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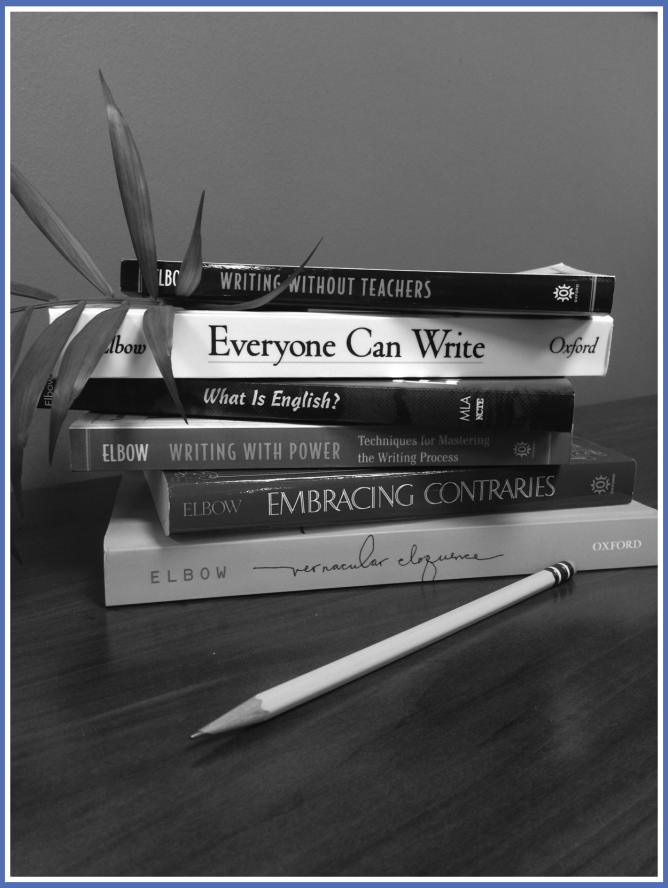

Illinois Association of Teachers of English

IATE is a professional organization for teachers of English/language arts. IATE publishes the *Illinois English Bulletin* and the *IATE Newsletter* and hosts an annual fall conference. IATE is organized by districts throughout the state, each district having a district leader and providing local activities to members throughout the year.

IATE also maintains standing committees that address a number of professional interests and works with other professional organizations to further the interests of teachers. Composed of over 1,000 teachers throughout the state, IATE provides a working network for the exchange of teaching tips, current research, and professional development as well as enduring friendships.

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WELCOME TO *RE-BELIEVING PETER ELBOW*: A SPECIAL ISSUE OF THE *ILLINOIS ENGLISH BULLETIN* 105.3 (SUMMER 2018)

BOB BROAD

In late March 2017, while preparing to teach a graduate class at Illinois State University, I wrote one word on page 220 of my copy of the book *Embracing Contraries: Explorations in Learning and Teaching* (Elbow, 1986). The story behind that single word illustrates why I chose to focus the course, Major Figures in the Teaching of Writing, on the scholarship of Peter Elbow.

The word I wrote? "*Complementarity*."

That was my comment on the section "Using More than One Observer" in the chapter "Trustworthiness in Evaluation," where Elbow argues,

> When groups or even pairs of teachers negotiate . . . grades on specific student papers . . . their grading or commenting becomes much more trustworthy. (220)

Let me explain what is so comical, humbling, and slightly annoying about my rediscovering Elbow's 1986 analysis of how multiple evaluators' judgments are crucially *complementary* ("each mutually supplying what the others lack"). Nearly thirty years after publication of *Embracing Contraries*, I took a turn extolling the virtues of evaluative complementarity, only I did so (as usual) unaware of how Peter Elbow had planted that seed in my mind decades earlier. In the 2005 article "Rhetorical Writing Assessment: The Practice and Theory of Complementarity," co-author Michael Boyd and I argued that "shared evaluation" (multiple evaluators) and writing portfolios (students writing in multiple genres) could both be justified and defended on the basis of the principle of complementarity borrowed from Neils Bohr in the field of quantum physics. I'm still very excited about this article because it bridges a risky gap between the practices and theories of best approaches to writing assessment.

Elbow mentions Bohr twice in *Embracing Contraries*, and all the key arguments in favor of *complementarity* enthusiastically put forth by Broad and Boyd in 2005 appeared in *Embracing Contraries* in 1986. Again and again I've had this experience, and I fully expect that many other scholars in writing studies have found themselves in the same predicament: discovering after the fact that their exciting new ideas had previously been put forth in some form by Peter Elbow. For example, upon recently rediscovering Elbow's "movies of the mind," Maja Wilson admitted " . . . I'm feeling a bit silly: if Elbow had this figured out almost fifty years ago, why am I acting as if this were a new insight?" (99).

If you teach writing, Elbow's ideas surround you and are part of your professional ecology as a teacher-scholar. That's also true of other great rhetors and scholars of writing, such as Aristotle, Frederick Douglass, Kenneth Burke, and Anne

Ruggles Gere. But I would argue that Elbow's writings (fifteen books and scores of journal articles and book chapters), his ideas, and the deeply humane *spirit* of his approach to teaching writing suffuse and surround us pervasively and with a warmth that few other influences can match. Naturally, Elbow has his critics (prominently James Berlin and Susan Jarratt), and we read them, too, in our Major Figures course. Without them, we would have failed to "embrace contraries" and achieve complementarity in our studies. We finished the course having adopted the word *re-believing* to describe the work we did with Elbow's scholarship. As Elbow teaches us in his epic "Appendix" to *Writing Without Teachers*, believing in something is not the end of the intellectual process but rather one productive beginning. We believe in ideas as the best possible way (along with doubting them) to try them on and get to know their strengths (and weaknesses). The contributing authors offer this special issue of *Illinois English Bulletin* to share with you, their readers, what they gained by re-believing Peter Elbow.

Peter Elbow launches our special issue with some associative and inductive reflections on the practical value of utopian thinking in the teaching of writing. To illustrate how "impossible" ideas can inspire necessary actions, he shares a cluster of real-life "stories." Elbow warms readers up and stretches their imaginations to prepare them for the five article-length explorations that follow.

Jenna Wilson's "Elbovian Strategies for Teaching and Assessing High School Writing" provides an overview, introducing secondary English teachers to some of Elbow's ideas and how they can enhance our teaching practices. Private writing, freewriting, the power of revision, and a range of evaluative innovations are all discussed and illustrated with real-life examples from Wilson's classroom.

Guided by research in adolescent psychology, Ashley Barnes explores how to engage students more deeply in revision using strategies adapted from Elbow's teacherless writing class. Specifically, she employs Writing Circles, defined by Barnes as "a community of writers who are thoughtfully matched" (38), to give peer audiences more powerful roles in writers' journeys. Vivid illustrations from Barnes's eighth-grade classes support her recommendations.

And now for something new and completely different. In "Free(write) Your Mind and the Rest Will Follow," Evan Nave presents a hip-hop, freestyling, poetic exploration of freewriting, teaching, and learning. Nave's starkly personal account of the struggle to write and the struggle to teach engages Elbow's writings in ways different from the other pieces in this issue. "I freewrote because I wasn't ready to write and knew I never would be. . . . I freewrote because I was afraid and didn't want to be anymore" (67).

"How can English teachers promote this democratic ideal in our increasingly vitriolic political and social climate?" asks Clinton Soper (72). Noting the urgent need to revive US democracy, here Soper gives it his best shot, developing an approach to getting students to listen and consider a range of viewpoints on contested issues. Soper's deep political dive into Elbow's "believing game" and the strategy of "writing-to-learn" holds the key. The author's reflections on a unit he actually taught his students illuminate the discussion.

Analyzing a disturbing professional experience through a feminist lens, Kristina Vik gutsily plays the "believing game" with students who had harshly criticized her. She explores what empowering roles (*plural*) a female secondary English teacher might productively adopt and how she might best communicate those roles to her students. (Hint: "I am nacho mama" [105].) Vik's project is distinctive in this special issue

because it is inspired in part by Susan Jarratt, a staunch critic of some of Elbow's work, while simultaneously drawing on some of Elbow's discussions of teachers' various identities.

These articles demonstrate how five teacher-scholars of writing engaged with and explored the work of Peter Elbow to enhance and deepen their professional practices. We invite you, our readers, to follow suit: to read freely among Elbow's works, to answer your own research questions and discover new paths to knowledge. If your experience is like mine, when you reach a satisfying stopping point along that learning pathway and you pause to admire the view, you might find Peter sitting on a bench nearby, smiling and ready to greet you.

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Bob Broad teaches graduate and undergraduate courses at Illinois State University. He has authored articles, chapters, books, and book reviews, mostly focused on writing assessment and the teaching of writing. This special journal issue emerged from a course Bob taught in ISU's Post-Baccalaureate Certificate in the Teaching of Writing program designed specifically for secondary English teachers.

INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE "OR WHAT'S A HEAVEN FOR?"[1]: THE CLASSROOM AS UTOPIAN SPACE

PETER ELBOW

Whenever we write about what we plan to do—and even when we critique what we've already done—we are invoking the ideal; the utopian. This is true of all human endeavors, but it's particularly true of teaching. We teachers operate in a protected space where we can try over and over, semester after semester, to get things right. Teaching is a profession that elicits the universal hunger for the ideal.

Here's a little collage about using utopian ideas for down-to-earth reality.

Story One. Galileo figured out the laws of motion—very close, as I understand it, to the laws physicists and engineers still use to calculate the trajectory of ordinary objects in motion. But he was led to these earthly laws, sublunar laws, by thinking about heavenly movement: the movement of

heavenly planets moving through heavenly space. At the time everyone thought of the perfect heavenly realm as completely different from our imperfect sublunar realm. Here below, we notice that things stop moving when we stop pushing them—even if momentum keeps them going for a little while until they come to rest. In Galileo's time, however, everyone conceived of the heavenly planets as continuing to circulate around the heavens forever.

Galileo's genius consisted in deciding he could use an "unearthly" or heavenly or "unrealistic" model for calculating earthly "realistic" motion. He conceived of wagons and marbles and even shoved pencils as "*trying to behave like*" heavenly bodies. When we shove a wagon—even if we shove a pencil on a table—they *try* to go on moving forever—just like the heavenly planets. But something in our sublunar sphere keeps slowing them down (namely friction).

In short, he used a kind of motion no one had ever seen on earth as his model for what we see all around us with earthly objects. That was how he was able figure out the mathematics of motion. In short, Galileo learned to think of common things through an uncommon lens—in terms of a new story. (I'm calling on Butterfield for this account of Galileo's thinking—hoping I don't have things too wrong.)

Story Two. When I was director of the writing program at SUNY Stony Brook, one of the instructors, Fran Zak, decided to do an experiment with feedback on spelling and grammar. With one of her sections of first-year writing, she noted and mostly corrected mistakes on these surface linguistic features on her student drafts. With the other section, she didn't give any feedback at all on these surface features. Of course students in both sections were obliged to revise and copyedit their papers for the final version. Results? She could find no appreciable difference in surface correctness

between the two sections. Students who had gotten feedback on surface correctness did no better on final draft correctness than students who had gotten no feedback on these features. In short, feedback on surface correctness didn't seem to help. (Was someone standing on my shoulder whispering: "If students do just as well with spelling and grammar when they have to revise without feedback, might they perhaps do just as well on the more substantive dimensions of their essays with no feedback?")

Story Three. I was teaching with Lucile Burt: a three-week summer program primarily for high school teachers. This was under the auspices of UMass's version of the Bay Area model summer workshops for teachers. Teachers wrote; Lucile and I read. At first we gave some feedback—mostly avoiding any judgment. But "knowing how way leads on to way" (Frost, "The Road Not Taken"), we were led to try out no feedback at all. It was summer after all.

The outcome was heavenly: we all wrote, and we read each other's writing. But no feedback.

When I returned to my regular first-year writing classroom, I knew I couldn't do it this way: assign and read but give no feedback at all. But my summer utopia with adults changed my thinking about institutional work with students for grades and credit. I consciously said to myself: "*How close can I come* in my nonutopian classroom to those utopian conditions?" I started giving less feedback; and most of all started thinking: "Maybe feedback isn't all it's cracked up to be." This experience led to my use of contract grading (Danielewicz and Elbow).

Story Four. A teacherless class. In the late 1960s (when I was a graduate student at Brandeis and doing my second stint as an instructor of MIT freshmen), I taught a writing course for the Harvard Extension School. It was a course for

adult students from Roxbury, which at the time was the fairly poor Black district of Boston. I was teaching as a volunteer in these years when Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy were shot.

I asked students to write papers and I broke them up into small feedback groups where they got no feedback from me. It's hard not to think of this as a case of trying out a dubious untested medicine on a minority population. (By the way, I'm curious if other teachers that early had used small groups, much less teacherless groups, and written about it.) The group work here was the germ that led to *Writing Without Teachers*.

###

These are stories of alternative classrooms—time-outs from regular classrooms with their grades and credit. But again, let's not forget that classrooms themselves are alternative: time-outs from the real world. School is utopian space. Grades may have consequences, but students seldom get fired or lose pay for poor work. School is like physical therapy in a pool where the water exempts us from the full weight of gravity. It's this exemption from the full weight of reality that makes school a place for teaching and learning.

I can't refrain from mentioning a utopian space *inside* the classroom's utopia: *freewriting*. Freewriting lets us *write*, but without the usual gravity of writing ("Put that down in black and white and send it to my lawyer"). We get to choose whatever word comes to mind on the click of the moment—indeed to take our hands off the steering wheel and let the words choose us. It's private, it doesn't count, it can be garbage. But in the absence of the usual consequences and constraints, we impose the most imposing constraint: to keep writing down words nonstop—yet without worry.

All This Commotion

"Take out your pens. We're going to write."

Groans. "Do we have to?"

All this commotion; all this writing.

All this *coercion*.

I used freewriting in virtually every class. Not "free" writing, for of course it's compulsory writing. I learned how to handle this coercive dimension from my wife, Cami. When people asked her how she got our toddlers to take their daily naps, she said, "I simply treat is as *unthinkable* for them not to take naps."

This is how I learned my approach to freewriting in class. I stopped trying to get them to love it. I learned to say, "You can hate this all you want; don't worry. I'll *make* you do it." In other words, "Leave the motivation to me." Everyone felt better this way.

As I struggle to complete my part of this job and send in my contribution—struggling to meet the compulsory deadline—suddenly this new feeling arrives: "Aren't we *lucky* that we get to do all this writing we wouldn't otherwise do."

Attention

And I'm so lucky, too, that I get to read your contributions, Ashley, Evan, Clinton, Kristina, and Jenna. It strikes me that attention is the most precious thing humans can give each other. Attention is what children need most; giving attention is what, in the end, exhausts parents most. When I write something, the best reward I can get for all my efforts is to have real people read and pay attention. Attention is what helps children and students and writers grow. Praise without attention is worthless; strong criticism is precious if it's based on attention. I've been blessed by your attention, and it's clear from what follows that you are dedicated givers

of attention to your students. (In the film *Ladybird*, the Mother Superior says, "Don't you think they're the same thing? Love and attention?")

As I read over your writings that follow here in this issue of the *Illinois English Bulletin*, what I notice is the wonderfully wide range of thoughts and feelings: Jenna's carefully detached analysis of feedback techniques; the way Ashley deploys careful analysis to resist cultural gender roles; Evan's personal foray into the existential depths; Clinton's ambitious program for transforming our culture's knee-jerk pattern of thinking; and lastly Kristina's courageous willingness not only to question traditional gender roles but also to look searchingly in the mirror at her own teaching. We get a spectrum of teachers trying to figure out how to do things right—invoking issues from theoretical to personal—and a catalogue of suggestions from the idealistic to the practical.

Notes

1. From the poem "Andrea del Sarto" by Robert Browning.

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Peter Elbow is Professor of English Emeritus, UMass Amherst. He directed the Writing Program there and earlier at SUNY Stony Brook and taught at four other colleges. Of his ten books, the last explores the relationship between speech and writing: Vernacular Eloquence: What Speech Can Bring to Writing *(all from Oxford University Press). For additional information and resources, visit www.peterelbow.com/ and works.bepress.com/peter_elbow/.*

ELBOVIAN STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING AND ASSESSING HIGH SCHOOL WRITING

JENNA WILSON

Introduction

Since the publication of his first book, *Writing Without Teachers*, Peter Elbow has become a hallmark in the world of writing scholarship. But Elbow's numerous books, articles, forewords and afterwords, interviews, essays, chapters, and conference presentations can seem overwhelming to secondary writing teachers. Sometimes his writing activities, processes, and philosophies don't seem applicable in secondary writing at all. Though much of his earlier work is dedicated to helping intrinsically motivated writers, Elbow's pedagogy and practice are easily applicable to the secondary English classroom. In fact, Elbovian writing practices provide solutions to long-standing issues faced by both students and teachers within writing instruction. With his honest balance

between writing and evaluation, "Elbow gives writing teachers a more liberated working environment at the same time that he unshackles students from the pressures of constant grading" (Fraiberg 173–4). Through focused synthesis and individualization, any secondary writing teacher can utilize Elbow's writing practices to encourage creative and critical writing, revision, and response, leading to student growth and development.

Reading, Not Grading

"Feedback and correction are not all they're cracked up to be. What's really valuable is an audience."—Peter Elbow

The first key factor to utilizing Elbovian writing practices in the secondary classroom is letting go of the compulsive need to grade everything. Sometimes it can be overwhelming to see the papers pile up in that "4th hour" tray, or see the e-mails with attachments pouring into the in-box as a dammed river pours through the first crack in the wall. Grading writing consumes time, energy, and in many cases, sanity. When more than one of those three components is running low, the writing assignments are the first to go. "Worksheets and quizzes are much easier!" we think, until we do assign some writing and see the mess we brought upon ourselves as our students quite literally don't know where to begin.

So before dabbling with Elbovian instruction practices, first internalize a healthy understanding of when and with whom Elbovian evaluation works. Not all writing must be shared, and even the act of sharing does not require a response. Consider Elbow's Audience and Response Grid below. Writers should start at the bottom left and gradually travel to the top right. Students must begin with step one: Audience of self. Sharing writing with an Audience with

authority in order to receive Criticism or Evaluation is the twelfth step on this grid, but unfortunately, it is oftentimes one of the first few steps taken in a secondary writing classroom. It's like taking someone to swim lessons for a week or two, then tossing them in the next Olympic breaststroke. It's not the path to success, let alone the path to passion.

	SHARING, BUT NO RESPONSE	RESPONSE, BUT NO CRITICISM OR EVALUATION	CRITICISM OR EVALUATION
Audience with authority,. e.g. teachers, editors, employers	❑	❑	❑
Audience of peers	❑	❑	❑
Audience of allies	❑	❑	❑
Audience of self: private writing	❑	❑	❑

Each part of the grid has its own home and purpose. Private writing is key to engaging beginning or struggling writers. When writing won't be shared, it's completely safe. Students can take risks they might not otherwise take. In my most recent research paper unit, I was teaching many high school juniors with very little experience. The confidence level across my classes was almost zilch, so I started with private writing. We practiced Elbovian freewriting (detailed below) and I offered students the chance to share the topics they wrote about but not the words they wrote. One student in particular, who had groaned loudly when I announced that fourth quarter would include a research paper, wrote about her love of nature the first time. Next time, she continued with a new focus on how nature helps her feel better in times

of stress. After a few freewrites and some loop writing, she began asking questions: *Do scientists think nature helps you*? *Is it good for your health to spend time in nature*? She ended up writing more than 1600 words on this topic for her research paper, and surprising herself with how much she enjoyed the assignment. This private writing planted the seeds for a product that made her proud.

After writing privately, students begin to hone some skills and become a bit more confident in some of the writing they produce. Thus begins sharing. Students should have ample opportunity to write for an audience of allies (friends, family, trusted readers) and an audience of peers (classmates). I have often used the same activity to hit both marks, which I find to be quite useful. With one unit, we practiced our argumentative writing with single paragraphs written on a topic of the student's choice from the New York Times Learning Network blog post "401 Prompts for Argumentative Writing." They knew they'd write multiple drafts. They freewrote on the topic, wrote a draft to share with a friend, got some feedback, then wrote a draft to share anonymously with a student in another class period. The anonymity and the chance for an ally's feedback helped make the assignment feel safe even though it was public. My writers also remarked at how cool it was to see what real-life people felt and thought about their writing. With my guidance, they saw their own strengths and weaknesses within that feedback, which is richer than any rubric. Keep in mind that I still didn't have to "grade" any writing yet, but students experienced powerful feedback and learning opportunities.

Even among different audiences, the response style can vary. Some writing calls for sharing but no response. As a teacher, this can be a check mark on top or a completion grade. For allies and peers, this can be a silent nod or a simple

"thank-you." The power of sharing with no response lies in its simplicity. Students gain experience sharing their writing and tend to notice that the world does not fall apart when they share. The classroom becomes a community of writers working together, even across ability levels. After this comradery forms, students can respond to allies' and peers' work. Teachers interested in building writing circles to milk all of the rewards of peer feedback should consult Ashley Barnes's article in this journal issue (page 37).

Elbow has many guidelines for response, some of which are detailed below. For my students, these lead to some giggles, some questions, and a whole lot of growing. At this point, too, the teacher can and should respond without evaluating. When I portray myself as an ally for my students, their writing blossoms. They learn to stop fearing my position as the "all knowing" because they see me for what I am: someone who knows a lot, yes, but wants to help them know things, too, and even learn from them. If they made a mistake, their grade doesn't suffer. I often reward them for trying with small amounts of completion points, and I tell them when something is confusing or mixed up. They have the chance to see where they have risen and move forward on their own terms.

Grading is a necessity in American writing classrooms, and thus will have a home in this article; however, Criticism and Evaluation should live at the end of the road, after writers have walked the path of other responses. When utilizing an Elbovian assessment grid or another writing assessment tool, students can evaluate themselves, their friends, and their peers. This means considering the requirements, considering the writing, and bridging any gaps. My students become incredibly comfortable with the assignment requirements through this process. They see more clearly what they need

to do, and they often choose to do it. The product is not only strong writing, but self-aware and conscientious writers. What more do we want?

Freewriting

"Freewriting, I have to say, is the secret of the universe."—Peter Elbow

No article on Elbow's theory can omit freewriting. Elbow's "no pain, no gain" style of freewriting is the perfect first step to enriching writing instruction. This is more than just asking students to jot down their thoughts on a given topic. Students must write, without stopping, for the span of time assigned. This is exercise. They have to persevere, mentally and physically (hand cramps are for the weak!). Elbow suggests ten minutes in *Writing with Power*, but that suggestion is made to adult writers who actively desire to improve their writing. For the range of ability and motivation in a secondary classroom, start with five minutes and work up.

For those five minutes, students write on any school-appropriate topic without stopping. In the past, I've had a student describe the desk in front of him, another list all the ways he hopes his crush dumps her current boyfriend, and I actually once had a student write about how much he hates writing, but that's okay. He was writing the whole five minutes, and that's the point. The goal of freewriting is the process, not the product (Writing with Power 13). Louis L'Amour would call this turning on the faucet, which is the only way to get the water to flow. Evan Nave calls it flowing, too, and "freestyling" in his article "Free(write) Your Mind and The Rest Will Follow" (find this article on page 55). Nave knows that many students view writing as a thing they either can do or cannot do, with most placing themselves in the latter

category. Persistent and unrestrained freewriting allows students to unblock, to get out of the habit of constantly editing every thought with every line, and to surprise themselves with what might appear when they open the doors of their own minds. They build writing stamina. "When you've freewritten enough, you develop this mental muscle, which allows you to generate language unplanned . . . the essential core of freewriting" (Elbow Skype Interview). When someone flosses for the first time in years, her gums will bleed. It hurts. But if she flosses regularly and pushes through that pain, they grow stronger and healthier. Such is freewriting.

Consider again the Audience and Response Grid, and we see that freewriting is the answer to building students up as writers without overwhelming the workload of teachers. Students can keep their freewrites private or share them, but freewriting is most beneficial when it remains free—from topic assignments, criticism, and evaluation. Some teachers require students to share freewrites with a friend (Audience of allies), to share with the class once per quarter (Audience of peers), or even to select three of the weekly freewrites to turn in at the end of a grading period (Audience with authority). The varying audiences can read without response, say thank-you, or share thoughts without evaluating. This one activity creates up to eight of Elbow's Audience and Response situations, all of which are necessary for students to experience if they can ever trust themselves to turn in an important piece of writing to any audience with authority when they know they will receive criticism or evaluation.

When the inevitable whine—"*But I don't know what to write about*!"—erupts from students' mouths, teachers have options. My personal fallback is to tell them to write down their favorite anything—food, movie, sport, person, animal—and write about that. However, the truly persistent

student has more concrete options. Carl Anderson suggests Nancie Atwell's strategy of determining certain writing territories at the beginning of the year. This essentially means making a list of things students greatly enjoy, care about, or find interesting (Anderson 22). They can pull from this list every day and still have more to say, thus providing a fountain of youth for writing topics. Establishing territories early and updating them regularly also ensure that these topics are of personal interest, which can flower into passionate and powerful discussions later in the year. Working with a close-knit writing circle can also provide the basis for topic selection and inspiration, as Barnes discusses in her article.

Students should have the chance to freewrite regularly. If the class involves a lengthy or detailed writing project, teachers can use freewriting to build up audience and response interactions instead of throwing students headfirst into authoritative critique. Alongside regular freewriting that is truly free, teachers can apply the freewriting goal—writing as much as possible—to literary themes or guiding questions. Regardless of "how," students need to write as much as possible and teachers need to critique as little as possible.

Drafting and Revising

"[Let's] get our high stakes writing to float on a sea of low stakes writing."—Peter Elbow

Writing without criticism is absolutely necessary for student writers. That doesn't easily fit into the public school system, though, which requires those doggoned points to be shoveled into the classroom left and right. But we don't have to decide between updating the gradebook and providing valuable instruction in the Elbovian classroom. Elbow

provides a variety of activity options that are well suited to track a student's participation and growth in the gradebook.

All strong writers know that writing is a process made up of other processes. The secondary English classroom tends to struggle with the attempt to honor the individuality of the writing process while also establishing the orderly, scheduled lessons typically required. What results is a structured, constrained, step-by-step program to which students must adhere or risk losing points, even if that program does not help them. Kolb, Longest, and Jensen found that teachers typically break the writing process down into a number of assigned components, moving through topic descriptions, outlines, and drafts of varying length spaced out over the course of the unit or grading period (21). Teachers may feel these different gateways make it "easier" to keep the class together, but in the end, this "easier" route leads most students into the darkness. The truth is that students apply their own meaning to certain components of the writing process, unless explicit instructions are given by the teacher. Even with instructions, the student is not honoring her own writing process—she is just doing what she is told to do (Kolb et al.).

Thus, strong writing instruction includes clear options for both the genesis and revision of writing. For many students, determining what to say and when to say it is the biggest obstacle. Elbow provides a variety of techniques to "cook up" an idea for a piece of writing.

The Open-Ended Writing Process

This process begins with freewriting for a long time (Elbow suggests 20 minutes) about possible topics or subjects. The writer should let the freewrite go wherever it needs to go, and include every single thought or half-thought floating in her mind. Next, she should read the freewrite to find its central thought and write it in one sentence. She can use that sentence

to fuel a new lengthy freewrite. For the secondary writer who has big ideas but little understanding, this can be a research point to find new information and learn more, then freewrite again, boil down to one sentence, lather, rinse, repeat. The open-ended process only closes when the writer decides what her true point is and what to say moving forward. I have found this process particularly useful for students who view writing fearfully or see it as the "end goal." Often my students don't see writing as a tool, but instead as an action with consequences. That's a very tumultuous relationship, and the person who grades can't always clear things up right away. The Open-Ended Writing Process can help students see the transformative power of their own words. I imagine a Flintstones-esque wheel carver seeing four of his wheels used on a car for the first time. It's a whole new world of possibility.

The Loop Writing Process

This process practices both control and creativity. It also serves as a brilliant example of the power of revision. Elbow suggests writers pick three or four of the following versions of a type of writing and loop through the topic repeatedly. The versions include:

- First Thoughts on the topic
- Prejudices the writer holds on the topic
- "Instant version"—just spit out an essay (memo, poem,story) and see what happens
- Dialogues between two people on the topic
- Narrative of the writer's thinking on the topic—what is confusing, appealing, angering, etc.
- Stories and events (nonfiction) related to the topic
- Scenes—small, specific moments on the topic; like snapshots
- Portraits of people connected to the topic and their background

- Vary the audience receiving the writing
- Vary the writer and step into the figurative shoes of another
- Vary the time period in which the writing exists
- Errors and fallacies on the topic which people might feel tempted to accept
- Lies or clear dishonesty related to the topic

Consider a research paper on the topic of illegal immigration. Such a polarizing issue has the potential to distract the writer, or make her writing's purpose to reaffirm her own thoughts rather than to inform, to argue, etc. The Loop Writing Process allows her to examine her own prejudices, the erroneous or illogical arguments used, the variety of people involved in such an issue (while humanizing them, not othering or vilifying them, whoever "them" is), and her own purpose for writing this type of project for this audience (teacher) as this writer (individual). Not only can this produce a good deal of content and research ideas, it can help her grow and develop her own view of the topic.

Many teachers include a prewriting or brainstorming stage, as well as at least one rough draft. These Elbovian processes, combined with other freewrites, can all be used as evidence of thinking, planning, and drafting. They can be revisited and reused, and they provide a space for the idea to grow before formally materializing as a final draft. So often, students think the rough draft should be a completed paper which they can check for typos before the final draft. They don't see the power of revision—the vital importance of going back to a piece of writing and fleshing it out, helping it grow, bringing it to its full potential. Instead of forcing concept maps and roman-numeral outlines, provide students the opportunity to write what they know, learn what they need to learn, revisit their work, write more, and then organize with

guidance. Let them see why a rough draft is called "rough." Let them make a mess of things on paper, then clean it up and create a thing of power.

Showing Exercises

These serve as peer response and help students show the "movies of their minds," as Elbow suggests. Combined with a teacher's narrative feedback (discussed below), student writers get a full picture of what their writing brought to life in the minds of their readers. For a more creative form of critical response, Elbow suggests readers "show" rather than "tell" with certain metaphorical responses, including:

- Describing the writing in terms of voices: Shouting, screaming, whispering, giggling, whining, droning, etc.
- Describing the writing in terms of weather: A sunny day with a slight breeze, a blizzard that comes from nowhere, constant drizzle, a hurricane, etc.
- Describing the writing in terms of motion: marching, climbing, crawling, racing, skipping, etc.
- More, including: color, shape, musical instruments, artwork, vegetables, etc.

Elbow's list of 24 showing exercises can be found in his first book, *Writing Without Teachers*. For secondary writers with a dash of creativity, showing exercises provide a unique and informative reader response that encompasses the whole piece. If students receive a list of showing options and are asked to complete one or two, they can receive points in the gradebook; they could also be required to defend their metaphors further by pointing to the text in question.

Skeleton Feedback and Descriptive Outline

The Skeleton Feedback activity involves the reader breaking the entire piece down into just its bare bones, and

isolating the main point, the supporting points, and supportive evidence in as few words or sentences as possible. It can be accompanied by a Descriptive Outline, which consists mostly of "says" and "does" statements. In this, the reviewer states the function or purpose of each component of the paper (what it says) and its impact on the reader (what it does). This helps the writer see what the reader pulls from her writing. In the event that the reader isn't hearing what the writer thought she was saying, she has someone to consult with and time to clarify.

When I discussed these activities with Peter, he felt they were better suited as a part of a self-evaluation or revision. We agreed, though, that students could use these as part of an in-depth, richer peer review for which students are allotted the time to take home the writing they analyze. He also suggested asking students to find the piece's "center of gravity;" that is, to isolate the central focus, or the most powerful bit of writing, and to think about how its energy could be harnessed throughout the piece.

Elbovian Evaluation

"I mean, really—shall we teach, or give credit?"—Peter Elbow

Points can still be awarded to writing that receives no criticism, and enough feedback can prevent the "big points" attached to evaluation from sinking the ship.

Narrative Evaluation

Both peer and authoritative audiences should take advantage of narrative evaluation. Elbow uses the phrase "movies of the mind" to describe narrative evaluation, but teachers are a bit blocked from giving the true movie within their minds due to their role as the expert in the field. Still, each reader should explain what happened to her while reading

the piece. Peers and teachers can do this by following Elbow's advice to label parts of the writing that feel particularly strong (he suggests underlining), parts that feel particularly weak or below-standard (he suggests underlining with a wavy line), and pointing out what they felt or thought in each paragraph. Much of what teachers write in response already does this. We articulate what made sense and what didn't, what questions we had, what the student didn't fix and why that disappointed us, etc. Instead of cramming those comments into the margins of the paper or the bottom of a rubric guide, Elbow suggests writing them out in paragraph form as a true narrative of the events of that reading. This allows teachers to "distinguish various features of [student] performance—not just sum everything up into one number" (*Embracing Contraries* 220).

Elbow is not the only scholar to encourage narrative evaluation. Composing letters to the writer creates a genuine rhetorical situation in which the work of both the writer and the reader is positioned in the conventions of the assignment at hand (Fraiberg). This is authentic writing instruction. Responding as an individual (grounded in expertise, as the teacher) is much more powerful than responding on behalf of the "general reader," the hypothetical and unrealistic entity created by English teachers everywhere when they tell students not to write with the word "you."

Self-Evaluation

There is very little evaluation more meaningful in the writing classroom than self-evaluation. With this activity, students become intimately familiar with both the requirements of the assignment and with their own writing. They look at their writing in a new, more critical light. It's not just revision, it's grading. It's heavier.

Self-evaluation also offers the truest insight into what the student has actually learned. If she remains dependent on

the teacher's evaluation, then she does not truly understand the assignment or her own performance on the assignment (*Embracing Contraries* 167). I have found self-evaluation to be the ideal tool for determining the efficacy of my teaching. If a student thinks she has accomplished something and I disagree, I see where I need to fill in some blanks—but more importantly, she knows just what question to ask.

I make a habit of asking students to self-evaluate at least twice in a given writing project: halfway through, and just before the due date. Though many of my students constantly revise their writing, they do so only to "fix typos" and "make it flow" as they say; they do not switch easily from creation mode to critical mode. Requiring them to sit down and handwrite an explanation of how their writing meets each individual standard forces them to see their writing for what it is—and for what it isn't.

Grid Evaluation—The Single Point Rubric

We don't grade for fun. Sitting waist deep in research papers is no one's idea of a hot Saturday night. No, we grade to help our students improve. But analytic and holistic rubrics, which severely limit and reduce writing, do not offer our students what they need. Even with narrative evaluation, we aren't breaking down each individual criterion on which the writing will be evaluated. This makes grading hard for us—how do we meaningfully communicate everything?—and a headache for students—what do all of these boxes and numbers even mean?

In his book *Everyone Can Write*, Elbow recommends listing each criterion before the writing begins so students can plan, and then giving a grade for each criterion. This is simpler than it sounds: we simply tell students what the criteria are and whether they hit each criterion weakly, satisfactorily, or strongly. Elbow called this grid grading in 1997, but more

recent scholarship names it the Single-Point Rubric (SPR). The average, standard expectation is listed on the rubric. If students don't do it, it's below the standard. In my classroom, that translates to F–D range. If they do it, and it's not great, but it's there, that's perfectly average (C range). If they manage to bring it to life, utilize powerful diction, or generally do more than is expected, they went Above and Beyond the standard (A–B range).

This might sound like it complicates grading further, but it actually simplifies the process for everyone. I hold satisfactory, average writing as the standard, so I only have to notate writing that is particularly strong or weak (*Everyone Can Write* 412). The SPR also helps students see where they need to be, and it gives them a healthy guidepost for how to get there. In fact, classrooms which utilize the SPR tend to show advancements in student achievement, engagement with writing, and efficacy of self-assessment (Fluckiger). For students who strive for higher grades and higher quality work, the SPR removes the limitations of the traditional analytic rubric. Instead of step-by-step instructions for an A, the student is

> put in a most valuable position—not just having to follow a teacher's suggestions but having to think: having to examine empirical evidence as to what her words did to different readers, and then having to make up her own mind about what revision, if any, she wants to make. (*Embracing Contraries* 162)

More than any other rubric, the SPR is focused on helping the writer develop her skills. It also allows teachers to highlight individual strengths and weaknesses instead of reducing them to one simple number.

Conclusion

Despite the longevity of his presence, not enough secondary teachers take advantage of Elbow's practices. They stick with the rigid, scheduled system and rubrics they've grown accustomed to using. When successful, these strategies might produce advanced writing—but the Elbovian classroom produces advanced writers. It's messy and purposeful. My goal as a teacher is for my writers to grow enough that they don't need step-by-step instructions, and the Elbovian classroom is the best environment for that level of growth. Our classrooms will never be perfect, and we'll always have students who choose not to grasp the opportunities we present. But for those students who have the potential and the willingness to grow, Elbovian writing instruction can open doors they never knew existed.

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THE ELBOVIAN WRITING CIRCLE

ASHLEY BARNES

Last year my eighth-grade students wrote original dystopian narratives to end our unit. When I introduced the assignment, nearly every kid in the room smiled or said, "aww cool!" The excitement in the room was energizing. I was looking forward to reading the creative plotlines and villains these kids would dream up. I provided plenty of guidance and preparation during the writing process, and each student typed away furiously on his or her computer. I provided copious notes of feedback and suggestions on their drafts. However, when it came time to sit back and enjoy the final stories, I noticed a troublesome pattern. As I scanned the first Google Document it was obvious no real revisions had been made. Instead the only major changes were to *my* comments.

Comment Resolved

Comment Resolved

Comment Resolved

With a single click, all my thoughtful questions, comments, and suggestions were deleted. Ignored. *Resolved*. And it wasn't just the first document. Student after student had clicked "resolve" without actually taking my feedback into account. It was the 21st century equivalent of finding the trash stuffed with the drafts you passed back last hour.

I was frustrated. I knew they had been excited about the assignment, so the results made little sense to me. Actually, I was a bit offended too. I didn't understand why these students didn't seem to care about the feedback of a more seasoned writer. I was left thinking that those writers must have been satisfied with their story despite my comments, and more so satisfied with their grade.

It wasn't until a year later that I realized there was a more powerful audience for these students than their teacher. After reading about Peter Elbow's Teacherless Writing Class, I began to explore the power of peers as audience and instructors. An idea was born: An Elbovian Writing Circle. These writing circles make writing an authentic experience where students write for and with a real audience, not just for a grade.

Elbovian Writing Circle Defined

For clarity, I must define my understanding of a writing circle. Like a literature circle, a writing circle is a small group of peers who work together inside of a larger class. My Elbovian Writing Circle is a community of writers who are thoughtfully matched, which I will discuss in detail later. These writers meet often in class at planned, reliable sessions and depend on each other for support. The secondary classroom mimics a "teacherless" writing class because the students take control of their writing circles. Here the teacher takes a backseat and functions as a facilitator when needed.

The writers also meet multiple times throughout the writing process from brainstorming, drafting, revising, publishing, and celebration.

It's no secret to teachers that our students measure their lives on the social stage of adolescence. Grades, activities, and their learning are important to them, but often secondary to their relationships to their peers. With guidance and structured Elbovian Writing Circles, teachers can channel that social interaction into a productive writing process because students value the feedback of this authentic audience. Teachers can use that social drive to encourage students to write, share, and collaborate more which will ultimately improve their writing. Psychologically, research shows that this peer audience and feedback is much more valuable than teacher feedback.

Peers as a Powerful Audience

At this time developmentally, the power of peer influence is astounding. Many researchers have found positive elements of this effect. Jay Simmons, a former high school English teacher and current professor at University of Massachusetts Lowell, has experienced the power of peer feedback. A student writer offered thanks to a peer in his writing group for teaching him about format and editing. Simmons had been teaching lessons regarding these tasks all along, and admits to feeling a bit snubbed. Later he reflects, "I was reminded of the peer-counseling dictum that anything heard from a peer will be more effective than what comes from a teacher" (71). As the teacher, with a degree I worked hard for, and as the authority in the room, I found this a bit surprising. But I am curious. If I can get my students to value feedback from their writing circle, would this motivate students to have more interest in their writing? Would they be more curious

about the effects on an actual audience and stop this "resolve comment" nonsense?

Further research supports the impact of a peer audience. Jacques D. Lempers and Dania Clark-Lempers of Iowa State University studied adolescent perceptions on how major figures in their life (mother, father, same-sex best friend, siblings, and teachers) ranked in supportive qualities, such as affection, nurturance, and instrumental aide, etc. They divided their adolescents into three groups: early adolescents, middle adolescents, and late adolescents. Their conclusions about peer relationships versus teacher relationships were interesting. The researchers explained,

> Relationships with teachers were, in general, ranked lowest for the attributes. These relationships were ranked significantly lower than others by all adolescent groups for affection, reliable alliance, companionship, intimacy, and nurturance; additionally, for the other attributes, these teacher relationships were in the lowest clusters. The only exception to this was for instrumental aid, where for the males and females in the young adolescent group and the males in the middle group they received somewhat higher rankings. (91–92)

It seems that students value their teachers for growth and help when they are younger. However, when they reach the developmental changes of the early teenage years, they begin to look more toward their peers, even for help in school. This further supports Simmons's argument that students are far more likely to listen to a trusted peer than their teacher.

Granted, this study was regarding same-sex best friends, but further studies show the effect extends to peers in general. In the 2016 *Handbook of Social Influence in School Contexts*, researchers Wentzel and Ramani found, "At least during

adolescence, students report that their peers are as or more important sources of instrumental aid than their teachers" (19). It seems that while teachers are the content authority in the room, adolescents simply will value feedback from peers more. Wentzel and Ramani consider the reasons for this effect. By junior high, most students have many teachers with different teaching styles and expectations. Adolescents begin to rely on peers as more of a constant form of support.

As a teacher, I feel a bit flustered hearing these data. Simmons even joked it made him feel like chopped liver. But I must emphasize the importance of what we do. When I shared my findings with Peter Elbow over a Skype conversation, he provided reassurance. Teacher insights and experience are the most valuable for students. We guide most every part of growth students experience in our room. We extend that growth when we ask students to share and receive feedback in groups. Elbow agrees the process is an act of faith, but he also argued its importance as students become "insulated against teacher feedback" (Skype Interview). As the data show, over time the students figure out the school process and how to survive. The interactions they have with their peers, however, offer much more capital in terms of growth.

Elbow also reminded me of the need for an audience. When writing, having an audience and understanding how our words affect them makes our work real. As the data show, students simply become a bit immune to teacher feedback. The real power, the real audience, has much more to do with their social lives unfolding around them.

Yet, there is also the fear of rejection from their peers. I will discuss how to avoid this later. While it feels counter-intuitive, teachers need to harness the power of this peer interaction. Peers simply have much stronger influence over adolescents than a teacher could ever have. There is

an unintended benefit to the peer-centered groups as well. Language Arts teachers often struggle to manage their loads of grading on student writing. As Jenna Wilson explores in her research, our constant evaluation is not necessary. Her look into Elbow's strategies asserts the importance of sharing work with a real audience. While grading is necessary, she reminds teachers that criticism is more appropriate for seasoned writers. When teachers transition from evaluator to facilitator, students not only discover a more powerful audience, we lighten our grading. For more insight into Elbow's Audience and Response Grid, look to Wilson's article on page 19 in this issue of *Illinois English Bulletin*.

When designed properly with influence from Peter Elbow's work, writing circles can help students overcome the fear of judgment from their peers and see real effects of their writing. Ultimately, these groups will give more learning opportunities for students and help them see writing as a legitimate tool to communicate in this world, not just schoolwork.

To establish these writing circles successfully, there are two important factors influenced by Elbow I believe you must maintain: student allies and student choice.

Student Allies

Students need to feel that they have an ally in their writing circles. Adolescents may value their peers' feedback over everything, however that comes at a cost. Any rejection, real or imagined, cuts deep. So, students in a writing circle must have at least one person they would consider an ally. There are many suggestions for how to do this. Some teachers allow students to group themselves. Others suggest allowing students to pair up with a friend, and then these teachers match up pairs. I prefer thoughtful design when grouping. I recommend grouping as Nancy Steineke does. She asks that

the students create a list of at least four people they would feel comfortable working and sharing with. She guarantees that they will be in a group with at least one of those people. When necessary, they can add if there is a peer with whom they simply can't work.

Writing circle size is also important. Steineke recommends two to three so that students have ample time to discuss but can still stay focused; however, I ran into issues with groups that size. Due to absences and unprepared students, many groups were left at a disadvantage. Elbow's teacherless writing circles are made of (mostly) motivated adults who want to improve their writing. Frankly, our students don't always fit that mold. Even when they care, we will have students who were genuinely sick or just didn't get the drafting done. Esteemed writing teacher and scholar Jim Vopat recommends grouping in three to six (30). I worry that in the larger groups, the writers won't get enough attention to their work or that the writers won't feel as comfortable. I found that grouping students into four was ideal. It helped protect against the unprepared but still gave students opportunity to get enough attention as individuals in the group.

In regards to using the student requests for writing circle allies, an important question comes to mind. What about the kid who isn't on *any* list? Or, what if a student is listed repeatedly as too difficult to work with? I don't have a perfect answer to this. I have not had this issue in my experience, but that's not to say I don't have my challenging students. Some teachers might argue to put all the "bad apples" in a group. I believe it depends on the dynamics of the classroom and the teacher's knowledge of the students. I can think of a few classes where it would have made my life easier to put the stinkers in one ship together, sink or swim, while I maintained great facilitation with the other groups. However, I

think this is poor practice. While writing circles give students more responsibility, we must remember our role as facilitator. It is our job to organize these circles so each student has the opportunity to be successful. Grouping the "bad apples" together may make the day's activities easier to accomplish, but in the end it would be against best practice to help these students achieve success. As teacher/facilitator, we must take the time to group thoughtfully. The time we spend with our writers gives us an advantage in that process. We get to know our students well and can usually find which student(s) can be allies to "that kid."

Writing circles ensure that students will have a real audience with an ally; however, taking the time to create the groups by these lists also promotes diversity, engenders new ideas, and ensures no student is left out (Steineke 109–10). From personal experience, this is important. I experimented with writing circles in March during the dystopian narrative unit I mentioned earlier. After seeing my comments "resolved" last year, I felt determined to try a new strategy for students to receive feedback. By March I knew the students well so I designed their groups with peers they were friends with, as well as some others who I believed might create balance or challenge their thinking. However, I went by *my* observations, not by asking the students themselves. For most, the groupings went well, but for one student I failed. Nick admitted to me he didn't understand how his peers could accept his writing. He feared they would judge or criticize it. I felt I really let this writer down. He is one of my students who loves to write, who has fresh ideas and frankly, who can be a goofball. In my rush to begin the circles, I made a mistake that violated Elbow's own recommendations. Elbow argues, "We want students to take risks; it's hard to learn well unless you are willing to take risks. But notice the dialectal

relationship here: the best way to help people to take risks is to build a foundation of safety" (*Everyone Can Write* 41). Writing circles could not help the students create better stories if they didn't feel safe enough to start. I felt terrible that the writing circle I (poorly) designed might have actually stifled Nick's writing and encouraged him to write or share less. Students need to feel safe otherwise the writing and sharing isn't going to happen.

Thankfully, I had other groups that I designed well. One group had peers who all could see each other as allies and could share openly. Jake felt his two group mates were very supportive and helpful. He said all three writers made thoughtful efforts to listen and provide support. Here I saw a mutual support group where all three students would like to share and work with each other again. Seeing these kids enjoy writing and sharing was one of my best teaching moments this year.

Student Choice

The second most important factor in the Elbovian Writing Circle is student choice. Students need choice in what they write, what they share, and the feedback they are ready to receive. The typical English classroom often groups students up to share brainstorms for a paper, but then kids don't meet again to share until they conduct a "peer review" on a draft. That's not going to cut it. This is setting up the dynamics of peer-as-evaluator, not a caring audience. Rather, low-risk writing and sharing should be occurring much more frequently in our classrooms. Over his career, Elbow has emphasized the powers of freewriting. Freewriting is one of the most effective ways students gain control of what they think, and therefore what they write. Further, freewriting is the most inclusive way to write in a classroom. In his collage of research and

creative writing, Evan Nave shares his knowledge about Elbovian freewriting. He reminds us that Elbow's freewriting is possible to all students, no matter their age, race, language, socioeconomic background, or ability. Nave writes, "The space is a come-one-come-all space. Everyone's languages are welcome. Everyone's writing is good enough to be and share freely" (find Nave's essay on page 55 in this issue). Students should be freewriting much more often and sharing these low-stakes works with their writing circles. Vopat agrees and argues that these freewrites make students stronger and more confident writers. He also adds that low-stakes sharing in writing circles helps keep sharing anxiety low (9).

But I must emphasize, students need choice in this too. Never demand a student share a freewrite. One way I maintain choice is by having my students keep freewrite notebooks in a bin in the classroom (helpful for those kids who would lose their head if it weren't attached). As a class we freewrite two to three times a week, and after two weeks I ask them to select *one* of their freewrites to share with their Writing Circle. The small writing groups offer continued support and validation from their peers, something that means the world to an adolescent, further showing the power in adolescent writing circles. The results are magic. As Elbow argues, freewriting and sharing with no feedback is the best way to improve writing (*Writing with Power* 24). In addition, students don't see their freewrites as typical "schoolwork." Rather they enjoy the opportunity to share their (sometimes wacky) ideas with their friends. One of my favorite memories this year was when a student shared a freewrite short story. It was a dark and harrowing tale from the perspective of the last Pringle, struggling to survive at the bottom of the can. It was the silliest thing I've heard in awhile, and his ownership of his Pringle identity and voice had us laughing for ten minutes.

Keri Franklin, who has taught both middle and high school, sees this in her class too. She says "Many students go to school purely for socialization. Incorporating socialization helped students see that I valued all types of talk. If student writing conferences are conversations between people with mutual respect, writing can grow" (79). Asking students to share freewrites of their choice builds their trust and encourages more sharing with their peers. Almost always, the classroom becomes wonderfully loud with excited adolescent voices reading aloud from their notebooks.

When students are ready for feedback, or the writing assignment calls for it, students need choice in the feedback. Feedback is supportive when the writer clearly asks for it (Spear 141). Sometimes student writers just need a listening ear, but other times or for different works they can handle more critical feedback. Either way, the student should express what feedback they need before the sharing begins. This is important so that all students in the writing circle know expectations at the start.

In addition, it is important to teach students to explain how they interpreted the writing ("I am confused about the riot"), not the writer ("Your sentence about the riot is bad"). To make feedback meaningful, Elbow argues for giving movies of your mind: "As a reader giving your reactions . . . you are answering a time-bound, subjective but *factual* question: what happened in *you* when you read the words *this time*" (*Writing Without Teachers* 85). His chapter "The Teacherless Writing Class" in *Writing Without Teachers* provides many exercises groups can use to show the movie of their mind. Since Elbow's model is designed for willing adults, I suggest using Vopat's condensed list I've included below (121).

I find adolescent writers can easily select one or two responses they'd like to receive from this list, and then their

No response	Sometimes writers aren't ready for (or don't want) a response.
Point Out	Sometimes they want to know what details are connecting.
Say Back	Are they getting their main idea across?
Just the Facts	How would other kids summarize their writing?
Sketch It	What do other kids visualize from the writing?
Suggestion	Do kids have an idea for making the writing better?
One Question	What do kids wonder about the question?
Writer's Craft	How does the writer put words together?
Association	What real-life and personal connections does the writing trigger?
A Star and a Wish	A combination of pointing out something positive (a star) and making a suggestion (a wish).

peers can give more real movies of their mind from it.

Admittedly, these response options might not work for every writing activity. Sometimes it is important to use a criterion-check for response (such as "do I have a thesis?"). Yet, I think it is essential that students hear how their writing actually affected someone. As teachers we instill that writing isn't just a checklist of "do I have a transition?" and "does my conclusion restate my thesis clearly?" Writing is a tool we use to communicate and connect with others, whether it be narrative or an informative research piece. Using writing circles to share and discuss all types of writing makes this more real to our students, too.

Questions (and some answers)

These Elbow-inspired writing circles have the potential to not just motivate student writers, but change their views on what writing really is. Using their peers as not only a genuine audience, but instructors, is powerful for the adolescent age group. But there is another reality we can't ignore. Adolescents can be extremely cruel to one another. Most want to fit in so badly that they are often quick to throw their peer into the fire if it prevents them from getting burned. Darla Wagner, also a middle school teacher, paints a picture of one of my biggest frustrations and fears: "Everything is funny, and uncontrollable giggling is a trademark. A slight chuckle by a classmate when a student is revealing heart and soul in a piece of writing, however, can diminish self-esteem and halt the writing process" (127). How can we avoid this? How can we avoid the giggling, the judgmental looks across the room, or worse, the blatant "That's dumb" blurted out in response?

Standards must be clearly set out from day one. It must be clear that writing circles will be approached with civility and respect for every person involved. Each teacher has their methods to establish their classroom community. In my research I really enjoyed Steineke's "home court" analogy she developed with her students. As a class they actively discuss why teams win more games at home than away. Then, the students brainstorm what exactly home court advantage will look like in their class. Steineke explains, "From now on, if anyone hears a put-down, just gently say 'Home Court' to remind that person to stop. Ever since I have started the year with this activity, the number of negative comments has plummeted" (20). This strategy is a nonthreatening way for students to keep each other accountable for their words, put-downs and sarcasm included. In addition, it's a reminder they are a team. This analogy can be extended further with

the ideas that the students must be team players and that as the teacher-facilitator, you are their coach. You can help them and give direction, but ultimately they are in control of what happens on the court.

A very important step teachers can take to avoid these put-downs is to teach active listening skills to students. While we have a set of Speaking and Listening standards that validate how essential listening is, too often students sit in lecture, jot down random notes, and never engage with the speaker. This yields frightening results:

> Yet while students spend more time listening than in any other school activity, they seldom receive instruction in any aspect of it. Consequently, by some estimates people are likely to ignore, misunderstand, or almost immediately forget around 75% of what they hear. (Spear 116)

It is important that teachers provide mini-lessons on how to listen, respond, and collaborate. I recommend referring to Steineke's *Reading & Writing Together* for detailed lessons and examples, including her Five Elements of Interdependence.

When the students are in writing circles, there are many easy ways to keep their investment to their little community. They should have a sense of identity with their groups. For older students, each writing circle can design a flag or write their motto. This will allow them to construct a set of values together. For the younger students, allow them to designate a name for their writing circle. Sure, you'll have a class of "savages" and "purple kangaroos," but this will help give them a sense of unity and pride.

One factor I am still working out is the duration of writing circles. Elbow's Teacherless Writing Class recommends writers meet for a minimum of two or three months, but likely meet week for a ten-week period (*Writing Without*

Teachers 77–78). Tereza Kramer's college-level writing circles meet weekly for an entire semester (21), while Jim Vopat recommends adolescent students meet for four to six weeks (35). For the sake of establishing and maintaining a sense of community, I find it useful that students meet for the duration of six to nine weeks, about a quarter of the term. This allows students to complete writing units together and build their sense of identity in their writing circle. However, it's important to form new groups to promote diversity in ideas. It's also a good strategy to prevent the kids from getting frustrated or too familiar with one another and accidentally blurting a "that's stupid."

One final question I considered when defining my Elbovian Writing Circle is, "How do we avoid this becoming the blind leading the blind?" In taking a facilitator role and giving students more control, will their writing suffer? Frankly, no. It is impossible for us to give adequate attention to all of our students' writing. I'd be reading and responding until two in the morning every night. But even if I did make that (crazy) commitment, my efforts would be unnecessary. The research shows that adolescents will be far more influenced by the feedback from a peer. Regardless of that, Elbow preaches that the best way to improve writing is to freewrite and share more, not assess more. We must put more power in the hands of the adolescents in our room. The most productive way to do this is the thoughtfully designed Elbovian Writing Circles. Paired with mini-lessons about writing skills, writing circles make writing a real activity with a real audience. This will only benefit our writers in the end.

Final Thoughts

There will be mistakes. These practices don't guarantee success, nor do they guarantee that every piece of writing your

students create will be magic. However, Elbovian Writing Circles and the practices I described are the best set of directions I know to achieve success. We must remember that we teach living, breathing, and at times unpredictable humans. But as English teachers, we are masters of the most powerful tool: writing. If we ask students to write and freewrite often, then share these works with a thoughtfully designed group of peers, that writing becomes the most powerful resource. Dean and Warren describe it best: "When we use informal writing and sharing in our classrooms, we shift some of the focus from writing as an evaluative tool to writing as a tool for living—and thus for learning" (51). When students write with and for a trusted group of peers, their writing comes alive. Suddenly they are not just kids scribbling for an assignment, but a community using their writing to connect to and understand the world around them. Adolescents watch their writing evolve into a tool to express their ideas, generate real responses from a valued audience, and build relationships with peers. Elbovian Writing Circles are a teacher's most effective strategy for students to experience writing as a powerful tool to think and learn through a lifetime.

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FREE(WRITE) YOUR MIND AND THE REST WILL FOLLOW: TOWARDS A FREESTYLE COMPOSITION PEDAGOGY

EVAN NAVE

Writing At All

The hardest part of writing is writing something in the first place.

Calling something out of nothing with a language that sticks and moves. Pushing it with pulse and body heat onto a blank page to scald the surface written and alive. Getting physical with the unspoken. Olivia Newton John with the same amount of dripping sweat on paper to speak. Touchy-feely till the writing is visible. The correct combinations of movements to match the voices in our heads step for step. Working out the kinks in the choreography to compose. Listening until we can make our bodies talk onto the same sweaty paper with muscle.

It is easier to not-write. To let the unsaid rest.

Dorothea Brande says as much when she opens her 1934 book *Becoming a Writer* by noting, "First there is the difficulty of writing *at all*. The full, abundant flow that must be established if the writer is to be heard from simply will not begin" (28–29).

The hardest part of writing is writing something in the first place.

Starting a flow of words to follow. Making it rain. Opening the floodgates.

Not to be taken lightly, these tasks are creation-work of biblical proportions. Rainbows and olive branches out of nowhere. Writing first thoughts with a rib bone in dust and clay. Getting it all started with the Word made manifest. Birthing a firstborn written something—with an emphasis on the labor.

But the labor of getting writing going, of beginning actual writing work, is often overlooked or underestimated by teachers and pedagogues more interested in the mechanics or rhetorical functions of students' compositions once said texts already exist in the world. Like the pieces fell newborn from the heavens, swaddled and ready for critique. Writing instruction (in classrooms, style guides, and textbooks) often takes a "here's how to be a better writer than you already are" tone, with an authority figure in composition offering time-honored tips and techniques, relaying strict rules, god-like, to novice writers seeking to "hone their craft" (i.e., make the writing they have already created, and perhaps will recreate in the future, more perfect, more divine).

Brande's response to such approaches to writing instruction is pragmatic: "Unless the writer can be helped past [the difficulty of writing at all] there is very likely to be no need for technical instruction at all" (29).

All the ancient writing wisdom or new age self-help composition insights won't mean a thing if the writing doesn't exist. If the would-be writer can't start by writing something, there can be no further writing instruction because there is nothing to instruct upon.

The hardest part of writing is writing something in the first place.

And with this in mind, I've turned my critical attention to the idea of writing as an embodied experience. How minds and bodies work together to make written work. How the first drops of Brande's notion of "flow," the physical work of writing and sustaining writing activity, can potentially lead to a psychological "flow state." Where writers start composing with their bodies as a way to kick-start and maintain more prolonged creative states of mind that in turn supply imaginative content for future writing. Where writers start by bringing whatever language they already have to the physical process of getting out whatever it is they could imagine having to say.

In focusing on writing and teaching writing as "flowing," I've found it useful to analyze two language traditions that emphasize in-the-moment creativity: the freewriting practices of Peter Elbow and other "expressivist" teacher-theorists, and the freestyle rap practices of classic and contemporary hip-hop culture. Both freewriting and freestyling value improvisation and off-the-top-of-the-head language delivery, and in doing so promote an approach to writing/speaking that is open to the personal, performative, and unexpected.

I'm interested in how writing gets going, moving. What moves writers to get going on their writing and keep going. Freewriting and freestyling offer opportunities for creative freedom to flow for those who feel they have nothing, or nothing good enough, to say. I'm after the language that can only be produced by writers who feel like they don't belong.

Flowing makes this language more accessible by emboldening the writers who possess it. By convincing writers that whatever language they have in them in the moment, any moment, is enough to start writing in the first place.

Rapper Trickster

I'm not a writing teacher; I'm a rapper with the proper academic credentials and professional attire to fool and front my way into an English department. Check my CV for the subterfuge proof. I'm an MC with a college costume and a university library card. What happens when a Master of Science degree blends with the message behind Erykah Badu's "Master Teacher." Staying woke enough to pass it on to others. And the benefits have been small-venue collaborative performances put on by Illinois taxpayers. I make publically funded paper.

I write my own papers like bait and switch requirements to move up through the teaching ranks. Adequate yearly progress and meritocracy politics to prove myself worthy of an audience. I write behind an MF Doom rap mask at home and change into faux-tweed jackets for work, convincing enough to get to the head of the class unnoticed. The name I scratch in white on the chalkboard on the first day of the semester is a see-through alias. A coy cover my parents handed me at birth. I put it on my syllabus as a palindrome prank.

After my last promotion, I started practicing a trickster pedagogy I learned from a course on the African American vernacular tradition. The whole thing more or less outlined by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. I stole my approach to teaching writing word-for-word from the folktale excerpts in *Talk That Talk: An Anthology of African-American Storytelling*. Now I'm a cotton-tailed Brer Rabbit scholar, an Anansi

spider straight out of *Charlotte's Web* by E. B. White. I teach writing like a second-rate tar-baby molded out of Elmer's glue.

And it's all to hide that I'm really a rapper instead. An MC with stage fright who hides behind papers and masks and syllabi but still can't kick the jitters. I perform teaching writing to get my language fix, enough to remember my name and pay my rent. But every lesson is an act of signification. A call-and-response with final grades attached. I hold class like a microphone and tell my so-called students to say, "Hooo!" in their own ways. In print. We carry on back and forth, and I show them how to perform writing that moves the crowd. Makes people believe. All the little tricks I've picked up from performing for so long.

Used to Teach

I used to teach writing like I knew what I was doing. Like I had everything under control. Like I was in control. I stood up in front of people called "students" with copies of *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, *Roget's 21st Century Thesaurus*, and Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* in hand and held court. Like court was in session for the semester. Like I was judge, jury, and executioner, and the textbooks were written law. Everything already on the books. I taught writing like I was above the law.

All of this even after I'd read Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and knew better. After I'd read bell hooks's *Teaching to Trangress* and knew better. After I'd completed all the post-graduate work in pedagogy and kind of knew better. None of it doing nearly enough to silence the voices in my head that said, "You know," and, "They don't," alternately. None of the book learning and dialogue making a dent in the knee-jerk desire to dictate. Teaching was a power play, and

I got the lead role. I handwrote the scripts that were monologues. I taught writing in soliloquies.

And I knew almost immediately that the approach wasn't working. The classroom felt wrong because it didn't feel like anything. Instead, it sounded like my head when I can't fall asleep at night. It sounded like backtalk between arcane scholarly articles. A throwback to a bygone generation of professional know-it-alls standing in lecture halls and proving how they got there. Providing a detailed bibliography of their power trip, complete with dry anecdotes and harmless self-praise.

The students looked conditioned for despair. Like they'd seen it all before on schedule since kindergarten. I saw them biding their time until matriculation and beyond. I saw them not trusting me clearly. I saw myself in them on schedule since kindergarten. They kept their eyes forward and listless like I didn't trust them. They read the bad faith in my PowerPoint slides and took defeated notes. We were all writing in the dark, with the lights out. We couldn't see each other or the point. We spent our time together apart. The semester was an exercise in dutifulness and distrust. I spent the whole time spouting off, "I told you so," to whoever would listen.

No one was listening.

Intro to a Freestyle Manifesto

In hip-hop culture, "To freestyle is to create rhymes on the spot—spontaneously and contemporaneously—as opposed to memorizing and reciting previously written works" (Bynoe 141). But it's more than this because it's not so much about who says what in the moment, but how one opens oneself to the creative moment to say anything at all. To freestyle rap is to respond to the beat(box) as originally, creatively, and (un)consciously as possible within a community (cipher) of likeminded peers—and keep going.

Freestyling is to keep going off the top of one's head with style.

To freestyle is to spit stylized language from the body indefinitely, on and on to the beat until the freestyler forgets her body for the language. Until she is the language itself flowing indefinitely to the beat. Until she flows to the beat in a flow state that supplies and bears witness to the language indefinitely. Freestyling as an embodied flow state of being and creating like something out of a Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi text or TED Talk. Where to enter and maintain the creative psychological flow state is more important to the "success" of the freestyle rap/rapper than the language-content that gets spat out physically during any individual freestyle session.

From a broader perspective, freestyling as a practice is as counterintuitive to the commercial rap industry as, say, freewriting is to higher education as an institution. Both center practitioners' holistic creative processes rather than the created products (flowing itself more important than what is produced while flowing). As a result, both complicate notions of revision, evaluation, and commodification by focusing on ephemeral states of being that are difficult to replicate and quantify. Freestyling and freewriting blur conceptions of authorship and ownership, raising important questions about whom the improvisational practices and subsequent oral/written texts are for and how they can be valued/evaluated.

In the end, freestyle rap isn't even about rap, it's about rappers reaching the psychological flow state that makes embodied freestyling possible. The raps themselves are manifestations of a way of approaching language- and music-making "spontaneously and contemporaneously," this approach opening creative space for unexpected utterances. Freestyling (and, similarly, freewriting) is loaded with creative potential because it rejects the formulaic and fussed-over in favor of

the fresh. It demands a sharp tongue and a short memory. It promotes "being" and "becoming" ahead of "producing." What could be imagined and voiced in the present rather than what's already been thought of and heard in the past.

Choosing Movement

If I taught writing, I'd be a ride-or-die expressivist. A warrior-disciple of teacher-scholars Ken Macrorie, Donald Murray, Peter Elbow, and others with their pragmatism. A practitioner of an approach to writing whose aim is "to better understand how writing comes to be in order to help individuals discover themselves and create the identity preserved in their language" (Burnham "Expressive Rhetoric" 156). Writing like my very identity depended on it. Teaching like it didn't mean a thing. A collective push towards becoming against all odds.

Any time I'd spend with students, I'd call them other writers with me. Writers together learning. We'd teach each other and write to learn from it as well. The classroom would be our bodies sitting together. We'd be the assignments and texts. Everything else would have to come through us first. Our community would be the pedagogy. How we'd turn what we take up into more writing and lessons. A cycle of input and output like an expressivism that "assign[s] highest value to the writer and her imaginative, psychological, social, and spiritual development and how that development influences individual consciousness and social behavior" (Burnham "Expressive Pedagogy" 19).

We'd be about developing more than anything. Moving ourselves to move an audience. Sometimes pretending to ignore audience all together if it moves us. Moving the "words in [our] head[s] and putting them on a blank piece of paper" no matter what (Elbow qtd. in Boice and Meyers

482). To get somewhere out of nowhere. To write something into being and ourselves into consciousness. We'd write to wake up and stay awake. The writing itself an expression of our wakefulness.

Trust Issues Pt. 3

I don't trust myself to teach writing because I learned the most about writing myself without a teacher present. Something like Peter Elbow's 1973 book *Writing Without Teachers*, acted out in real time and space. The words became flesh and embodied beyond academic or peer evaluation. No one over my shoulder. The learning a series of periodical self check-ins, disciplined listening, and page after page of actual writing. In the end, coming to know how I think I know how to write.

The practice went like this: I wrote as much as I could by hand every day for a summer and called it ENG 101: Composition as Critical Inquiry: A Reprise. Alone in someone else's house, at someone else's prolific desk, surrounded by other people's prolific writing, as fast as I could without stopping. An exercise in prolificacy.

I wrote as fast as I could, the language coming from what sounded right in my mind at the time. I listened to my mind and transcribed what sounded right in the moment without worrying. The whole thing revolving around rhythm and timing. Staying true to what I heard. Listening very closely and writing what I heard honestly. Writing what seemed honest without deviating—no matter what. Straying from what sounded right taking on the feeling of lying through my teeth.

I wrote when I wanted to. I wrote when I didn't want to. When my teeth were on edge. When I couldn't sleep or was well rested. I wrote my arm and hand to sleep and back awake again at other times. I wrote to stay awake and listen to myself.

I noted the cadences of my mind. Any notable discrepancies. I took note of contradictions and tensions. Patches of internal dialogue. Endless indictments and demands for authenticity. Further rigor. I listened and called what I heard *source material*. I cited myself as fast as I could in the body of the growing text.

I wrote to the dissonant rhythms of my dysfunctional mind-body. I called the rhythms found *breakbeats* and freestyled over them with writing. I called the writing my "voice" without knowing any better. The beef so many compositionists have with the notion of tongues. I called the writing *freestyle rapping* knowing full well what critics at *The Source* would say. The implications for traditional folkways. Cultural practices bent out of shape. Form and content butting heads and coming away bruised and worse for wear.

I wrote the rhythms of a season's worth of moon tides and myself drowning in them. The sounds I heard and the sounds I created in response as proof of life. In the end I was myself still but more prolific. The text proof-positive I knew what it takes to produce a text. Self-evident and irrevocable. The process of production, the listening and honesty, the transcription and subtle self-corrections stepping in for a teacher over a season when school was out. The process of learning as trial and trial—no error. "Error" only making sense within a system of external evaluation that didn't exist or matter all summer. Writing as a continuing practice of self-education and self-trust.

Getting It Out

I write with other writers I resist calling "students" because it implies I'm not a student with them. It implies they're not teachers with me. I resist the idea that other writers aren't writing enough or well enough without my say-so. That they

aren't shit without my instruction. That they're destined to write shit without me. Or write nothing without a writing identity without me. Like I don't write shit with them the same way. Like I'm anyone without them.

Freewriting allows us to speak the same "I am somebody," off-the-top-of-the-head language. Where our minds meet our pens and then some in space and time, together. Freewriting opens a space for writing from different experience levels and literacy backgrounds. The space is a come-one-come-all space. Everyone's languages are welcome. Everyone's writing is good enough to be and share freely.

It's like, "Freewriting is part of a larger theory of writing that views students as individuals who are already writers, people who have legitimate ideas and writing lives that ought to be acknowledged and respected by the teacher" (Wheeler and Carrales 22). Where no one needs me to be a writer for themselves.

It's like,

> The practice of freewriting helps communicate a crucial assumption: that students walk into our classrooms already possessing the core linguistic resources they need to develop as writers. Their experience with speech can be the foundation of their written literacy. (Bean and Elbow 18)

Where students are writers before they even meet me, with or without me. Like I was a writer before I met them. Class time functioning as a space to build on the language we already have. Express the language no one can deny or take away.

Ultimately, it's like, "Freewriting allows students to separate the processes of getting it out and getting it right" (Marshall 19). And the separation is crucial because if we're too worried about getting it right we may never get it out.

And if we never get it out, it may become something else entirely, something overwhelming, without our say-so. With each student-writer coming to class with their own "it" to get out, the same as me. Class becoming an inclusive place to express what we have to, to be anyone moving forward with language.

And the place isn't inclusive without me writing with other writers in the classroom. Without me writing, the other writers are being watched by someone not writing. The watching pushing me back into teacher as watching evaluator. Teacher as observing judge. Teacher having participated long enough elsewhere, having put in enough outside-the-classroom work in isolation, to opt out of the come-one-come-all space. If I don't write, it becomes a come-one-come-all-but-me space, and the inclusivity ethos becomes hypocrisy.

So I freewrite with other writers like Bernice W. Kliman proposes in her article, "Writing With and For Students." Only I resist calling my writing academic role-modeling for other student-writers. Where Kliman writes with her students to "show them how to respond to a call to write," I write to show solidarity with others working (4). Student-writers don't need to witness my responses to writing situations in order to respond themselves. They've been responding to writing situations all their lives without me. But I respond with them in the classroom to show that we are not alone in our responses. We freewrite together to act out how we are always writing together, somewhere.

Free

I turned to freewriting to feel free in my mind with writing. Like if I freed my mind my ass would follow with writing. Like I had been blocked something awful and started freewriting with dead prez's *Let's Get Free* running

in the background to fight. Writing like a militant freestyle hip-hop optimism. Outflanking the block to write something starting to feel radically political for better or worse. A real or imagined stand against nothingness taking on a freeing potentiality feel.

But it was also all about the Benjamins, like it always is. I started freewriting because the price was right. Free was all I could afford. I didn't have anything left to spend. I was spent. It was free or nothing, and nothing felt too familiar. So I started questioning the free in freewriting

Writing scholar George Hillocks says freewriting, "is free in two senses: the topics are not prescribed, and the writing is not normally graded" (qtd. in Fox and Suhor 34). Boice and Meyers add,

> The 'free' in free writing does not have to mean writing *anything* that comes to mind. It can mean that a writer writes before feeling ready, by trusting and following somewhat vague images for a topic, by putting imperfectly formed ideas on paper. (486)

I freewrote because I wasn't ready to write and knew I never would be. What with the block beyond reason putting in more work. I freewrote as an act of self-trust like I trusted it. An all-out belief through the block. Faith in my abilities to failure all over the place, regardless of standards. An open acceptance of imperfection on paper. Everything I had left and wasn't prepared to lose, documented.

But "free" went beyond cost analyses, low stakes, and surprise to something rooted deeper. More painfully familiar. A tradition less hip-hop conscious and more blues/jazz continuum. A more desperate wail and moan. Something like Nina Simone saying, "I'll tell you what freedom is to me. No fear. I mean, really, no fear."

I freewrote because I was afraid and didn't want to be anymore.

Afraid of what the words could mean if they came out wrong. If they came out right, but worse. Fear bad enough to see nothingness as a real option. Unreal levels of fear knocking me off balance to fall. Fear like fallen-world sin and blasphemy. Mistakes beyond redemption. Fear unspeakable.

I freewrote to fall into myself with words and seek salvation.

Since, "Freewriting seeks an open space for expression . . . so that we might explore without fear and find out what we think" (Bean and Elbow 6). I freewrote to, "begin the process of writing without fear and anxiety that often makes the articulation of an idea impossible" (Wheeler and Carrales).

I freewrote to articulate my fears. To make my fears more articulate. To get the words right in my head before spilling them, spitting them out salty and uneducated. To get right with myself before it all goes wrongheaded. To come correct with the knowledge that, "There's no way to freewrite wrong" (Bean and Elbow 20).

Freestyling in Hindsight

My students and I freestyle together to make sound on paper. It's all about volume. The volume of pages in black and white. Taking up space with language and style. Flowing on paper with statements to get to a flow state beyond the page.

Some students have found freedom in freestyling. They tell me later about having heard their voice on paper for the first time and writing to listen and flow. They say it helps I never read their freestyles or forced them to spit them out loud, that it freed them up to flow without worrying over an audience. Stage fright its own overpowering state.

Other students have dissed freestyling and sat with their arms crossed to the beat looking bad. Like Run-D.M.C. with their mouths closed and empty fists clenched. These students have reminded me that freestyling ain't free if it's forced. And the slanted power dynamics of our cipher demand an exchange of words for letters whether we like it or not.

At the end of most semesters, I'm left wondering over the degrees of freedom in writing and teaching.

But I still believe in volume. The sound of ink grinding against paper. The day-to-day grind of returning to blank pages and filling them in an effort to forget them and focus on the flow. Flowing separately, together, in an effort to understand individuality within community. Flow requiring effort, labor, the written work standing in for sweat.

And the payoff is priceless—knowing the street value of a voice.

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Evan Nave is Normal's native son (for better or worse). He teaches writing and hip-hop off the top of his head, out of his mind. "Free(write) Your Mind" is a collection of pieces pulled from his PhD dissertation, On My Grind: Freestyle Rap Practices in Creative Writing and Composition Pedagogy.

"A SPECTRUM OF PERSPECTIVES": BELIEVING IN DEMOCRACY BY WRITING-TO-LEARN

CLINTON SOPER

If you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view—until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.

—Atticus Finch in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Civil democratic discourse is in crisis. Fellow Americans increasingly perceive each other as hostile oppositional forces to be debated, refuted, rejected, and defeated. The "us vs. them" mentality pervades. Intolerance is on the rise, on both sides of the spectrum. Cooperative dialogue and mutual understanding is on life support, if not flatlining. While discussing writing-to-learn in the *Handbook of Writing Research*, George Newell provides insight into our mission as educators:

> Given that American schools are founded in the basis of tolerance, diversity, non-sectarianism, and inclusiveness, and their academic mission is often defined in terms of thoughtfulness, reflection, and creativity, it seems clear that any agenda for writing and learning must likewise reflect such values. (237)

English teachers have a duty to our democracy to engender in our students the skills necessary to engage opposing viewpoints without the compulsion of picking a side and immediately arguing with and demonizing the other. English teachers must fight this metastasizing discursive cancer with a mindset that is summed up early on the Ratcliffe's *Rhetorical Listening:* "I do not accept the U.S. culture's dearth of discursive possibilities either for articulating intersecting identifications of gender and race or for promoting cross-cultural dialogues" (3). We all must refuse to accept this dearth of civil discourse. Democracy in our diverse nation must account for diametrically opposed perspectives while finding common ground and establishing goodwill through balanced consideration and ensuing policy. How can English teachers promote this democratic ideal in our increasingly vitriolic political and social climate?

Overview

Students must be encouraged to believe (even as a thought-experiment) rather than defaulting into doubt when faced with contradictory perspectives. Students' suspension of doubt and active willingness to engage in the intellectual challenge of equally considering conflicting perspectives is the focus of my writing unit "A Spectrum of Perspectives," which is rooted in my teaching experience at demographically homogeneous rural central Illinois high schools and inspired by Peter Elbow's "believing game." My experiences are not

overwhelmingly negative or blatantly intolerant by any means, but there is naturally a distinct lack of representation of ideas and experiences beyond that of our community's specific culture. Students must be encouraged to think beyond their personal, direct experience if they are to grow into responsible citizens in our diverse democracy.

The goal of this writing unit is creating opposing first-person narratives based on a question associated with an issue, then researching and critiquing existing policy, regulations, rules, or legislation. The aim is to enhance empathy, increase awareness of diversity, and foster trust in American democracy's social and political obligation to account for disparate perspectives and experiences. The goal of this unit is to promote the democratic ideal, which is also the mission of the Illinois State University College of Education: "The democratic ideal unites caring and knowing: The more voices we call into thoughtful dialogue, the truer our convictions and conclusions will be" (Realizing the Democratic Ideal). To achieve this goal, students must first establish prerequisite beliefs in their intellectual capability, in their importance to the community, and in the value of writing-to-learn. Once students believe in these three components, they will be prepared to extend their belief to the activities of this writing unit. Although many students don't need to be convinced of their brilliance and importance to the community nor the intrinsic value of writing, other students are reluctant to buy into belief over doubt. Why?

The Doubting Game and the Believing Game

The culture of doubt prevails in our society, often—and rightfully so—in the name of critical thinking. "The doubting game seeks truth . . . by seeking error. Doubting an assertion is the best way to find the error in it. You must assume it is

untrue to find its weakness" (*Writing Without Teachers* 148). We pride ourselves in finding flaws, inconsistencies, and clever arguments to disprove others' ideas and opinions. The doubting game is important; without this culture of doubt and skepticism, we would not enjoy the fruits of the scientific method. After all, science is all about disproving hypotheses: finding what's wrong with an idea, where it falls short, or circumstances in which it breaks down. By finding fault, we strive for accuracy, for mastery.

> However it happened, we now have a state of affairs where almost everyone in the academic or intellectual world, it seems as though when he plays the doubting game he is being rigorous, disciplined, rational, and tough-minded. And if for any reason he refrains from playing the doubting game, he feels he is being un-intellectual, irrational, and sloppy. (*Writing Without Teachers* 151)

However, is the doubting game out of control, running amok and trampling some of our students' psyches?

Our culture's compulsion to identify, criticize, and correct fault is seeping into self-image, so that students are focused on what's "wrong" with themselves (and their writing) rather than what's right, scared of exposing what's broken rather than embracing what's working. Culturally and academically, we are sowing a mindset of doubt that leads to counterproductive writing apprehension: "For example, in the . . . studies there were, in every case, inverse relationships between [writing] apprehension and feelings of competence as a person" (Daly 337). The seeds of self-doubt planted in a writing classroom culture of red-ink corrections grow into weeds of writing apprehension that can ultimately choke students' perceptions of themselves

as integral, intelligent members of not only our classrooms but of our democracy.

> Our schools continue to be filled with with adolescents who are disinterested and disengaged because 'learning becomes a matter of memorization and recitation, where the teacher is seen as the provider of knowledge and the student is expected to replicate.' (Newell 245)

What if students themselves generate the content? Will they get more engaged in writing? What if their voices contribute actively to the writing classroom community? Will they, in turn, engage more actively with the community at large? Is there a correlation between the kid who shuts down or never takes writing seriously because of feelings of inadequacy or incompetence (struggles with generating ideas that are "good enough" and memorizing and reciting grammar or punctuation rules) and the adult who doesn't vote or never bothers to take others' perspectives into careful consideration? We may not know the exact correlation between apprehensive high school writers and voter apathy, but one thing is certain: voter turnout for young people is dismal.

In his article "Becoming a Habitual Voter: Inertia, Resources, and Growth in Young Adulthood," Putzer notes the various elements that contribute to low voter-turnout in young adults: "As young voters confront their first election, all of the costs of voting are magnified: they have never gone through the process of registration, may not know the location of their polling place, and may not have yet developed an understanding of party differences and key issues" (42). So English teachers ought to consider taking our students through an electoral dry-run and locating polling places, and we can definitely provide opportunities to learn about party issues and key differences. Students' experiences in

high school do have an impact on whether or not they vote: "[H]igh school achievement seems to matter [to voter turnout] but mostly indirectly through knowledge and political engagement" (Putzer 50). English teachers are in dereliction of duty if we do not prepare our students to be informed and engaged citizens in our democracy. The challenge is that there is just so much debilitating doubt associated with our politics, government, and democracy itself. We're losing trust in the system and in each other.

Our primary focus must be counterbalancing the negative impact of doubt. Young people doubt whether or not they can navigate the democratic processes and doubt whether or not they know enough to deserve their political voices, but there's another form of doubt that's even more pervasive: so many young people (and even not-so-young people) doubt the intrinsic value of their votes. We've all heard (and perhaps even uttered), "My vote is just one vote, so it doesn't matter." But it's not one vote; it's upwards of half the electorate! If the doubting game—with its criticism, suspicion, and incredulity—is tearing at the fabric of writing classrooms, civil discourse, and democracy itself, then we must shift in a new direction—even if it's only for one English project or local election at a time.

Peter Elbow's "believing game" provides a lens to refocus the academic and political thought-process. Providing a space in which students can suspend disbelief and strive to learn by affirmation is necessary. Positive reinforcement yields the best results. Students benefit from belief. Ultimately, by playing the believing game in the writing classroom, students can discover not only their own truth but that of others and, in turn, be productive, informed members of our democracy who will actively sustain our institutions, along with our ideals of tolerance, diversity,

non-sectarianism, and inclusiveness, rather than let them wither away.

Believing in Students Who Believe

Although I assure my students that they are all intelligent and capable members of our community, do they all buy it? Do they all believe it? How can I encourage my most apprehensive writing students to believe in their potential and value our little classroom writing community? Every class has its apprehensive writers, so how can teachers alleviate the apprehension enough to inspire students to trust in themselves and their writing? The question of apprehension resides in the roots: "Developmentally, a deficit in skills training and poor or negative teacher responses to early writing attempts are apparently related to the apprehension" (Daly 328). Teachers need to—at times—drop the doubting game because we foment the apprehension. In the believing game, teachers cannot be adversaries, we must be allies. If our doubt-inspired grading and feedback procedures are actually turning our students into apprehensive writers, we'd be better served to focus on the positive aspects of student writing, rather than picking apart the flaws. The contract-grading system is a solution to shifting the focus from what's not working to what is, even if that's just submitting a merely adequate composition on time.

So much apprehension is associated with grades. Students don't want to take risks in writing when what they're truly risking is a passing grade. Grading contracts are an option for alleviating this apprehension, and are the focus of Danielewicz and Elbow's essay "A Unilateral Grading Contract to Improve Learning and Teaching." Basically, if students put forth an acceptable effort, they earn a *B*. Even if they take some chances and the final draft doesn't quite hit the mark, they earn a *B*. This not only alleviates grade-pressure

from the students, but it reduces grading-pressure for the teacher. Outstanding work will still earn an *A*, and terrible work is still subject to grades lower than *B*, but most writing will be deemed sufficient, earning the *B*. A grading contract is necessary for a unit as potentially foggy as "A Spectrum of Perspectives" because the writing task is so challenging. Students must be assured that there's a safety net, inviting them to take a chance on imagining the experience and perspective of another. The great thing about a contract grade is that it can be implemented exclusively for this unit:

> In sum, the genre of contracts is a natural form for experimentation. Even teachers who are not free to depart from a conventional grading system can experiment tentatively with a contract for only certain assignments, or for certain features of a course. (Danielewicz 260)

If students believe that their grades are safe, they'll engage with this unit more openly and honestly. The contract will give them the confidence to believe.

Increasing self-esteem in all students is vital to the creative demands of the "Spectrum of Perspectives" writing unit, and reducing apprehension is the key: "There is a statistically meaningful and inverse association between writing apprehension and the way people feel about themselves" (Daly 333). Escaping from the looming shadow of failure and risk-aversion (thanks to the contract grade), creativity can flow and students can take risks imagining—and believing—personal narratives from each end of a spectrum. "This then is the leverage of the believing muscle: believing two things and thereby being able to have a trustworthy sense that one is better than the other. But there is no leverage—no increased trustworthiness—unless both are believed" (*Writing Without Teachers* 163–64). The goal is for students to immerse

themselves in the complexity of issues, so first they must discover and believe the sincerity of each side. By authenticating disparate experiences with their writing, students are actively engaging with the community at large. Their participation in this writing unit is itself an act of being a citizen, of believing in their importance to the community.

For students to productively engage in this writing unit, their belief in writing-to-learn is necessary because the "right" answers won't be laid out for them beforehand. Students themselves will be truth arbiters and meaning-makers, which is the essence of writing-to-learn:

> [W]riting-to-learn approaches to instruction alters the role of both the teacher (evaluator to collaborator) and students (from memorizers to meaning makers) and transform the content area information as facts to be absorbed into ways of understanding ourselves and our cultural communities. (Newell 235)

We generally write to show what we know, to display our learning or expertise. "A Spectrum of Perspectives," however, is about writing to better understand people, to creatively engage an issue from each end of the American experience. "Perspectives" asks students to write from an unfamiliar position, to discover and consider a new perspective, to take a risk: "Instead of trying to minimize the drawing and estimating models of perception and thinking, the believing game tries to exploit them: you are constantly asked to make the other person's drawing, make the other person's estimate" (*Writing Without Teachers* 172). Students will be writing-to-learn, which is only possible if the apprehension is alleviated for all students, and if they believe in their ability, their importance to the community (and everyone else's), and the power of writing-to-learn.

"A Spectrum of Perspectives"

In the past, my students wrote an opposing viewpoints paper that focused on objectively presenting each side of an issue after reading two biased primary sources. The "Perspectives" unit is a revision of the opposing viewpoints paper, which kept students at arms-length, resulting in dispassionate, somewhat canned essays. Rather than writing an objective essay presenting each side of the argument, students will be asked to write a fictional first-person narrative from each end of the spectrum, imagining a human perspective with the experiences and lifestyle that lead to that point of view. Students will be challenged to express ideas that are not their own: "The believing game is constant practice in getting the mind to see or think what is new, different, alien" (*Writing Without Teachers* 173). This will take imagination, thoughtfulness, and respect to do well.

The task is for students to imagine an American's story at each end of the spectrum, which requires that they believe that story, even if the belief is a short-lived game:

> But there is a kind of belief—serious, powerful, and a genuine giving of the self—that it is possible to give even to hateful or absurd assertions. To do this requires great energy, attention, and even a kind of inner commitment. It helps to think of it as trying to get inside the head of someone who saw things this way. Perhaps even constructing such a person for yourself. Try to have the experience of someone who made this assertion. (*Writing Without Teachers* 149)

What experiences does this person have that shaped her perspective? What are her motivations? Her biases? What outcomes does she hope for? Why does this issue matter to her? What is her background and socio-economic status? Where

and how does she live? These are the challenging questions conducive to actively considering multiple perspectives in a creative way.

Students will be writing from unfamiliar perspectives, but this can make for a powerful narrative writing opportunity: "It turns out that such unplanned narrative and descriptive exploratory writing (or speaking) will almost invariably lead the person spontaneously to formulate conceptual insights that are remarkably shrewd" (*Contraries* 56). Students just might surprise themselves with just how insightful they can be when they aren't writing to represent themselves. For this project, the topic-selection process might go one of two ways: my first inclination is the less self-interest, the better. In order to maintain a rhetorical distance, students should not choose their issues; the issues should choose them.

In a democracy, not every issue of the day will affect us personally. However, as responsible citizens, we must strive to be aware and educated about all issues, even those that don't impact our lives directly. Therefore, students should not choose their issues because they'd naturally choose issues they're already fired up about or issues in which they have a personal stake. But that's not how democracy works. The topic-selection process might be "Pick a question out of the hat" or "Spin the wheel of questions." The key is that it's random. Students might resist this lack of choice initially, but I envision a sense of freedom taking hold because too much choice—or any choice, at all—can be a shackle. However, choosing a topic that students already feel strongly about or are already interested in has its value, too.

If students are allowed to choose issues, they might choose an issue in which they're biased. Wouldn't this lead to lopsided perspectives? Not necessarily, especially considering the acceptance committees that I'll discuss later in this section.

What would happen, though, is that biased students would be required to consider the opposing viewpoint. They might just discover a new idea during their perspective-taking adventure that challenges their bias. At the very least, they'll understand the opposition and build upon their knowledge of the issue. Allowing students to choose their issues would spark more initial enthusiasm for the project, too. However, what do we do when half the students want to write about gun control? That redundancy could be a problem. My approach will be to experiment with each method over time.

My students use the "Opposing Viewpoints in Context" resource on the Gale Database through our library's subscription to identify issues and build background knowledge, along with another valuable online resource: procon.org. The *New York Times Learning Network*'s "401 Prompts for Argumentative Writing" in the Student Opinion section is another productive jumping-off point for compiling kairotic issues, locating reliable sources, and building necessary background knowledge. If students need to creatively conduct additional research in which to ground their narratives, so be it.

Students will be writing to learn, specifically learning to better understand fellow Americans. Because students will write from the perspectives at each end of the spectrum, they'll have to see the entirety of the issue or the question at hand. This challenging task is not without its risks: might writing first-person narratives from imagined people and experiences open the door to sexist, racist, bigoted, or—at the very least—intolerant or stereotyped viewpoints? Well, yes. But is it not important for students to be aware of these unpleasant perspectives?

> [Y]ou can never keep out all wrong ideas, all disgusting or threatening ideas, all ideas tainted by previous tenants—all infection. . . . Since you can't keep ideas out,

> you have to let them in: consider things in the guise of the widest and most conflicting array of categories and thereby get a feel for what's really there—a feel for the misconceptions or blindings that various categories impose on us. (*Writing Without Teachers* 186)

Pre-writing freewrite sessions will be an opportunity to get all of these potentially objectionable ideas out there in a safe setting. Students can explore the extremes of the spectrum without having to submit or even share these ideas. The key to early freewriting exercises is to generate ideas for the opposing first-person narratives: some ideas will be the heart of the narratives and some ideas will go straight to the wastebasket.

One element of the grading contract associated with this project is the requirement that the narratives must be deemed a fair, respectful representation of an American perspective to be accepted by the class. The process for accepting narratives as a fair representation will be an extension of our democratic ideals and will contribute to students' belief in their importance to the community: students will be organized into odd-numbered acceptance committees that will read a set of narratives aloud, voting on whether to accept each narrative after it is heard by all. Narratives will not include the writers' names, and students will not evaluate the acceptability of their own writing. If a majority of students object to accepting the narrative as a fair, respectful representation, they will discuss and record their specific objections to be returned to the writer for revision. To meet the requirements of the grading contract, students must have each of their perspectives accepted by a committee, which will only consider a particular narrative twice. After two rejections for objectionable content, the writer in question will then meet with the teacher to discuss the perceived issues with fair representation.

Why First-Person Narrative?

"A Spectrum of Perspectives" invites students to actively see through the eyes of others, so the humanity emerges from behind the impersonal fog of statistics, logical arguments, and party lines obscuring an issue. Americans are more than statistics and we aren't always logical. What we are is human: all flawed, all biased, all with a different perspective on life. The goal of this project is to encourage empathy through perspective-taking, but is there evidence that first-person narrative does indeed promote empathy?

In her article "A Theory of Narrative Empathy," Keen notes the power of first-person narrative on readers:

> Narrative theorists, novel critics, and reading specialists have already singled out a small set of narrative techniques—such as the use of first person narration and the interior representation of characters' consciousness and emotional states—as devices supporting character identification, contributing to empathetic experiences, opening readers' minds to others, changing attitudes, and even predisposing readers to altruism. (213)

Reading first-person narratives engenders empathy, so it stands to reason that writing fictional narratives might be even more powerful because students would be taking on a more active, generative role in the perspectives. Fiction writers—those active perspective-takers—do indeed score higher than the general population on empathy assessments, which leads to the conclusion that "the activity of fiction writing may cultivate novelists' role-taking skills and make them more habitually empathetic" (221).

Although the project does not call for students to become full-fledged novelists, it does ask them to create a person on the page, replete with experiences, ideas, and insights. By

walking a mile in another's shoes, seeing the world through another's eyes, crawling into another's skin, students will experience the empathetic power of the first-person narrative, and maybe, just maybe, they'll better appreciate and understand the values of democracy.

Compromise and Policy: The Hallmark of Democracy

After writing the diametrically opposed first-person perspectives, students will then research and write about the established policy associated with the issue. What rules, regulations, or legislation exists? Do these take both ends of the spectrum into account? How might the rules, regulations, or legislation be improved? Hopefully, students will acknowledge that the social and political issues are not all or nothing. By discussing policy, students can resist the false dichotomies that our current political and social climate perpetuates while infusing their voices into the issues, concluding with and justifying what they believe would be the best way forward for our democracy.

A Final Note Concerning the Efficacy of Spectrums

Although this project frames social and political issues in terms of two-dimensional spectrums, I acknowledge the limitations of this paradigm. Real-world perspectives exist and evolve in a 3-dimensional world that is much more complicated than a linear spectrum can represent. Divergent perspectives might be situated at each end of a spectrum, but that spectrum might actually be circular in nature in which the opposing viewpoints end up agreeing on policy. The three-dimensional, murky, often paradoxical world in which we live is important to explore, but we must walk before we can run. Conceptualizing issues in terms of spectrums is valuable for high school students, so they can build the

foundation on which to delve into the three-dimensional later in their education.

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EXPLORING THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL ROLES OF THE SECONDARY COMPOSITION TEACHER

KRISTINA VIK

In December of my first year of teaching, a large group of my sophomore students started a petition to get me fired. They passed it around the school publically to collect support for my resignation. I was devastated because I never got an inkling from my students, a professor, a cooperating teacher, a co-worker, a principal that I would be a bad teacher. In fact, I excelled in my methods classes, student teaching, job interviews, and my first evaluations. My students and I seemed to have friendly encounters, and they were meeting my daily and unit objectives. I was applying the best practices I learned in college. I was devoting hours outside of school developing my curriculum and grading. I was attending extracurricular events. What more could I do? Who did they want me to become? What was so wrong about me, my teaching, my personality, my classroom, my assignments? What were they seeing that I was missing?

After a much needed, indulgent (dare I say even self-pitying) winter break, I realized that I had been playing the Peter Elbow's "doubting game," a "systematic, disciplined, and conscious attempt to criticize" my students' negative perspective about my teaching (*Embracing Contraries* 257). I thought to myself that they were just lazy teens; they were testing the new teacher; they were ruining our learning community with their own negative behavior. I wanted to convince myself with absolute certainty that my students fundamentally misunderstood me, and that the people who really mattered, like my coworkers and administrators, saw the real me and were on my side. However, as Elbow so articulately asserts, "doubt is only half of what we need"; we also need "the equally systematic, disciplined, and conscious attempt to *believe* everything no matter how unlikely or repellent it might seem" (*Embracing Contraries* 257). The coup was "repellent" to me, and it made me feel utterly exposed to venture into "believing" their side of the story.

This article is the product of my belief in my students. After studying Peter Elbow's oeuvre, I determined that the coup (probably) existed because of a miscommunication between society, my students, and me about the role I was "supposed" to play as their female composition teacher.[1] In this article, I hope to explore the variety of roles a composition teacher can choose to fulfill and how teachers can utilize a "teaching statement" to clearly and honestly articulate their multidimensional roles in the learning community.[2]

The Beginnings of Belief

Immediately following the attempted coup, my students were given an anonymous survey in which they could rank various aspects of my teaching on a scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." There was also a "comments"

section where students could open endedly share their opinions about my teaching. I've included a short sampling of the responses from my students:

About My Personality

- I think Mrs. Vik is a very good English teacher. She really cares about each student and wants to help . . . .
- I feel strongly that she cares about us [as] a person and sees us not just as another student.
- I honestly think some people complain about Mrs. Vik because she demands respect and demands to be listened to, but she also respects her students.
- I think how Mrs. Vik teaches/operates is either her way or the highway. I don't think she's open to other's opinions.
- She connects with students and has fun in her classroom. She makes her class enjoyable.
- One thing that I think she could improve upon is her temper/tendencies to go from having fun to her being very angry. One specific time that felt unacceptable was when I came into her room during lunchtime [when she was in a meeting with other teachers] . . . and she yelled, "Get out, get out, get out!"
- All around, she has good ideas of teaching and good new ways of teaching that I like but when it comes to her being an understanding person, she isn't very understanding and accepting.

About My Grading

- I feel like the level is too high. Example: watching a movie based off of a book is supposed to be enjoyable. I don't want to take notes comparing the differences the whole time. Relax . . .

- She grades very strictly. She grade me as if I was giving brain surgery.
- I think a lot of people don't like how they have to actually work hard to keep a good grade.
- Yes, we complain about homework she gives us but everybody complains about homework.
- She grades too hard. She grades us the same way that she grades honors. They just have more reading and an easier grading scale. Solution—grade easier.

About My Classroom Management

- Mrs. Vik makes the necessary disciplinary decisions that she needs to keep the class under control. A lot of people don't like her discipline but she has to do something because they are either out of line or disrespectful.
- Mrs. Vik has a hard time dealing with things that don't go EXACTLY her way. Say if she told us to stop talking right [now] and we say one more thing, we get a punishment. . . . We only get one warning!
- It is mostly the guys in this class that choose not to take that very well. Instead they mock her, disrespect her, they don't take her seriously, and they purposefully try to get her annoyed. Mrs. Vik has every right in the world to be irritated in a good, natural way, which she does, but every time she tries to confront the class, the boys arrogantly sit there and act like nothing is wrong even though they know themselves that what they are doing will irritate Mrs. Vik.

As you can probably imagine, the range of positive to negative responses that I received was confusing, so for the purposes of believing, I began to think about my students' cultural identities. I teach in a small, conservative, rural high

school that is homogenous in nature. Most students are raised with a strong Christian faith and have parents who fulfill typical gender roles in the household. Having been raised in this specific climate might have led students to expect me to likewise fulfill a traditional, conservative role as their teacher, which would explain why they were pleased when I was caring, fun, understanding, accepting, and flexible—typically "feminine" characteristics.

Traditional "Teacher-Mother" or "Teacher-Father"

Susan Jarratt defines this cultural "ideal for the composition teacher" as the "teacher-mother," who is nurturing, nonconflictual, and supportive (111). Under a "teacher-mother's" care, the classroom "becomes a safe environment where everyone feels nurtured and able to speak and write, where conflicts are resolved and everyone remains connected" (Buffington 2). As a form of classroom management, "mom" is likely to use "reward authority" in which she gains respect by granting positive attention, encouragement, or more privileges to well-behaved students (Esmaeili et al. 4). As I'm describing this teacher, I'm envisioning film representations like Miss Crabtree from *Little Rascals*, willing to endure endless shenanigans from her students and only wielding loving and wise authority to help her children grow. Or perhaps Miss Honey from *Matilda* could be another appropriate cultural reference point. She literally adopts Matilda as her own when she realizes she is in need of love, care, and rescuing from a questionable situation at home.

By no means do I wish to belittle these "teacher-mothers." Others say that the "real world" is full of unmotherly people, and our students need to be prepared to deal with conflict and power differentials (Buffington 1–2). Quite frankly, I'm not a fan of this way of problematizing the

"teacher-mother" because our students are not yet in the "real world"; they're still learning how to be humans, and if we can provide a space for them to build confidence and moral correctness, I think we're doing part of our job. What's more, a vast majority of my students identified this type of teaching as being the most impactful in their development as readers and writers when they wrote literacy narratives. They told of one teacher who conferenced with them about their writing to develop close and caring relationships and provided copious amounts of positive feedback on their writing. To my students, this was invaluable because they could accept her feedback in a constructive, nonthreatening way and truly grow as writers and thinkers. I admire the impact she had on my students. Snaps for teacher-mothers, if that's your jam.[3]

However, not every female teacher is capable of, nor should they be forced into, fulfilling the "teacher-mother" role due to who they are at the most fundamental level. For example, I am in my early twenties and not nurturing by nature. In my interpersonal relationships, I tend to be more sassy, and challenging students' abilities and assumptions is my bread and butter. It isn't that I don't want to embody the positive qualities of the "teacher-mother" and support my students in their social-emotional development; but the unbending expectation that female teachers will be exclusively nurturing is problematic and promotes a one-dimensional view of our role in the classroom. There are other, more complex and realistic roles we should be able to fulfill. What's more, students *need* other kinds of female teachers to appeal to different learning styles and to expand their view of what femininity looks like in an overly-feminized profession.

If we went the opposite route on the gender spectrum, we could fulfill a "teacher-father" role that is characterized by masculine "aggression and adversarial relationships" with

students and is ultra focused on content and evaluation (Jarratt 112; Buffington 2). This teacher is likely to use "punishment authority" as a form of classroom management, which is opposite of "reward authority" in that it gains its power by removing privileges and attention from students (Esmaeili et al. 4). When thinking of the "teacher-father," I'm imagining teachers like Mr. Feeny from *Boy Meets World*, particularly early in the series when his authoritarian style of teaching earns him respect and healthy fear from Cory and his peers. Or Mr. Collins from *The Wonder Years*, who insists that his focus stay on learning, even when providing extra academic support after school, when he says, "I am not your friend, Mr. Arnold—I am your teacher."

However, as their feedback shows, my students were alarmed when I stepped into the role of "teacher-father" and was angry, authoritative, confrontational, demanding, or challenging. They were dissatisfied when I, someone they expected to be "mom," started acting like "dad" when it came to classroom management and grading.

At the end of the day, it's not realistic to assume that we could be only a "teacher-mother" or a "teacher-father"; every teacher has been tasked to inhabit both the role of the teacher and support system ("mom") and disciplinarian and evaluator ("dad"). Elbow describes us as both the "hurdle the student has to get over" and "the person who helps the student get over hurdles" (*Embracing Contraries* 88). We are single parents to the utmost extreme, and with that comes a set of unique contraries that we must navigate.

This type of tricky space for us to navigate as teachers is also tricky for students. If we or our students accidentally "mystify" our authority (Finke 7) by pretending that we are one-dimensionally "mom," we are setting them up to feel betrayed. Buffington says that "it's neither honest nor fair to

pretend that we've given up all our authority. In short, we can't turn the classroom into classwomb. And we shouldn't even try" (3).

Elbovian Alternatives to the Contrary

With all of the challenges this binary presents for us as teachers and our students, should we be asked to navigate this dual role? Is it possible to be just "mom" or just "dad," in the most gendered sense of the words? Elbow explores this scenario in "Separating Teaching from Certifying." In this fragment he argues that teaching would benefit if all classes functioned like Advanced Placement classes in that there is a teacher who is able to separate themselves from the final evaluation stage of the course. Elbow argues,

> The teacher will no longer have the dual role which makes him both ally and adversary of the student—which makes him try to police the student while also trying to help him. Even if the teacher has somehow learned to keep his role as guardian at the threshold from interfering with his efforts to help everyone enter, nevertheless, the conflict of roles is apt to be just as destructive in the eyes of the student: no matter how the teacher actually behaves, the student is apt to see him as the enemy—the person to be tricked, fooled, deceived. (388)

The benefits of this separation are irrefutable. It is glorious to imagine a world in which someone else gets to be the "bad cop." However I wonder what we risk in giving up the authority and accountability that comes with being an evaluator. I also wonder how reasonable that request is in a secondary situation where we are low on budget and high on expectations for teachers.

Beyond the total separation of teaching ("teacher-mother") from certifying ("teacher-father"), Elbow's "teacherless writing classroom" could be another solution to uncomplicate our role. After all, he says that "students can learn perfectly well without teachers" ("Illiteracy at Oxford" 9). In Elbow's "teacherless writing class," a group of focused writers meet regularly to read and respond to each other's writing. No one is an expert, or a "parent," in the group, and instead each member soaks in the group's readerly responses as a tool to pursue their own writing goals (*Writing Without Teachers* 126). This consistent exposure to low-stakes, nonthreatening feedback can be beneficial in terms of creating an authentic space for students to know and care how their writing is experienced by multiple readers and for accepting those readers' reactions (*Writing Without Teachers* 124–5). Students are also exposed to readers who are at the same academic level and are just as invested as they are, as opposed to a teacher-reader who likely understands the subject better than the student does and who is fulfilling a professional obligation by reading the students' work (*Writing Without Teachers* 127–8).

With scaffolding and structure, I do think our students are capable of giving this type of beneficial, authentic response to each other's writing,[4] but this method is not a replacement for our traditional writing classes at the secondary level. After all, not all high school students would meet Elbow's criteria for participants in the teacherless class: committed, motivated, serious, patient, brave, responsible, diverse, open, and trusting (*Writing Without Teachers* 78–116). Managing and motivating those students takes a skilled teacher.

Roles Beyond "Mom" or "Dad"

If we agree to stay in the writing classrooms to support students and, whilst there, juggle the roles of teacher *and*

evaluator, there are many roles that we could choose to fulfill that reach beyond the traditional "teacher-mother" or "teacher father." The field of education has wrestled with the variety of roles we can choose to play and so has the media (Reyes and Rios 4). Film representations of teachers provide a valuable reference point to conceptualize these roles.

***Expert**: Mr. Miyagi,* The Karate Kid*, "We make sacred pact. I promise teach karate to you, you promise learn. I say, you do, no questions."*

This teacher uses "specialty authority" based on his or her knowledge of their content, and students seek to gain the skills that this teacher has and are motivated by that transfer of information (Esmaeili et al. 3). The teacher's knowledge becomes the stream for students to swim against in their quest towards understanding, and the student is likely to ask questions like "Is this ok? I hope I didn't do something wrong?" (*Writing With Power* 119). This instructor is likely to teach their student to "give in" to genre conventions, as Elbow's professors tried to get him to do ("Illiteracy at Oxford" 18).

***Collaborator**: Ms. Frizzle,* The Magic School Bus*, "Take chances, make mistakes, and get messy!"*

We could ask students to stop looking at us as "experts" or "professionals" and start looking at us as co-learners or "collaborators" (*Embracing Contraries* 10). This teacher is humble enough to learn about things inside and outside of his or her discipline with the students. They follow the learning where the learning goes and take an authentic approach to the exploration of the content. This teacher would be a big fan of Elbow's commitment to freewriting as a way to spark new ideas by "babbling" and "jabbering" and being "careless"

with their writing (*Writing Without Teachers* 3–9), and they would likely teach their students "fruitful or healthy ways to resist" genre conventions ("Illiteracy at Oxford" 17).

***Savior**: LouAnne Johnson,* Dangerous Minds, "*You asked me once how I was gonna save your life. This is it. This moment*."

This "teacher savior" (Brown 128) or "super nanny" (He et al. 57) views it as their personal duty to to "rescue their students from their inherent shortcomings" (Reyes and Rios 9) by instilling life lessons in the morally lost or seemingly abandoned youth (He et al. 56). This teacher assumes that their students are learning how to navigate "the real world" as good, responsible citizens in their classroom and content becomes a secondary focus (He et al. 57). The teacher-savior's identity is also deeply intertwined with their career, and they are personally invested in the "joys, frustrations, and rewards" of teaching (Nieto 15–6).

***Lawyer**: Annalise Keating,* How To Get Away with Murder, "*You're never going to trust me; that's not in your nature. But you can stop worrying because—and you might have forgotten this—I am your only option*."

This teacher claims "legal authority" as the justice system that gets to decide how its citizens, students, are governed in the classroom (Esmaeili et al. 3). Elbow says we could "stop pretending, through words or implications, that we are engaged in education to help people be free" and embrace the power that we are given (*Embracing Contraries* 94). This would mean saying things like "I'll try to be fair, but remember that decisions about grades and credit are unilaterally mine" and "We are not studying your lives here. You may or may not find something here which you can apply yourselves" (*Embracing Contraries* 94). This teacher does not

"dominate" their students in a way that would "diminish" them; instead, they "acknowledge that our role as teacher is a position of power over others," and they use this power "in ways to enrich" (hooks 96).

***Facilitator**: Dumbledore,* Harry Potter, "*For in dreams we enter a world that is entirely our own. Let them swim in the deepest ocean or glide over the highest cloud*."

We could adopt Freire's cognitive dissonance model where "the teacher is, perhaps, more a 'facilitator' than a teacher in that he doesn't make the student learn things: the force that makes the student learn things is his own itch, his own dissatisfaction, his own problem" (*Embracing Contraries* 94). The power difference is minimized in this relationship and the teacher assumes a wise, motivational approach to help students discover learning on their own terms. Elbow uses the metaphor of a coach, a label which in itself has a motivating extracurricular ring to it, to describe this teacher who will "stand off to the side and watch you from the stage wings as you give your violin concert and not get too involved in your music." Yet, that coach is ready with feedback to help you further hone your skills before your next performance (*Writing With Power* 251).

***Role Model**: Mark Thackeray,* To Sir With Love, "*I teach you truths. My truths. Yeah, and it is kinda scary, dealing with the truth. Scary, and dangerous*."

Socrates' "locus classicus" or "falling-in-love model" is where the teacher is adored by their students, and that love is what energizes the students' learning, not content or "the itch of a problem" (*Embracing Contraries* 96). If this teacher chooses to reciprocate that love, they may gain students' emotional favor by showing them love and respect, "reference authority."

Doing so makes the students feel empowered, engaged, and entertained while they are simultaneously achieving the teacher's objective (Esmaeili et al. 3).

Offscreen, Multidimensional Teaching

What all of the nontraditional teachers mentioned here have in common is that their role is clearly defined. They're unmistakable, and they are consistent in their identities. However, the media-driven expectation that we will "bring these 'characters' to life" is not realistic or fair because our classroom is not a movie set; no group of students is "totally homogenous" and "we are first and foremost individuals" (Reyes and Rios 6). In other words, real teachers, like me, have to play multiple roles because they deal with real and diverse students, colleagues, and situations. What makes a fictional teacher easy to portray is that they are one-dimensional; real teachers must be multidimensional.

In that way, I don't feel comfortable ranking the roles mentioned above in terms of effectiveness because the role of the teacher is necessarily fluid. For example, in any given class period, I might channel multiple parts of my personality to boost engagement like Frizzle, enforce justice like Keating, and show compassion like Honey. Each moment of teaching (filled with a learning objective, an activity, our personality, our community, and our particular collage of students) determines who we must be for our students. Knowing that this miscommunication about the one-dimensional nature of who we "should" be exists between society, our students, and us, I'm interested in the ways that we can eliminate and, in some ways, embrace the confusion that surrounds our role in the composition classroom.

Believing

Looking back on my first days of teaching, I recognize that I wasn't sure who I wanted to be in my classroom. I spent my life watching my own teachers and those on screen, and I wanted to be a combination of the best parts of each of them. That "not-knowing" had two unintended effects in my classroom. First, it left my students to their own devices to make judgments about who I am and how I should treat them. As explained earlier, that patriarchal assumption that I would be their "teacher-mother" was almost certainly in play, and I can't say confidently that I didn't try to meet that expectation. I presented myself as nurturing and supportive and kind to gain their trust, even though I am fundamentally more complex than that. After our honeymoon period of August and September, my patience with trying to fulfill the singular role of an "ally" ran thin. It's not that I didn't want to be nice or that I didn't care about their emotional and moral development; it's that I also wanted to push my students toward independent, original, critical, conflictual, challenging thinking, and I'm kind of a stickler for rules and requirements. As hooks states, this type of teaching doesn't usually make students feel comfortable (97), and it certainly isn't "motherly." The result of this self-realization and shift toward also inhabiting the role of an "adversary" caused the second unintended effect: being confused about my role in the classroom left my students feeling betrayed, or as Elbow would say, "bamboozled" (*Embracing Contraries* 79). The feelings of distrust and frustration that followed ultimately led to the coup.

Being Honest in a Teaching Statement

To eliminate this toxic miscommunication about our role in the classroom, hooks says that having explicit conversations

about her role with students is essential, especially when she isn't going to fulfill a traditional one (97). Likewise, Elbow calls this type of honesty "getting the weapons out on the table" (79), so that students never feel threatened by an unreliable or unexpected shift in the power dynamics or the teacher's role. This is especially important for female teachers because students are culturally conditioned to judge their female teacher's success based on their likeability and nurturing qualities (hooks 97–8; Buffington 5–6). In other words, no matter how clear we are internally about our role in the classroom, if we don't show our students who we are and how we measure our success as their teacher, we won't live up to their cultural expectations. It's just like grading an assignment: you can only be fair when clear expectations were set in the first place.

This definition of the teacher's role should occur on the first day of school, along with any other housekeeping items that would otherwise be addressed (Buffington 7). I'm imagining that this statement would most naturally exist in my course syllabus, a contract between my students and me where we can agree upon the bedrocks of our learning environment. This statement is not unlike that which Elbow provides as a pre- and postlude to his sample grading contracts in "Getting Along without Grades—And Getting Along with Them Too" (416–9). In this statement he acknowledges the ways he will wield his authority by providing ways to improve the quality of their work. He says to his students, "You can experience me as a coach and ally rather than someone to psych out or con. . . . You can learn and benefit from any criticism I give you without feeling threatened by it" (419). He goes on to define his criteria for his own success as the following: students should develop independent thinking, motivation, and an appreciation for writing as a tool to do

hard thinking (419). Similarly, Buffington says she tells students that they "may not always feel comfortable with what they read, say, or hear in my class," but she's okay with that because she doesn't view herself as their mother; instead, her measure of success is for students to be "thinking, learning, and changing" (12).

My Teaching Statement

I'd like to end this exploration of the various roles of the composition teacher with the teaching statement that I plan to give my second group of sophomores in August. Rather than rigidly define who I seek to be as their teacher, I will instead define who I will not be, so that I can fluidly shift between the roles that they need me to inhabit.

My name is Mrs. Vik, and I might not be what you're expecting. You've probably heard lots about me during my first year at Tremont, but guess what? I've heard a lot about you too. We're both "sophomores" here, so to speak, and we've changed a lot since day one of our "freshman year." I don't want you to to worry with uncertainty about who I am or rely on what you've heard before. Instead, I want to explain the most important aspects of who I strive to be as your teacher so we can get on with learning. But, honestly, defining exactly who I am is tricky because none of us are simply "one-way"; we shift and change in every situation. So instead of telling you who I am, *I'll tell you who I definitely am* not.

- I am not easy. I will hold you to a high standard, and I will challenge your academic abilities because I know you are capable of excellence (yes, all of you). That means I will expect you to do work inside and outside of class to help stretch your mind to the next level.

- I am not boring. I find learning energizing and exciting, and I try to create that type of environment for you to enjoy in my classroom.
- I am not self-serving. Nothing I plan for our class is for my benefit. The activities, assignments, and feedback you receive is solely to help you become a more competent reader, writer, and thinker. I've dedicated my life to being a public servant so that I can help you.
- I am not unreliable. You can trust that if I make a promise, I will keep it. That applies to assignment deadlines, classroom expectations, grading policies, and this contract. I take clarity and consistency very seriously.
- I am not unfair. I understand that you have full lives outside of school that may inhibit your commitment to English class (I do too!). Trust that I understand those interests are important and want to help you balance both work and play. If you consistently communicate with me, we can "make it work."
- I am nacho mama. You might not always feel comfortable with what you hear, say, or think in this classroom, and you might not always feel "safe" emotionally. I hope you have someone in your life who will nurture and care for you, but my job is to challenge your thinking and help you grow as a budding professional in our world. I will expect you to be mature and self-sufficient.
- I am not a cop. I will not chase you down for assignments or harass you to behave in class. My expectation for your time in class is simple: learn things. I expect you to embrace that responsibility with care, for yourself and your peers.

- I am not your adversary. It can be tempting to view me as the enemy if you receive a poor grade or are told "no." I urge you to reject this idea. Instead trust that I want you to grow into brilliant readers, writers, and thinkers, and all of my actions come from that interest.
- I am not a punching bag. This is my day job, Folks, and I have real feelings under this "teacher" self. When you are rude, insulting, or degrading, it hurts my human. Please don't be jerks. Also know that I recognize and value your feelings too. I want to create a climate of respect for all of us to thrive in. Help me do that!
- I am not perfect. Despite my best efforts to make every class amazing, I make mistakes, just like you do. Please be forgiving of me, as I will be forgiving of you. Also know that I am interested in your feedback. I invite you now and always to let me know directly if you have a question or a concern about class.

You might be asking yourself, "So if she isn't *these things, who* is *she?" That question is far more complex because my role in the classroom is necessarily fluid. Depending on the situation, you might see me switch hats midstream (say from Dumbledore to Ms. Frizzle), but there are a couple of consistent roles I want to play in your life:*

- I am your reading and writing coach. Just like a sport or a music coach would, I will give you pointers about how to improve for the purposes of your playing in the "big leagues" or in Carnegie Hall someday. You've got big things ahead of you, and I want to help you get there (wherever there is to you).

- I am your ally. *You can trust that I'm on your team. You don't need to feel threatened by me or my feedback to you in class, and I'm interested in your lives outside of class. I believe that you are talented, capable, important, and unique, and I want to get to know you better.*

You might not always like my teaching style, and we might not always be on the same page, and that is okay. It is not an indication that I am a bad teacher or that you're a bad student. If you want to know if this class is a success, ask yourself, "Is my brain stretching?" If the answer is yes, even if that isn't comfortable, we are doing okay. That is why we're here. You *are the reason we're here.*

Notes

1. Although this article is largely focused on gender, I am also interested in the ways that age, gender, and race intersect to impact a teacher's relationships with their students.
2. My personal "teaching statement," intended to exist as part of my course syllabus, can be found at the end of the article.
3. There are other real concerns about the role of the "teacher-mother." For example, Jarratt explores how discouraging conflict can create a hotbed for racist, sexist, classist ideas to breed (106). I choose not to explore those here, but do find that type of concern valuable.
4. See Ashley Barnes' article on page 37 in this edition of the *Illinois English Bulletin*.

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- Full name of school
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