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*David Bartholomae*

## Writing With Teachers: A Conversation with Peter Elbow

**A**t the 1989 and 1991 meetings of CCCC, Peter Elbow and I began a public conversation about personal and academic writing. We have had several opportunities to continue it in private and we have decided to go public once again, partly because we find it useful to think these questions through in conversation (and partly because the conversation we had in 1989 has been reproduced as the Bartholomae/Elbow debate in ways we would like to challenge or revise). Here are the texts of the talks we gave at the 1991 CCCC in Boston, followed by a brief response from each of us.

*Editor's note: Bartholomae's and Elbow's responses to each other, along with a set of further comments on their exchange, appear in the Interchanges section of this issue.*

### Where to Begin?

Most discussions like the one we are about to have begin or end by fretting over the central term, academic writing. It is clear that this is not just a contested term, but a difficult one to use with any precision. If, for example, it means the writing that is done by academics, or the writing that passes as currency in the academy, then it is a precise term only when it is loaded: academic writing—the unreadable created by the unspeakable; academic writing—stuffy, pedantic, the price of a career; academic writing—pure, muscular, lean, taut, the language of truth and reason; academic writing—language stripped of the false dressings of style and fashion, a tool for inquiry and critique.

And so on. I don't need to belabor this point. Academic writing is a single thing only in convenient arguments. If you collect samples of academic writing, within or across the disciplines, it has as many types and categories, peaks and valleys, as writing grouped under any other general

category: magazine writing, business writing, political writing, sports writing. Or, I could put it this way: Within the writing performed in 1990 under the rubric of English studies, writing by English professors, you can find writing that is elegant, experimental, sentimental, autobiographical, spare, dull, pretentious, abstract, boring, dull, whatever.

If I am here to argue for academic writing as part of an undergraduate's training, or as a form or motive to be taught/examined in the curriculum, I need to begin by saying that I am not here to argue for stuffy, lifeless prose or for mechanical (or dutiful) imitations of standard thoughts and forms. We need a different set of terms to frame the discussion. It is interesting, in fact, to consider how difficult it is to find positive terms for academic writing when talking to a group of academics, including those who could be said to do it for a living. It is much easier to find examples or phrases to indicate our sense of corporate shame or discomfort.

I don't have time to pursue this line of argument here, but I think it is part and parcel of the anti-professionalism Fish argues is a pose of both the academic right (for whom the prose in our journals is evidence of bad faith, of the pursuit of trends, an abandonment of the proper pursuit of humane values, great books), but also for the academic left (for whom professional practice is the busy work we do because we are co-opted). For both, academic writing is what you do when you are not doing your "real" work.

### **My Position, I Think**

I want to argue that academic writing is the real work of the academy. I also want to argue for academic writing as a key term in the study of writing and the practice of instruction. In fact, I want to argue that if you are teaching courses in the university, courses where students write under your supervision, they can't not do it and you can't not stand for it (academic writing, that is) and, therefore, it is better that it be done out in the open, where questions can be asked and responsibilities assumed, than to be done in hiding or under another name.

To say this another way, there is no writing that is writing without teachers. I think I would state this as a general truth, but for today let me say that there is no writing done in the academy that is not academic writing. To hide the teacher is to hide the traces of power, tradition and authority present at the scene of writing (present in allusions to previous work, in necessary work with sources, in collaboration with powerful theories and figures, in footnotes and quotations and the messy business of doing your work in the shadow of others). Thinking of writing as academic writing makes us think of the page as crowded with others—or

it says that this is what we learn in school, that our writing is not our own, nor are the stories we tell when we tell the stories of our lives—they belong to TV, to Books, to Culture and History.

To offer academic writing as something else is to keep this knowledge from our students, to keep them from confronting the power politics of discursive practice, or to keep them from confronting the particular representations of power, tradition and authority reproduced whenever one writes.

Now—I say this as though it were obvious. Students write in a space defined by all the writing that has preceded them, writing the academy insistently draws together: in the library, in the reading list, in the curriculum. This is the busy, noisy, intertextual space—one usually hidden in our representations of the classroom; one that becomes a subject in the classroom when we ask young writers to think about, or better yet, confront, their situatedness.

And yet, it is also obvious that there are many classrooms where students are asked to imagine that they can clear out a space to write on their own, to express their own thoughts and ideas, not to reproduce those of others. As I think this argument through, I think of the pure and open space, the frontier classroom, as a figure central to composition as it is currently constructed. The open classroom; a free writing. This is the master trope. And, I would say, it is an expression of a desire for an institutional space free from institutional pressures, a cultural process free from the influence of culture, an historical moment outside of history, an academic setting free from academic writing.

*Whose* desire? That is a hard question to answer, and I will finesse it for the moment. I don't want to say that it is Peter's; I think it is expressed in Peter's work.

I can, however, phrase this question: "Whose desire is this, this desire for freedom, empowerment, an open field?"—I think I can phrase the question in terms of the larger debate in the academy about the nature of discourse and the humanities. The desire for a classroom free from the past is an expression of the desire for presence or transcendence, for a common language, free from jargon and bias, free from evasion and fear; for a language rooted in common sense rather than special sense, a language that renders (makes present) rather than explains (makes distant). It is a desire with a particularly American inflection and a particular resonance at a moment in the academy when it has become harder and harder to cast any story, let alone the story of education, in a setting that is free, Edenic or Utopian.

"I have learned to relinquish authority in my classroom." How many times do we hear this now as the necessary conclusion in an argument

about the goals of composition? “I want to empower my students.” “I want to give my students ownership of their work.” What could it mean—to have this power over language, history and culture? to own it?

Unless it means stepping outside of the real time and place of our writing—heading down the river, heading out to the frontier, going nowhere. Unless it means stepping out of language and out of time. I am arguing for a class *in* time, one that historicizes the present, including the present evoked in students’ writing. Inside this linguistic present, students (with instruction—more precisely, with lessons in critical reading) can learn to feel and see their position inside a text they did not invent and can never, at least completely, control. Inside a practice: linguistic, rhetorical, cultural, historical.

As I am thinking through this argument, I read Peter’s work as part of a much larger project to preserve and reproduce the figure of the author, an independent, self-creative, self-expressive subjectivity. I see the argument against academic writing, and for another writing, sometimes called personal or expressive writing, as part of a general argument in favor of the author, a much beleaguered figure in modern American English departments. This is one way that the profession, English, has of arguing out the nature and role of writing as a subject of instruction—Personal writing/academic writing—this opposition is the structural equivalent to other arguments, arguments about authorship and ownership, about culture and the individual, about single author courses, about the canon.

And these arguments are part of still other arguments, with different inflections, about production and consumption, about reading and writing, about presence and transcendence, culture and individualism—arguments working themselves out in particular ways at conferences and in papers in many settings connected to the modern academy. The desire for an open space, free from the past, is a powerful desire, deployed throughout the discourses of modern life, including the discourses of education.

### The Contact Zone

When we talk about academic writing at CCCC, I don’t think we are talking about discourse—at least, after Foucault, as discourse is a technical term. We are not, in other words, talking about particular discursive practices and how they are reproduced or policed within the academic disciplines.

I would say that we are talking about sites, possible scenes of writing, places, real and figurative, where writing is produced. This is why so much time is spent talking about the classroom and its literal or metaphorical arrangement of power and authority—where do we sit, who talks first,

who reads the papers. Whether we rearrange the furniture in the classroom or rearrange the turns taken by speakers in a discussion, these actions have no immediate bearing on the affiliations of power brought into play in writing. At worst, the "democratic" classroom becomes the sleight of hand we perfect in order to divert attention for the unequal distribution of power that is inherent in our positions as teachers, as figures of institutional/disciplinary authority, and inherent in the practice of writing, where one is always second, derivative, positioned, etc.

I am trying to think about the scene of writing as a discursive space. So let me say that we shouldn't think of ourselves as frontier guides but as managers, people who manage substations in the cultural network, small shops in the general production of readers and writers. We don't choose this; it is the position we assume as teachers. If, from this position, we are going to do anything but preside over the reproduction of forms and idioms, we have to make the classroom available for critical inquiry, for a critique that is part of the lesson of practice. We have to do more, that is, than manage.

If our goal is to make a writer aware of the forces at play in the production of knowledge, we need to highlight the classroom as a substation—as a real space, not as an idealized utopian space. There is no better way to investigate the transmission of power, tradition and authority than by asking students to do what academics do: work with the past, with key texts (we have been teaching Emerson, Rich, Simon Frith on rock and roll); working with other's terms (key terms from Rich, like "patriarchy," for example); struggling with the problems of quotation, citation and paraphrase, where one version of a student's relationship to the past is represented by how and where he quotes Rich (does he follow the block quotation with commentary of his own? can Rich do more than "support" an argument, can a student argue with Rich's words, use them as a point to push off from?).

I want this issue to be precise as well as abstract. You can teach a lot about a writer's possible relations with the past by looking at how and why she uses a passage from an assigned text. This is not, in other words, simply a matter of reproducing standard texts, but as using them as points of deflection, appropriation, improvisation, or penetration (those are Mary Louise Pratt's terms). But you can't do this without making foremost the situatedness of writing, without outlining in red the network of affiliations that constitute writing in the academy.

Let me do this another way. There is a student in my class writing an essay on her family, on her parents' divorce. We've all read this essay. We've read it because the student cannot invent a way of talking about family, sex roles, separation. Her essay is determined by a variety of forces:

the genre of the personal essay as it has shaped this student and this moment; attitudes about the family and divorce; the figures of “Father” and “Mother” and “Child” and so on. The moment of this essay is a moment of the general problematics of writing—who does what to whom; who does the writing, what can an individual do with the cultural field? Of course we can help the student to work on this essay by letting her believe it is hers—to think that the key problem is voice, not citation; to ask for realistic detail rather than to call attention to figuration. Almost two hundred years of sentimental realism prepares all of us for these lessons. We can teach students to be more effective producers of this product. We can also teach them its critique. Perhaps here is a way of talking about the real issues in the debate over academic writing? How can you not reproduce the master narrative of family life? How might a student writer negotiate with the professional literature? How and what might it mean to talk back to (or to talk with) Adrienne Rich about family life? What does it mean for a student to claim that her own experience holds equivalent status with Rich’s memories as material to work on?

### Teachers as Writers

We have several examples of academics announcing that they are now abandoning academic writing. I am thinking of Jane Tompkins’ recent article, “Me and My Shadow.” I am thinking of other similar moments of transcendence: Mina Shaughnessy’s use of Hoggart and Baldwin as writers who could use autobiography to do intellectual work. I am thinking of Mike Rose’s book, *Lives on the Boundary*. I am thinking of the recent issue of *PRE/TEXT* devoted to “expressive writing.” I am thinking of the roles Gretel Ehrlich or Richard Selzer have played at this conference, or for scholars like Peter and Chuck Schuster. Or that wonderful session of CCCC where Nancy Sommers and Pat Hoy presented extended personal essays as conference papers. I am thinking of Don McQuade’s chair’s address at the 1989 CCCC. I am thinking of some of Peter’s prose. And some of my own.

I seem to be saying that one cannot not write academic discourse, and yet here are examples of the academics pushing at the boundaries in decidedly academic settings. I don’t see this as a contradiction. I would say that these are not examples of transcendence but of writers calling up, for a variety of purposes, different (but highly conventional) figures of the writer. These are writers taking pleasure in (or making capital of) what are often called “literary devices”—dialogue, description, the trope of the real, the figure of the writer at the center of sentimental realism. There is great pleasure in writing this way (making the world conform to one’s image, exalting one’s “point of view”), and there are strategic reasons for not

doing academic writing when it is expected—I would say all great academic writers know this. I would call the writing I cited above examples of blurred genres, not free writing, and both genres represent cultural interests (in reproducing the distinct versions of experience and knowledge). In my department, this other form of narrative is often called “creative nonfiction” or “literary non-fiction”—it is a way to celebrate individual vision, the detail of particular worlds. There is an argument in this kind of prose too, an argument about what is real and what it means to inhabit the real. The danger is assuming that one genre is more real than the other (a detailed, loving account of the objects in my mother’s kitchen is more “real” than a detailed loving account of the discourse on domesticity found in 19th century American women’s magazines)—in assuming that one is real writing and the other is only a kind of game academics play. The danger lies in letting these tendentious terms guide the choices we make in designing the curriculum.

### A Brief History

Why, we might ask, do we have such a strong desire to talk about schooling as though it didn’t have to be schooling, a disciplinary process? I have started one answer—it is part of a general desire to erase the past and its traces from the present.

I would also say that our current conversations are very much a product of an important moment in composition in the early 1970s—one in which Peter played a key role. At a time when the key questions facing composition could have been phrased as questions of linguistic difference—what is good writing and how is that question a question of race, class, or gender?—at a time when composition could have made the scene of instruction the object of scholarly inquiry, there was a general shift away from questions of value and the figure of the writer in a social context of writing to questions of process and the figure of the writer as an individual psychology. If you turn to work by figures who might otherwise be thought of as dissimilar—Britton, Moffett, Emig, Northrop Frye, Jerome Bruner—you will find a common displacement of the social and a celebration of the individual as fundamentally (or ideally) congruent with culture and history. Here is how it was phrased: There is no real difference between the child and the adult (that’s Bruner); the curriculum is in the learner (that’s Moffett and Britton); we find the universal mind of man in the work of individuals (that’s Frye). All find ways of equating change with growth, locating both the process and the mechanism within an individual psychology, equating the learner with that which must be learned. And, as a consequence, schooling becomes secondary, not the primary scene of

instruction, but a necessary evil in a world that is not well-regulated, where people would naturally mature into myth or prose or wisdom. School is secondary, instrumental, something to be overcome. And, in a similar transformation, writing becomes secondary, instrumental (to thinking or problem solving or deep feeling or unconscious imaginative forces).

I would say that the argument that produces archetypal criticism produces cognitive psychology, free writing, and new journalism: I've got Bruner, Linda Flower, Peter, Tom Wolfe, and John McPhee all lined up in this genealogy, this account of the modern curricular production of the independent author, the celebration of point-of-view as individual artifact, the promotion of sentimental realism (the true story of what I think, feel, know and see).

### Conclusion, or, So How Do I Get Out of This?

I am at the point where I should have a conclusion, but I don't. I could say this is strategic. Peter and I are having a conversation, and so it would be rude to conclude. Let me reimagine my position by rephrasing the questions that allow me access to it. Here is how I would now phrase the questions that I take to be the key questions in the debate on academic writing:

Should we teach new journalism or creative non-fiction as part of the required undergraduate curriculum? That is, should all students be required to participate in a first person, narrative or expressive genre whose goal it is to reproduce the ideology of sentimental realism—where a world is made in the image of a single, authorizing point of view? a narrative that celebrates a world made up of the details of private life and whose hero is sincere?

I don't have an easy answer to this question. It is like asking, should students be allowed to talk about their feelings after reading *The Color Purple*? Of course they should, but where and when? and under whose authority?

I think it is possible to say that many students will not feel the pleasure or power of authorship unless we make that role available. Without our classes, students will probably not have the pleasure or the power of believing they are the figure that they have seen in pieces they have read: the figure who is seeing the world for the first time, naming it, making their thoughts the center of the world, feeling the power of their own sensibilities. This has been true for teachers in the Writing Projects, it will be true in our classes. Unless we produce this effect in our classroom, students will not be Authors.

There is no question but that we can produce these effects. The real question is, should we?

In a sense, I feel compelled to argue that we should. We should teach students to write as though they were not the products of their time, politics and culture, not our products, as though they could be free, elegant, smart, independent, the owners of all that they say. Why should they be denied this pleasure; or, why should it be reserved for some writers in our culture and not for others?

But I can also phrase the question this way: Why should I or a program I stand for be charged to tell this lie, even if it is a pleasant and, as they say, empowering one for certain writers or writers at a certain stage of their education? Why am I in charge of the reproduction of this myth of American life?

Or—is it a matter of stages in a writer's education? Should we phrase it this way: A 19-year-old has to learn to be a committed realist in order later to feel the potential for the critique of this position. People used to say something like this about traditional forms of order in the essay: You have to learn to write like E. B. White before you can learn to write like Gertrude Stein. Picasso couldn't have been a cubist if he hadn't learned to draw figures.

Learn to be logocentric? Learn to celebrate individualism? Learn to trust one's common sense point of view? Who needs to learn this at 18? Well, one might argue that students need to learn to do it well, so that it seems like an achievement. That is, students should master the figures and forms, learn to produce an elegant, convincing, even professional quality narrative before learning its critique and imagining its undoing.

I could phrase the question this way: Should composition programs self-consciously maintain a space for the "author" in a university curriculum that has traditionally denied students the category of author (by making students only summarizers or term paper writers)?

But it is too easy to say yes if I phrase the question like that. What if I put it this way? Should composition programs maintain a space for, reproduce the figure of, the author at a time when the figure of the author is under attack in all other departments of the academy. That is, should we be conservative when they are radical? Should we be retrograde in the face of an untested *avante-garde*?

Or—are we (should we be) a part of the critique, given our privileged role in the production of authors in the university curriculum, our positions in charge of sub-stations in the culture's determined production of readers and writers?

When I phrase the question that way, the answers become easy. I don't think I need to teach students to be controlled by the controlling idea, even

though I know my students could write more organized texts. I don't think I need to teach sentimental realism, even though I know my students could be better at it than they are. I don't think I need to because I don't think I should. I find it a corrupt, if extraordinarily tempting genre. I don't want my students to celebrate what would then become the natural and inevitable details of their lives. I think the composition course should be part of the general critique of traditional humanism. For all the talk of paradigm shifting, the composition course, as a cultural force, remains fundamentally unchanged from the 19th century. I would rather teach or preside over a critical writing, one where the critique is worked out in practice, and for lack of better terms I would call that writing, "academic writing."