Edifying Violence: Peter Elbow and the Pedagogical Paradox

JOHN CHANNING BRIGGS

In the process of helping students become their own writers and learners, teachers of writing must at least partly deny and veil the training that makes them teachers. Teachers are of course students, too, and so to some degree can join other students without having to distinguish or obscure their roles as teachers. But as long as institutions are charged with responsibilities of instruction, and as long as there is at least the perception of inequality of attainment when teachers and students are compared, teachers will face this paradox: their pedagogy needs to overcome or reserve itself, even as it comes into play, so as to enable their students to become independent. The teaching of mere technique is not an adequate solution to this problem, since the effective and meaningful application of technique is the sine qua non of composition pedagogy and of writing itself. Likewise, the teaching of writing as liberation does not by itself address the problem of teaching writing that truly liberates (see Boyd). Compositionists continue to confront the problem of discovering and maintaining a responsible forbearance that steers them past the temptation to abdicate and the appeal of resorting to arbitrary force. In a recent interview, Paulo Freire has commented on this dilemma by alluding to the need for teachers to act "impatiently patient" (Olson, "History" 6).

The paradox of pedagogical authority in even the best kinds of teaching becomes highly problematic when teachers of writing begin to believe, as more than a few have recently, that their authority in the classroom is at bottom arbitrary, redeemable only to the extent that it can be given away or used to abolish all uneven distributions of power. The teacher who attempts to shed all authority and the teacher who seizes it to construct a seemingly teacherless system are fraternal twins. They are especially vulnerable to swings between fatigue and zealotry, enthusiasm and despair, that threaten our profession and our students. The greatest casualty of these oscillations is interest in distinguishing between persuasion and coercion.

The pedagogy of composition, which now has an extraordinary influence over the way we educate lower-division students in American colleges and universities (and hence over our education of future teachers of English in
the schools) presents instructors with an additional dilemma: what to do with their authority when they presume to teach persuasion and argument—when they ask students to become teachers of their own audiences. Under the pressure of what seems an intolerable dilemma, many anxious composition faculties have greatly reduced their emphasis on persuasion and argument, focusing instead on expressive, personal writing and exposition. Others have embraced the teaching of argumentation essentially as a tool or as relentless cultural critique, as though the problem of pedagogical authority could be done away with by declaring everyone a teacher, or commanding that everyone be a student.

To grapple with these difficulties, it is worth reexamining the idea of persuasion and the possibility that pedagogical persuasion as it is carried out by teachers and by writers is demonstrably distinct from coercion, falsehood, and the propagation of information. For example, we need to reflect some more upon our continuing reliance on discourse that is persuasive because it is truthful enough to be believed. Granted that half-truths can be misleading, often a partial truth is far better than an untruth. Proponents of self-expression depend sooner or later upon persuading an audience, if only themselves, that they are more honest than hypocritical. Conversely, proponents of a mastery of the ways of rhetorical power typically thirst for something more than power. Stanley Fish’s militant relativism outrages or wins over audiences by putting something important at stake (see Olson, “Fish”). Theorists of discursive power such as Derrida, Foucault, and Nietzsche are remarkably appealing and controversial not only because they question the moves of persuaders and believers, but because they are themselves ministers to lost souls who possess a strange faith: the backhandedly metaphysical certainty that there is no certainty.

To observe that everything is more or less rhetorical and yet somehow grounded in claims of truth is nothing new, and no solution in itself to the pedagogical paradox. Rhetoricians and philosophers have argued and tested the meaning of such contradictions for millennia. There is in fact a danger in assuming that the paradoxical nature of persuasion, its relinquishment and withholding of authority, is self-evident and commonplace. The notion that as a writer or teacher one can merely balance one attribute of persuasion with the other does not address the problem of teaching students to be truly self-governed writers, or of appealing to audiences’ capacity for genuine self-government—both activities fraught with the difficulty of influencing audiences for the better (teaching them to be their own best teachers), not by merely coercing or ignoring them.

A widely read but underappreciated contributor to these debates is Peter Elbow. This essay proposes to reread Elbow’s works in light of the problem of pedagogical authority, an issue that informs them all even though Elbow usually steers away from discussing persuasion explicitly. As I have argued elsewhere, by taking Elbow seriously as more than a master of how-to
therapies and more than a spokesman for expressivism (a role he explicitly refuses to assume), one can begin to appreciate and scrutinize the importance of his understanding of persuasion, persuasive voice, and the relation between persuasion and inquiry. The result of this rereading should help refocus the debate over Elbow's work, moving it away from a fixation upon whether he is correctly progressive or retrograde.\(^1\) It might also lead to a more complete understanding of the limits of Elbow's perspective, and suggest (thanks in part to Elbow's precedent) another way of approaching the problem of pedagogical authority in teaching and writing.

Experience and Theory: Elbow's Problematic, Representative Life

Before 1968, says Elbow, there was a period in his life when he went along with the "mysteriousness" of the prevailing mode of teaching. An instructor in an old-fashioned liberal arts curriculum, he absorbed and enacted what he later called the "plain, pushy, normative" ways of traditional instruction. What seemed open was, he came to believe, secretly coercive. He was guilty of "unsolicited telling" (Embracing 70), plain speaking that shrouded an ambitious TA's self-indulgent, manipulative vanity\(^2\). Looking back, he concludes that he erred because, like his senior models, he thought he had mastered the pedagogical paradox: he thought he could distance himself from his authority by cultivating a specialized discipline and then coaxing his students' aspirations toward that discipline's ways of thought. In fact, Elbow argues, his old success with getting his students interested was representative of a long-fashionable, institutionalized hypocrisy. Teachers who thought they were reasonably persuading students in the old liberal arts curriculum were "bamboozlers." They gathered restive followers; their students' seemingly pliant silence projected a "real animus" at being "taken in" (Embracing 90-92). Teachers were hidden, sinister persuaders, and they created an "epidemic" of distrust. In those cases in which they succeeded, Elbow argues, they taught their charges to be satisfied with wooden nickels.

Elbow explains his own role in that period, not without ironic bravado, as that of a conformist who became a war-resister, a teacher who finally refused to participate (Embracing 70). The "muscle" that he used to stave off disorder in his classroom became "tired" (Embracing 20), like a war effort deprived of a sustaining purpose. He had sought pedagogical victory by means of guile and superior force. It was, he concluded, an institutional and personal tendency toward brutish, physical, and manipulative impositions of order that by 1968, that year of unhinging, he wanted to give up for good (Embracing 72). He abandoned conventional pedagogy and for a time left his formal studies.

The academy's old sickness, Elbow concludes, was sexual too: "The one sure thing is that teaching is sexual" (Embracing 70). And according to his analysis, traditional teaching's sexuality was predatory. In the throes of a
corrupt world, one could make no qualitative distinction between intellectual and appetitive aspiration in teaching. False teachers of the pre-1968 era, he argues, unthinkingly indulged their appetites to seduce their charges. Their charm, all the more manipulative in its power to win over students secretly without the teachers' acknowledgement of what they were doing, perverted even good teachers' passions for education. (In the nomenclature of the nineties, they were all harassers.) The good conventional teachers' very lack of self-consciousness and their inability to bring into the open a desire to seduce made them hypocritically prudish, helping to propagate the notion that there was a false mysteriousness in teaching and learning (*Embracing* 119). Elbow's almost Augustinian revulsion at what he identifies as the arbitrary ways of the old pedagogical power was emblematic of that period, in which there was a sudden and widespread withdrawal of assent from public institutions, and a drastic downturn (most pronounced in the early seventies) in the numbers of graduates entering the teaching profession.

Elbow converted to a new conception of teaching and learning, one that reformulated the pedagogical paradox. From the start, Elbow's new approach was unusual because he took seriously the influence and comprehensiveness of John Dewey's educational reforms designed to democratize the classroom. That is, he took seriously Dewey's paternal influence, for better or for worse, on the entire question of defining real learning and the teacher's role in American schools. In the opening of *Embracing Contraries*, his most comprehensive account of his new conception of liberal arts education, he invokes Dewey's precedent. He refers to the "well-thumbed" pages of a handful of works he has made his own, one being Dewey's *Democracy and Education*. From that book he selects what he calls a "bleak" declaration from Dewey that becomes a tuning fork for Elbow's emphasis upon the self-determination of the learner: "No thought, no idea, can possibly be conveyed as an idea from one person to another" (*Embracing* 8). The quotation obliquely captures the point of Dewey's sharpest criticism of conventional pedagogical authority: conventional forms of instruction, those that we label prescriptive and persuasive, are delusory.

More than any modern educator, of course, it was Dewey who prepared the intellectual and institutional conditions that enforce contemporary professional distrust of pedagogical authority. In *Embracing Contraries*, Elbow both exaggerates and undermines this pattern by using Dewey's authority. He adopts Dewey's sentence in order to create another set of Deweyan arguments that nearly reverse it: a) "real learning" can occur with the help of teachers as long as that learning is "experiential," and b) educators make the schools places of experiential learning. Even an isolated reader, otherwise cut off from pedagogical influence, can be schooled ("affected to the core") by "simply taking in information or an idea" as long as that incorporation is *experiential* (*Embracing* 8-9).
Experiential learning and experiment are akin in Deweyan practice just as they are in etymological history. To learn experientially, one must act upon the world and feel the effects of one's actions. As Dewey says, the experience must be a "trying"; it must test learners as much as it allows them to test the world. Dewey's summary of this principle in *Democracy and Education* is the keynote of Elbow's later arguments for reform:

To "learn from experience" is to make a backward and forward connection between what we do to things and what we enjoy or suffer from things in consequence. Under such conditions, doing becomes a trying; an experiment with the world to find out what it is like; the under-going becomes instruction—discovery of the connection of things. (141)

Dewey presents this process as eminently democratic because it requires that everyone act upon the world rather than accept indoctrination. But that liberation also calls for universal trial, including the testing of all the learners who act upon the world. The price of conducting experiments is personal ordeal. Learning comes through a mutual suffering by experiment, a suffering that is the student's mastering endurance of the world.

Given the necessity of this reformation of education in the image of practical science, what is the role of the pedagogical persuader, if any? Dewey's elaboration of the passage which Elbow features in *Embracing Contraries* tells us that the problem of pedagogical authority can be overcome as long as the learner and the teacher become fellow experimenters, testing and being tested together:

No thought, no idea, can possibly be conveyed as an idea from one person to another. When it is told, it is, to the one to whom it is told, another given fact, not an idea. The communication may stimulate the other person to realize the question for himself and to think out a like idea. Only by wrestling with the conditions of the problem at first hand, seeking and finding his own way out, does he think. When the parent or teacher has provided the conditions which stimulate thinking and has taken a sympathetic attitude toward the activities of the learner by entering into a common or conjoint experience, all has been done which a second party can do to instigate learning. The rest lies with the one directly concerned. . . This does not mean that the teacher is to stand off and look on; the alternative to finishing ready-made subject matter and listening to the accuracy with which it is reproduced is not quiescence, but participation, sharing, in an activity. In such shared activity, the teacher is a learner, and the learner is, without knowing it, a teacher—and upon the whole, the less consciousness there is, on either side, of either giving or receiving instruction, the better. (160)

Both must wrestle with experience without knowing whether either is teacher or student. Thus, the wrestling involves forgetting roles; otherwise, the problem cannot be known firsthand. In fact, the true teacher must construct "the conditions which stimulate thinking" without recognizing him or herself as a teacher, and the student must become a sort of teacher without realizing what authority that change gives him or her over the teacher, who now is more like a student. Success in this endeavor, as Dewey notes, depends upon the cultivation of an attribute one does not ordinarily associate with education: forgetfulness—even though circumstances for the
experiential sharing are carefully premeditated by at least one of the sharers, and even though the student is invited to take the heady role of teacher. What is not fully reciprocal in this volatile mixture of opposite authorities must be repressed.

Elbow at one point argues that this process is simple, that it can be started “tomorrow”; yet elsewhere he acknowledges it is not so easy to bring off. In an earlier book that attempts such a transformation of authority, *Writing Without Teachers*, he concedes that pedagogical constructions for teacherless classes do not make teachers obsolete: “Perhaps imprudently, I spoke of these [self-directed writing groups] as ‘teacherless classes’” (225). Elsewhere, he resorts to a teasing paradox that denies and yet amplifies the pedagogical power of his advice: “I think you should take complete charge of yourself as you write . . . yet on the other hand I think you should follow my directions since I have lots of good advice here” (*Power* 8).

The problematic combination of distance and daring in this approach is reminiscent of Rousseau's plans for the natural education of the young Emile. In the highly influential book by that name, Rousseau spurns didacticism in order to develop a curriculum of seemingly spontaneous experience. But the sheer volume and overwhelming ingenuity of the *Emile* indicate how the resultant experiential learning must be stage-managed by a master who makes the lessons extraordinarily demanding while keeping himself out of sight. A modern commentator on Rousseau encapsulates the resultant contradiction: “What is forgotten is that Rousseau's full formula is that while the child must always do what he wants to do, he should want to do only what the tutor wants him to do” (Bloom 189). Elbow is involved in this Rousseaeuan paradox still. At first glance at least, the pedagogical implications of his recent textbook, *A Community of Writers*, are radically ambiguous. Almost entirely avoiding instruction about persuasion, that book creates an encompassing regime of procedures that exert a powerful, indirect influence over every motion of the class.

**Elbow's Adaptation of Dewey**

How then does Elbow's teacher in Dewey's shadow become a truly experimental peer of the student, and what does this role mean in terms of pedagogical authority and the need for natural learning? Look, Elbow advises, at Outward Bound. That organization is almost a paradigm for the notion that academic training and experience of the wilderness can go together. In Outward Bound, the rigors of cliff-scaling and collective hardship, combined with skillful coaching, create an experience of mutual, experimental trying. Students are virtually on their own and their experience somehow makes them learn what they need to learn. There are coaches, but they teach indirectly: “They arrange things so that the students’ attention gets fully occupied with what could in a sense be called ‘subsidiary goals’—getting to the top of the mountain, etc.” (*Embracing* 136). Subsidiary goals are
necessary because they are distractions from what undisciplined observers cannot or should not see if they are to learn. The actual goals of instruction are "developmental," "organic," and "tricky" (Embracing 135). To fix upon them directly is to risk losing the way. Good subsidiary goals are "pressing enough" to be diversions. They are a kind of ceremonious indirection that veils the real goal. Elbow refers only glancingly to higher goals by resorting to the double negative: "Taking your mind off a goal is not the same as not having it for a goal" (Embracing 136).

Elbow's recent definition of the profession of English in What is English? expands upon this principle while further obscuring the idea that there is a goal. Rightly understood, he says, English is a "profession that cannot know what it is. I don't mean this as scandal... but this very absence of comfort and convenience [in not knowing] is probably a good thing... 'It's about time we finally don't know where we are'" (What v). Hence, the experiential breakthrough for teachers, as with Outward Bound students, is supposed to be the arduous recognition that they are lost. Less trying and less inconvenient pedagogies are not adequate points of reference. The good coach must have the ability to be seen as lost; he or she must somehow persuasively display uncertainty while working behind the scenes to create subsidiary goals. There is sometimes an almost religious dimension in this ministerial distancing of the coaches, a distancing that mixes anomic with a promise and strategy of regeneration. Elbow draws attention half-jokingly to religious analogies for this pedagogical practice when he refers to his diverse religious upbringing (Christian, Jewish, secular) as though it were a cue for understanding his mature pedagogy (Embracing 233). It is indeed tempting to think of Elbow as an evangelist preaching endurance of the sweet rigors of conversion, by which all things are made possible if one undergoes the change completely. Or as a Mosaic law-giver, he might be seen to hand down strict prohibitions, mixed with promises of favor (beware of intellectual idolatry; do not speak in false voice; take with you these multitudinous rules of drafting ["dry cooking"] to get through the wilderness of writer's block). As a secularist, Elbow quests for unifying "Gestalts" in a wilderness of options.

The way for the Elbowean teacher to "make peace" between the opposites of his own "natural" yet trying dialectic of liberal learning is to alternate between them, for example by adhering to strict rules of criticism and then identifying with students as fellow learners. Otherwise, Elbow argues, to attempt to reach a compromise between rigor and sympathetic release is to display weakness or dogmatism. What is needed is "wholeheartedness" and "commitment" in the pursuit of dialectical opposites. The experience of each must be fully undergone by turns. One's "spirit" or "stance" matters most (Embracing 157). Lack of whole-heartedness, not of knowledge or ability, is the fatal insufficiency that distinguishes the nonprofessional from the true teacher: "This middling or fair stance, in fact, is characteristic of many teachers who lack investment in teaching or who have lost it" (Embrac-
ing 157). Those who do not have a tested and enduring passion for what they do, who think the unifying goal of learning can merely be “Excellence” or “Quality,” are in danger of indulging themselves in mere talk. The true learner and thus the true teacher must be whole-hearted enough to “experience” the “genuine paradox” of learning (Embracing 145-46).

Elbow maintains that he is not interested in promoting “manichean crudeness” (Embracing 258). Nevertheless, he argues, “being in the middle” is the problem. (The quasi-religious rhetoric persists.) Without the experience of embracing contraries, students and teachers reside in a voiceless limbo, “stuck, barren, held between opposites” of sympathy and doubt (Embracing 48). Moderation as we commonly understand it is at best a misleading goal: at worst, a bogus one. There should be no “sort of” commitments in the arduous, passionate embrace of contraries because true moderation is no mere “middle course.” The “golden mean” in this earnest game is only “allegedly” golden if it is understood as compromise. Compromise is deceptive because one must overcome “engraved disputes” in every subject matter and practice by “doing justice to both sides in their opposition” (Embracing 144-45). At the same time, that justice requires a kind of absolute moderation, despite (or because of) Elbow’s distrust of more ordinary temperance. The doubting and believing games that he sets out in great detail in Embracing Contraries and elsewhere must be balanced. To effect that moderation, Elbow again uses alternation between opposites. Both games must be pursued to the limit, but neither game must be allowed to prevail “at the expense of the other” (Embracing 142). Violent balance vies with balanced violence. Moderation is the enemy and yet the law.

The ordeal of this form of education is supposed to be “positive”: “One opposite [i.e. doubt or belief] leads naturally to the other; indeed, extremity in one enhances extremity in the other in a positive, reinforcing fashion” (Embracing 152). All inquirers are supposed to move between sympathy and critical evaluation of their chosen subject matter until the process “naturally,” experientially, leads them to a more complete balance. To do so requires “higher standards yet greater supportiveness” (Embracing 155). “It is no good just asserting” that such harmony exists (Embracing 145). Learners and their subject matter are “maximally transformed—in a sense deformed. There is a violence in learning. We cannot learn something without eating it, yet we cannot really learn it either without being chewed up” (Embracing 151).

Teachers and students have three “natural” ways for “making peace” between contraries, but two are undesirable because they do not play the game of contraries to the hilt. The third stance has two modes: undesirable mediocrity and Elbow’s preference: a strange moderation “on the knife edge,” which must somehow be “scrupulously fair both to students and what they [the teachers] teach” (Embracing 151). Yet, this scrupulous fairness is not at all natural in any ordinary sense. It is the ordeal of deformation, the
experience of being sliced in two (or virtually sliced; the difference has become obscure). This virtual slicing must somehow also be so strictly regulated that no damage can be done to the persons involved. The wilderness is a park, and the park is bursting with wilderness.

In Elbow's recent article on binary thinking, such extremity is no vice as long as each side is pushed toward extremity and no view is allowed to jeopardize the existence of the other: it is necessary to "heighten the conflict," "emphasizing dichotomies but holding them unresolved" ("Uses" 57, 59). Paradoxically, the greater the conflict, the greater the chances that wilderness and order, submission and mastery, will become their opposites. The more extreme that doubt and belief become, the more they come to resemble each other. As we shall see, Elbow follows up this trend. Doubt that pursues the experience of deepest skepticism eventually doubts itself, and so approaches back-handed belief in the possibility that there is something beyond what can be doubted. Likewise, belief that is open to the full force of experience approaches a form of doubt. To be genuine, belief needs to attach itself to more than one thing so as not to embrace the falsehoods of fanaticism or the complacency of close-mindedness ("Uses" 64).

The Academic Polity and the House Radically Divided

Elbow's emphasis upon this complex play of opposites, which combines violence with absolute laws of balance, is accompanied by an extraordinary and problematic concern for civility. For all its advocacy of liberation and experiential struggle, Embracing Contraries is meant to be a step toward establishing an embracing, radically inquisitive "polity" in the academy so that traditional abuses of academic power can be overcome (Embracing 260). Hence, Elbow's most recent article in these pages makes a case for creating a strictly enforced "external" peace among compositionists (and by extension among teachers and students). Although internal warfare is necessary for the sake of playing the game of extremes to its fullest within each learner, the internal conflict must be kept from overturning that external peace ("Uses" 72).

How is this possible? It seems inevitable that the intense internal warfare generated by Elbow's dialectic would interfere with his absolute prohibition on a public warfare of ideas, and that his desire to ban public contests that risk defeat would ultimately deprive private warfare of its sense of urgency. We need to ask whether Elbow's magnification and attenuation of academic conflict, given the current volatility and vulnerability of the academic environment, is practicable or desirable. Or is it an introduction to the arduous cure that the academy needs to undergo in order to save itself? Elbow's embrace of contraries seems designed to problematize civility as well as maintain it. This sometimes happens in his writing when public and private concerns are blurred into one another. In an apparently once-private letter Elbow published in Embracing Contraries, what looks like an ideal
encounter between teacher and student (on the collegial and yet experiential footing that Dewey wanted for all didactic occasions) is difficult to distinguish from exploitative experimentation:

I'm struck at how much more negative you experienced my feedback on your lecture than I intended. Perhaps I was more critical than I realized. But really I don't think so. What I think now is that you were very dissatisfied with your lecture, hence no matter what I said, you assumed I was being understatedly kind about a horrible lecture. Since this phenomenon would apply both to you and to me, let me elevate it to a general principle of universal validity: anyone with any tendency to think he or she isn't doing a good enough job, isn't smart enough, isn't talented enough, etc., is very likely to experience any feedback as criticism. The moral of the story is that until one is really secure that one is adequate and doing a good job, one cannot hear feedback clearly. Of course I might have transmitted my feedback unclearly, but for what it's worth at this point, I can still remember how impressed I was with your lecture as a very professional performance.

Here Elbow's therapeutic mode, which many of his readers find immensely helpful when it is directed toward general audiences and when it features Elbow's own experience, undermines and parodies the civility that he wants to protect. A private communication of this information, protected by confidentiality and trust, might have had a positive effect. But in the way it is allowed to become public in Elbow's book, the letter presents itself with earnestness and sincerity that border on tactlessness and schmaltz. Its archness and self-effacement are aggressive as well as comic. True civility needs aggressive wit and humor in order to test its resilience and distinguish itself from milquetoast conformism; what is disturbing here is the radical ambiguity of the letter's honesty and politeness.3

The letter's extreme ambivalence cuts back and forth to expose psychological secrets, then offers balm, then humbles its writer before the victim's professionalism as though civility could be restored with a bow to the colleague's undiminished (though now deeply problematic) record as a good teacher. The colleague's alleged fear that the lecture was horrible needs to be admitted deep down, confessed, before reading the letter's final praise. But since the teacher's own troubles supposedly come from his or her own highly professional expectations, that confession might very well be gratuitous. In this environment of extremes of extraordinary sympathy and mandatory ruthlessness exchanging places with each other, one must constantly mark out or ignore the difference between uncivil civility and civil incivility. How could this process cultivate the ability to learn and teach in a civil spirit?

Elbow's Self-Critique

One cannot merely dismiss such moments in Elbow's writing as aberrations, but neither are they obviously fatal discrepancies in his argument. The writer of Embracing Contraries is in fact extraordinarily sensitive to the great comedy and danger, as well as the advantage, of pedagogies that mix belief
with doubt, openness with manipulation. He is unlikely to have simply erred in such an important demonstration of Elbowean dialectic; neither is he likely to have damned himself without supplying some measure of remediation, which we do find elsewhere. We need go no further than Elbow's first book, which is largely a reflection on pedagogical cross-purposes in an extreme case: the intriguingly disingenuous and disarmingly honest conman, Chaucer's Pardoner (Oppositions). Elbow's comments are not casual references to a literary character. His work on Chaucer, especially on the Pardoner, informs and even guides a great deal of his later work. A section of Elbow's book on Chaucer focuses on the Pardoner as a master of sincere duplicity and duplicitous sincerity, one who tests the limits of the medieval and modern tension between "earnest" and "game." The Pardoner's brilliant perversity in the games of radical doubt and radical belief, of extreme openness and manipulation, serves in that book as Elbow's model and warning. It performs a similar function for readers of Elbow. The Pardoner parodies the coach in Outward Bound. He is a persuader who almost succeeds in taking his audience's attention away from his outrageous machinations as a peddler of fake relics. A man of roles, he is a didact, suppliant, braggart, fable-maker, and salesman. He dares to tell the pilgrims of his own duplicity, while using his confession to delude them into buying the very relics he warned were fakes. The honesty of his deception is remarkably attractive. The comic, seductive thoroughness of his ambition and predatory honesty puts him in the company of Gorgias, the archetype of those ancient sophists who dared to make attractive the most commonly suspect case so as to display their power to invert an audience's expectations. One is appalled and amazed at the Pardoner's cheek.

For Elbow, the Pardoner's skills are intriguing and impressive, but they also give pause. Chaucer, as Elbow argues, presents the Pardoner as an ingratiating warning of what happens when the master of the play of opposites takes whatever mask he pleases, including the face of sincerity, until he cannot act without faking. (One might add that his bankruptcy as a faker ultimately prevents him from putting on a good act.) The Host's angry condemnation of the relic salesman's duplicity is more than a comic means of closure to these developments in The Canterbury Tales. Elbow argues that if the Pardoner could have put his masks down, including his seemingly sincere one, he would have been better able to "activate" himself and thus realize that "submission can yield a kind of freedom" (Oppositions 140, 139). In being otherwise "trapped behind his mask," the Pardoner is like a compulsive scholar who can only get experience "in surrogate ways, in books or dreams or writing" (Oppositions 139, 142). What is doubly remarkable about the Pardoner's plight is that his blatant honesty, his love of telling his audience what he is doing to them, contributes to his bind.

How then can Elbow's role-playing teacher overcome the Pardoner's excesses? For an answer, Elbow turns to the exemplum of Chaucer himself.
That poet, he argues, is capable not only of controlling and taking off the Pardoner's masks, but of taking off masks entirely. For all his power of characterization, Chaucer is able at certain points to combine "direct speech" with visionary poetry. His accomplishment is two-fold: He turns the play of opposites toward a greater end, and he indulges in, but then acts beyond, the powers, vagaries, and dangers of dialectical irony. In Elbow's interpretation, Chaucer's famous apology for his poetry shows that the poet can put aside roles, can take up speech that characterizes "a real, historical personality and self," not merely an "abstract language or truth" (*Oppositions* 132-33). Speech that imitates Chaucer's retraction is speech that is almost impossible to discuss: it is a "religious affirmation" as well as an existential embrace of the limits of earthly life. As a teacher, the poet can overcome the problem of pedagogical authority by simultaneously offering a leap of heavenly faith and a descent into the arbitrary, contradictory limits of earth: "And so though this religious affirmation is a choosing of what is heavenly and in this sense 'upper,' the act of choosing is important action here, and it is essentially a coming downward to accept his limited, single, human position on earth" (*Oppositions* 133). Boethius is a precursor of this model, as Elbow explains in a recent article: Boethius "believed that unity or truth often exists in a realm or form where human reason cannot grasp it either with logic or language, and that the closest we can come to the highest or deepest knowledge is try to hold in mind propositions that are irreconcilable" ("Uses" 52). In its best sense, the embrace of contraries is somehow the opposite and the image of a higher truth.

Is this Embrace Possible? Remember Chaucer's Theseus

In a telling passage of *Embracing Contraries*, Elbow glosses the pedagogical paradox by alluding to Chaucer's King Theseus. The king of "The Knight's Tale" is a paradigm for Elbow's wisely forgiving yet ironic teacher who copes with the play of opposites by standing back and yet pushing his subjects to equal and opposite extremes. He is a Pardoner who is wise in practical things. In Elbow's interpretation, when Palamon and Arcite begin a bloody rivalry that threatens Theseus' kingdom, the king becomes their master teacher by enabling them to embrace contraries. The enlightened king allows the fighting to proceed, but then ends it by intensifying it, pushing "the opposition between the two cousins till it reaches contradiction—till the rules of the original system lead to a dead end or a wrong conclusion." This tactic "thereby forces into the open the weaknesses or limitations of the system of chivalric romance":

Courage, loyalty, and honor are shown to comprise a special, limited system of values that is only a subset of Theseus' larger system, which contains feeling for others, humor, irony, forgiveness, the ability to change one's mind, and the ability to grow and change through suffering instead of just stoically enduring it. (*Embracing* 243)
Elbow presents Theseus as the one who limits the conflict to "its proper sphere of application" by pushing it toward radical contradiction. The warring knights' virtues are supposed to give way to the king's "humor, irony, and forgiveness" because ultimately "there is no conflict" in Theseus' "larger system" of growing through suffering (Embracing 243-44). Theseus seems clearly superior to the Pardoner. However, when one remembers in greater detail how Chaucer's King Theseus actually rules, Elbow's example becomes more problematic. For example, if, as Elbow says, Theseus and his subjects learn to grow through suffering, that suffering is deeper than the reference in Embracing Contraries lets on. The amazing violence and otherworldliness of Theseus' rule makes his gentleness a questionable model. The king first seeks to end the knights' contention by exile and imprisonment, then by indulging their violence with a joust between armies supporting each man's cause. Theseus acts as referee, but only to the extent that he orders his men to drag from the battle anyone who uses the wrong weapon. The ensuing catharsis depends upon a ritual battle of almost unlimited mayhem. Palamon loses according to the rules when he is nearly killed from behind. After the victor Arcite's death, the king seems to recognize his limited power over earthly things. But Theseus then compounds the violence by arranging a funeral pyre that devours the chivalrous world in flames. To feed the pyre for the severe order of the funeral, Theseus levels and consumes the surrounding forest, burning all the knights' trophies with it. Even as he presides over the ensuing wedding of the surviving knight to Emilia, he delivers a speech that dwells upon the world's mortality. In the end, Theseus has drawn his kingdom into a ceremony of peace that is also a combustive, exhausting contradiction. One wonders whether Elbow is working on a similar story in his work in progress, "The War Between Reading and Writing" ("Uses" 76-77).

That Elbow is not satisfied with this disturbing though charming Chaucerian exemplum is evident in his efforts, in the last chapter of Embracing Contraries, to show how "embracing contraries" can effect a consensus that is less apocalyptic. There he proposes that the game of contraries can affirm "methodological belief" by engendering "dubitable confirmation" which "carries more weight [than] 'indubitable' disconfirmation" (297). Winning the assent of others is possible, and is not to be forced; true agreement is something that "the whole group can enter into or affirm" (289, 290).

Elbow further distances himself from Theseus by recollecting the remarkable example of some traditional teachers who largely overcome these Thesean contradictions because of their unusual attachment to their subject matter and their students. Such teachers, he says, are "invested." They are "a bit passionate about supporting students or else passionate about serving and protecting the subject matter they love" (Embracing 145). Their stubborn, sometimes parochial passion for what and whom they teach enables
them to be excellent though unsophisticated players of their own game of opposites. Their double attachments liberate and yet proportion their power to be exacting and sympathetic. Such teachers can "push harder and yet be more tolerant of students' difficulties" (Embracing 158) because their love of subject and of learner strengthens and tempers their teaching.

In another context, Elbow observes methodological belief at work even in (perhaps especially in) a controversial case of neo-traditional pedagogy: competency-based instruction. The teachers he observes and interviews are remarkably proficient, he says, at joining their passion for students' progress with their attachment to the knowledge and skills they want their students to learn (Embracing 121). The competency-based curriculum permits them to be effective coaches. Their willingness to stand by publicly defensible standards and proof of their students' progress gives them a space within which they can be impersonally demanding and yet personally concerned for individuals' success. Is it possible that such teachers take to heart the Deweyan zeal for genuine learning more than Deweyans do? Are Elbow's reforms ultimately anti- or meta-Deweyan? The issue for Elbow is complex, since his other work shows that he is not bent on transforming the nation's composition programs into models of pre-Deweyan education or competency-based instruction. Nevertheless, Elbow engages these issues elsewhere in tentative asides. In Embracing Contraries, for example, he briefly praises the virtues of older methods of teaching that use reading aloud, memorization, and recitation (285). In a parenthetical passage, he lets it be known that after he dropped out of graduate school, his study and teaching of great ancient and medieval authors (as well as educational theorists and his own writing practice) helped restore his love of study and teaching. In fact, they were instrumental to his return. From "Greece, Rome, the New Testament, and the Middle Ages," he discovered demanding and intriguing books that helped form a curriculum of recovery (xi, 5). Something in those works was "truthworthy," to use the term Elbow coins later in the book for describing learning's riches. Such books somehow helped him look beyond intractable paradoxes of pedagogical power that were driving him out of the academy.

Now and then, one can glimpse other examples of Elbow's debt to old books and to long-valued methods of teaching. There is not only Chaucer, a poetic magnitude affirming something beyond and within the great work for which he apologized; there is also Augustine, whom Elbow uses in the culmination of Embracing Contraries to supply a crucial argument for the basis of Elbow's idea of methodological belief. (The book's three allusions to the Christian rhetorician go unrecorded in his compendious index [262, 278, 299].) In another instance, Elbow quotes at length from a description of Plato's definition of dialectic to show that despite its "peculiar" ontology it offers a revealing account of something very close to the methodological belief promoted in Embracing Contraries. In an unusually long footnote he likens his own game of doubt and belief to the philosophically unifying
Platonic dialectic (242), and in his latest essay, he refers to the "Neo-Platonic" Boethius as an important reference point ("Uses" 52). Of course, Elbow almost always subordinates such references by placing them in notes or parentheses, or by supplying key glosses of their work as quotations from others. He employs these pre-modern writers as authorities, but then often reduces them by making the reference almost whimsical. Thus, he observes that the old confidence in the possibility of ascent to higher, demonstrable principles via Platonic dialectic is no longer operable: "It doesn't seem to work out that way (not since the good old days, anyway)" (Embracing 254). But this rejection of Plato contains the half-ironic implication that there were indeed some "good old days" in which the Platonic insight into learning's dialectical aspiration might have been true.

When Elbow argues that Boethius justifies the play of opposites, he defends a dialectical inquiry of opposites that transcends its user's biases by letting "things turn out any which way." Boethian binary thinking heartens inquiry into whether a course of action is right or wrong ("Uses" 73). And it suggests, if only furtively, that the lower world sometimes approaches or analogizes another, higher one.

The difficulty of reading such passages is Elbow's between-ness: his equivocation in the guise of decisiveness, and his decisiveness in the guise of equivocation. Repeatedly, however, one comes across evidence of persistence. Within parentheses and in the form of a question, his recent essay observes that "everyone now seems to agree that there is no such thing as certain knowledge or truth (do we have certainty about the lack of certainty?)" ("Uses" 72). The question is almost hidden away, but it is compelling: Can pedagogues seeking to overcome the problem of pedagogical authority depend upon a relativism that is not aware that it embraces its own absolutism? There are other implicit questions in Elbow's trial balloon: If the contradiction within relativism is repellant, what makes us think it repellant—relativism itself, or something else? Is not Elbow working with a notion of reasonable opinion here, from which inquiry might ascend beyond self-contradiction? It is this deeper pattern in Elbow's project that should stir up other compositionists, not just skepticism or enthusiasm over his therapeutic exercises and insights. Is Elbow's work anti-academic or anti-progressive, as has been alleged? Or does it help to uncover neglected ways of challenging the profession's all too conventional views about the untrustworthiness of pedagogical authority?

An (Im)Modest Proposal
Our circumstance is strange: The historic Deweyan obsession with making learners independent, a laudable goal in need of persistent attention, has been pursued with an almost millennial faith and despair that has curiously weakened the very dedication to those rigors, passions, and ideas that Dewey himself seems to have prized. We are all Deweyans, in a sense, and we hardly
bother to read him. By taking Dewey seriously, Elbow edges up to a post-Deweyan form of education that breaks away from self-defeating trends. And yet, the apparent alternatives—competency-based instruction and neo-traditional teaching of the liberal arts—threaten the very basis of Elbow's original break with the old academy. In the rush to do away with or redefine pedagogical authority, it is worth asking whether we are failing to acknowledge that teachers as teachers take on a type of authority that is amazingly resistant to corruption as well as reform—an authority we cannot entirely invent or transform, which we would do well neither to neglect nor take for granted. It is the authority of the teacher as the parental coach.

Paternalism's bad press has removed paternity from the lexicon, and "maternalism" has become a dangerously contested term. But as a profession we have become all too reluctant to acknowledge and scrutinize our virtually undeniable roles as academic parents. The same could be said for our treatment of those who have been our academic forebears. Our deeply Deweyan parentage is not a source of much interest. Nor is the intellectual parentage of Dewey himself, even though he imitated and made self-defining stands against such authorities as Darwin, Plato, the pragmatists, the medieval scholastics, and Aristotle. Being a pedagogical parent in loco parentis is not the same as being paternalistic. A true alma mater is not a smothering home. For all their flaws, the educational settings in which writing is usually taught can assist teachers with the paradox of teaching self-governed learning. Those settings can invest teachers with an often unacknowledged role, one that can facilitate impersonal yet profoundly familiar engagement with students' abilities and aspirations. Students are at an advantage too, if their educational institutions give them a place to be students, to express a desire to learn in an environment that neither takes learning for granted nor hypes all their achievements with a narrow bias.

Parents' almost inescapable love for their offspring makes for high ambitions for children, but it is also a temptation to be complacent. It easily prevents them from detecting serious academic shortcomings and real merits. Moreover, great love for one's own often makes for great anger and shame, even the desire to punish or to withdraw love from one's offspring if they do not measure up. The ineffectual tirade of a parent on a game's sidelines is often the attempt to impose these private desires on the rigor and chance of a public contest. Coaches (if they are coaches) can know differently because of their understanding of the game's demands and because of their unique closeness to the strengths and idiosyncracies of their players. Like coaches, teachers can have an extraordinary attachment to the great game of learning (and thus to its vagaries as well as its order and history) that enables and usefully limits the pretensions of their coaching. Given its parental strengths, pedagogical authority by its nature contains weaknesses too, but these weaknesses are not all necessarily incorrigible. Students in the academy are distant enough from the sources of parental authority to know, almost
inevitably, some of the most serious shortcomings of parental authority as it is invoked by teachers. Sooner or later they are bound to notice their academic parents' decline: lots of coaches and teachers have paunches, physical and otherwise, which become all the more prominent because teachers are not parents. The fundamental recognition that one has parents, whether these are parent-like teachers or familial progenitors, is the beginning of a recognition that parents are mortal as well as fecund, that their children will eventually replace them and see themselves replaced by those they have raised. The academy perhaps more than any other institution exemplifies and makes known this progression—and possible degeneration. E.B. White goes once more to the lake (and to class) and becomes his mortal father to his own son. His "Once More to the Lake" is the test of his capacity to do well with that knowledge, and to garden his successors in that knowledge of their growth, decline, and provision for others.

The authority of the teacher is in this sense an act for the ages. Students often know (and sometimes understandably fear sooner or later) that for all its uncompromising and artificially affectionate ceremonies, the academy—especially the writing and reading it spawns—embodies a relinquishment of learning, a revelation of ignorance as well as the glittering impermanence of learning's record. Becoming one's own learner, teacher, and writer in this light is a taking of oneself of what one owes to others and then passing it on, answering the persistent call of a legacy and facing the almost irreversible prospect of loss. But that loss is proverbially restored. A legacy is not a legacy unless it is made again as a passable, if mortal, inheritance. One must "own up to it," as the vernacular phrase instructs us, or it goes begging like an abandoned grandparent or a neglected child. The etymology of the two ideas—of owing and owning—is fused in the archaic root of the verb owe. In the last part of the repeating cycle, students leave the academic and natural family behind, perhaps because they have learned to be self-governed learners, perhaps not. This is an especially difficult lesson for teachers who welcome self-governance, for it must be learned again and again in order to know the limits—the powers and the limitations—of familial teaching, especially teaching that measures its success according to its ability to foster self-governed writing.

Today a fashionable academic questioning of the need to acknowledge parenthood (both academic and otherwise) has combined with the extraordinary, opposite conviction that everything can be parented or constructed by those who think they know that parenthood, like authorship, is a construction. The death of the last parent is at hand, as Nietzsche might say; behold the Overparent. Or as Marx might say, authorial property is theft; let us march on to universal (hence indifferent) parenthood. So as not to be parents, teachers are now pressured not to presume to be teachers, while they are pushed contrariwise to develop technologically systematic or hidden forms of pedagogical manipulation that threaten to make them into big
brothers. In danger of neglect is the idea that the authority of the instructor and the writer depends upon a debt of affiliation, and that owning up to that debt depends upon achieving a form of self-government as a writer or teacher that distinguishes itself from mere egoism or indifferent altruism by tendering that debt.

Reading Elbow in the light of such problems invites and demands discussion of subjects that now tend to be dominated by a reductive, almost hegemonic terminology of power. Reading Elbow is one way to resume exploratory discussions of philosophy, ethics, political philosophy, history, biography, and autobiography as they bear upon teaching and the process of learning to write. Elbow's writings offer compositionists the outlines of an intellectual life—of purposes, ideas, aspirations, choices, and textual forms that join with a history of ideas and events relevant to the study and practice of teaching and writing. To read those works critically and sympathetically requires disruption of conventional lines between "progressive" and "conservative" views.

A close reading of Elbow requires, in other words, a consideration of the liberal arts. Going back to Elbow's suggestions about Outward Bound while remembering that something more is needed, we might say that these arts offer a species of intermediate challenges that help us to contend with the pedagogical paradox. They provide a means for discussing the play of power in the context of ideas and events that we seek to understand. They disrupt the complacency of believing that we know what power, enlightened teaching, and the abuse of power really are. Discussing such things, one need not indulge in the immediate self-contradiction of claiming that one's perspective is determined by power politics and yet free to analyze and apply that kind of politics to all situations. A renewed study of the liberal arts holds out to us the opportunity of rediscovering unacknowledged strata beneath the debate over power, for the liberal arts have their own power to name, problematize, and draw forth what is worthy of reconsideration in the nature of pedagogical authority.

One of the great paradoxes confronting professional compositionists is that we are now in an auspicious position to champion and renew liberal arts education, even though we are bent on carving out a new field. In an era in which much of the traditional liberal arts academy—which often marginalized the teaching of writing—is losing its grip on liberal arts education, the task is ours if we are up to it. Implicitly and explicitly, and almost despite themselves, Elbow's works help introduce the possibility that a renewed liberal arts curriculum might be the best way of coping with the problem of pedagogical authority, particularly in the composition classroom. By example and by default, Elbow points toward ways in which we might reconceive what we do.

University of California
Riverside, California
Notes

1 For another, partly complementary attempt to redirect the debate over Elbow's politics, see Killingsworth.

2 Many of the arguments in the early chapter of *Embracing Contraries* resemble those in an article Elbow published in 1971: "Shall We."

3 Elbow's new essay in *Profession 92* is a case in point. In arguing that student evaluations of instructors are too often misused and misunderstood, he advocates a system of evaluation that is more probing and more informal. Yet the new system would be open to even greater misuse if it did not lead to greater trust between the evaluators and those being evaluated. The game of contraries, when it is used to deepen such evaluations, makes the judgment far more intimate and more systematically ambiguous, leaving those it evaluates more vulnerable to misunderstanding when a high level of trust cannot be counted on.

4 See Chaucer 25-47.

5 If this analogy is offensive because it seems to suggest that schooling is really like physical combat or a ruthless pursuit of victory, it is perhaps worth recollecting the experience of watching or being taught by a swimming teacher, a soccer coach, or a middle-school band instructor—some good and some bad. Such memories of gymnastic teaching are not always clear mirrors for composition instruction, but they are tonics for a soul sickened by the prospect of assuming or questioning pedagogical authority.

6 The idea of questioning narrow definitions of power by means of renewing liberal arts education raises the issue of cultural literacy. But the deeper issue has to do with whether we are ready to explore the full range and depth of liberal arts education in order to confront the pedagogical paradox, which will otherwise continue to threaten the teaching of composition. It is instructive to see how Paulo Freire, who would seem to be opposed to E.D. Hirsch's proposals for renewal, responds to Gary Olson's question about cultural literacy. On the one hand, he suggests that inquiring into the meaning of cultural literacy misses the point. The pedagogue should instead "accept" cultural illiteracy as a given among the oppressed and use it for purposes of cultural critique: "I think we should accept the concept of cultural illiteracy and develop it, use it in a much more progressive way" (8). On the other hand, Freire seems to have in mind not only the importance of teaching cultural differences and the division between oppressor and oppressed, but also the fact that cultural illiteracy needs to be developed for the sake of independent learning and for encouraging cross-cultural sympathies of the kind that best emerge from a wide-ranging discussion of what might be the commonalities of human experience and human nature. Thus, although his goals are sometimes associated with one kind of "diversity" curriculum for the composition classroom (the one that focuses on individuals as aggressors or as members of aggrieved groups) Freire's project implicitly calls out for the sort of intellectual diversity that the traditional and post-Deweyan liberal arts are especially good at cultivating for the sake of a truly liberatory pedagogy.

Works Cited


—. "Shall We Teach or Give Credit?" *Soundings* 54 (1971): 237-52.


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Kinneavy Award Winners Announced

The James L. Kinneavy Award for the most outstanding essay in volume 13 of *JAC* was awarded to Michael Murphy for "After Progressivism: Modern Composition, Institutional Service, and Cultural Studies."

John Trimbur received an honorable mention for "Articulation Theory and the Problem of Determination: A Reading of *Lives on the Boundary*."

The award is generously endowed by Professor Kinneavy, Blumberg Centennial Professor at the University of Texas, and was presented by him at the meeting of the Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition at the CCCC Convention in Nashville.