernacular of Dante was selected. In Florence, where the dialect and grapholect are essentially one and the same, the Tuscans are regarded as speaking and writing the best and purest Italian. Several examples of well-known writers departing from the proper Latin are illustrated throughout VE. Similar to other educators who have faced vernacular challenges, Elbow’s career has been devoted to teaching others to write better. For Elbow, however, “better” means writing more clearly and directly by drawing from vernacular speech. Does this mean we ought to forsake Standard English? Not exactly, because eventually (and inevitably) even our vernaculars become standardized, helping bind speaker/writer with auditor/reader in mutual understanding. Hence, we might be better off replacing the expression “Standard English” with “Common English.”

The Layout of Vernacular Eloquence

VE is divided into four parts: “What’s Best in Speaking and Writing?,” “Speaking onto the Page,” “Reading Aloud to Revise,” and “Vernacular Literacy.” Conversational in tone, VE is inviting to general readers, not exclusively academics. Technical, academic treatments appear in gray blocks scattered throughout the chapters for readers wanting more in-depth information or
research-oriented discussions, but both popular and academic audiences will find value in the book.

The eighteen chapters of VE reveal how orality benefits both the invention and revision of writing. For example, chapter three, “Speaking as a Process: What Can It Offer Writing?,” presents Elbow’s view of speech as naturally acquired, albeit acquired through systematic processes. Elbow’s discussion anticipates the parallel argument of writing as a process—a topic familiar to most rhetoric and composition specialists. Specifically, his treatment of coherence and complexity in these processes unpacks and establishes the dynamic interrelationship between speech and writing beyond historical appreciation, showing the importance of speech’s relationship to effective writing.

To his credit, Elbow discusses aspects of speech, such as tone and voice, which reveal relationships with writing. In everyday speech we seem to have little trouble understanding a speaker’s tone and voice. Elbow discusses the relationship of speech to writing through personal observations and research into how famous writers compose—including unplanned speech and dictation practices. These illustrations help readers see concrete examples of oral and literate composition. Overall, the speech-writing relationship is best practiced by fusing vernacular speech to freewriting activities (or what Elbow calls “ink-spilling”) to facilitate invention. Likewise, speech facilitates the invention or creation of written texts. No one ought to claim that the first draft of any essay will be the last draft. In fact, at the point of the last draft is when Elbow asks his own students to revise for mechanics. By providing non-standard oral approaches to writing, Elbow shows readers that unfettered vernacular expression is a way to help ideas flow, principally because such a mode of natural expression does not suffer the constraints of trying to be perfect at the moment of utterance. As Elbow argues, this self-imposed compulsion to write the perfect sentence out of the box leads to writer’s block.

There are times when freewriting “frees up” the author so that she or he can draw from the comfort zone of speech. There are, of course, times for rigorous editing, what some teachers call “polishing the diamond.” Overall, Elbow’s treatment of speech and writing stresses a pedagogical point: all levels of writing are best learned after we’ve convinced the student to care. Freewriting, as Elbow points out, does not mean careless writing. Rather, teachers are helping the student so that all he or she cares about is the idea and expressing it. Revision is another facet of care. Many of us would admit that, like our students, we do not write good first drafts. Elbow’s approach allows students to freely express ideas, and in the process to more easily engage them in the act of writing, equipping them with common conventions for expressing their thoughts and sentiments to a wider audience.
Standard English, Englishes, and the Rise of the Vernacular

Readers of VE will find the beginning of part three fascinating, especially Elbow’s discussion of Standard English, which he shows to be anything but stable and shared. In England, for example, where the Royal Family are the guardians of Standard English, about 25% of the population speak “BBC English” and only about 3% of the people speak the “Received Pronunciation” of Standard English that is associated with prestigious English boarding schools and the Queen (215). Yet readers will see the communal construction of Standard English (including the grapholect) has enormous social implications. In brief, Elbow argues that we can learn the standardized form without compromising our dialect, identity, or culture. Dialects can be used to increase proficiency in common English.

Whereas part two of VE emphasizes using speech for invention, part three emphasizes speech for the later stages of writing, especially revising. That is, the practice of reading one’s writing aloud is an aid in revising and proofreading because speaking slows the writer down, letting her or him hear errors more readily than one might see them, while also giving papers a more acoustic quality. Elbow also discusses another controversial point: using orality as a guide to punctuation. Elbow lays out the controversy over punctuation by discussing two incompatible traditions. The first and older one is the rhetorical/elocutionary tradition that punctuates for an oral culture and is more interested in punctuation’s service to cadence and symmetry. Looking at theatrical prompt books reveals that this form of punctuation was done for listeners, not silent readers. Reading Shakespearean plays silently does a great injustice to those pieces, for Shakespeare intended his vernacular dialogue to be performed orally, not read as the great (silent) literature it has come to be considered today. In short, the punctuation and stage directions are made for orality.

The second tradition of punctuation that Elbow examines is the grammatical tradition, made famous by H. W. Fowler’s A Dictionary of Modern English Usage. Fowler and his lineage of grammarians advanced preferential (i.e., rhetorical) selections of what ought to be considered Standard English and, conversely, what ought not to be considered Standard. The point, as Elbow reveals, is that both the rhetorical/elocutionary and grammatical traditions are socially constructed. For those reactionary advocates of prescriptivist punctuation, Elbow cites when they themselves have broken what amount to arbitrary rules.

Perhaps one of the more striking ideas in VE is the concept of “good enough,” a theme that grounds Elbow’s rationale and approach to effective punctuation as well as rhetoric itself. At first it sounds as though Elbow advocates the least acceptable standard of effective expression, but really he is guarding against those perfectionists who so over-react to grammar and
proper punctuation as to induce writer’s block. Elbow is saying that trusting the process of reading aloud—along with a good knowledge of grammar—is the best possible heuristic for the writer. One can trust the ear, tongue, and eye while simultaneously understanding common conventions of grammar, especially in revision stages. In Elbow’s view, particularly during early stages of the writing process, being content with “good enough” can eventually lead to a higher quality of writing.

For us, however, the most controversial idea in VE waits in chapter sixteen, “The Benefits of Speaking onto the Page and Reading Aloud,” where Elbow discusses two engaging issues. First, he argues that children naturally write before they read and should be encouraged to do so as early as possible. While children may not master the rules of standard grammar, nor even fully understand the alphabet, they nonetheless use writing in many positive ways. Those unbridled ways, Elbow argues, should be encouraged and not dulled by rigid rules of correctness in the form of prescriptive grammar and syntax. As the very title of this chapter reveals, Elbow raises a second controversial issue when he advocates for speakers to use their own speaking languages as the basis for “speaking onto the page.” Arguing against rival views, Elbow makes the case that the ease of speaking onto the page with one’s primary language is inherently better than imposing an artificially spoken English that must be learned and then applied as an aid to writing. Eventually, people can learn the standard forms, Elbow argues, and move around in different genres. In this respect, Elbow claims that literacy is not just at war with those who do not perform proper English; literacy is at war with speech itself.

**Concluding Observations**

*VE* closes by arguing that English will never become Standard English, not with so many “Englishes” available to us; in fact, the pluralization of English has long taken place. Our task, Elbow argues, is to respond to this phenomenon. First, as with different periods in the history of rhetoric, vernacular should and will be recognized as an *acceptable* mode of expression. Second, and complementary to the first point, vernacular Englishes should be recognized as *appropriate* for written expression. This occurs, Elbow asserts, as a challenge to the “powerful ideology of prescriptivism,” in favor of the democratization of writing (369). Over time, we must begin to pay more attention to our speech habits so that we can better convey and share meaning with others. Yet, in the formative stages of composing, more freedom of expression, less bridling from artificial constraints, will prove just as helpful as “speaking onto the page” practices.

Ultimately, how are we to use Elbow’s *Vernacular Eloquence*? While continued exposure to varieties of good writing is obviously helpful and should
therefore be encouraged, making a conscious effort to facilitate the transition to “vernacular eloquence” is becoming increasingly essential. Elbow offers a democratizing heuristic, one that allows individuals to write more effectively by speaking onto the page. The use of speech for the invention of written text is a powerful heuristic that facilitates expression and creativity. Eventually, in the art of revision we must work deliberately to share meaning with others by recognizing conventions of grammar and style that enable the co-creation of meaning between writer and reader (who now is an “auditor” of sorts). How valuable is this contribution to solving “Why Johnny [and Janie still] Can’t Write”? We have no doubt that Vernacular Eloquence will be one of the 21st century’s pivotal works. For its treatment of rhetoric and composition’s history with speech and its thoughtful reflection and recommendations for modern writers, it will change the course of our discipline by empowering all writers to write more eloquently in vernacular expression.

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Acknowledgments

We wish to thank Professor Elbow for corresponding with us during the writing of this review, for answering our questions, and for providing his views on the topics we covered.

Works Cited


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