

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Title: Shifting the Scholarly Conversation: A Rhetorical Reading of Peter Elbow's Work

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Shifting the Scholarly Conversation: A Rhetorical Reading of Peter Elbow's Work

explores Peter Elbow's contributions to the field of writing and rhetoric. Over the course of his long career, Elbow's scholarly and pedagogical work has been much praised and much criticized. Elbow's work has influenced generations of teachers and writers, but it has also met with criticism, particularly during the theoretical debates that dominated scholarship in rhetoric and writing in the late 1980s and 1990s. While scholars have debated whether Elbow is or isn't an expressivist—and the theoretical and pedagogical consequences if he were—less attention has been paid to Elbow's efforts to engage and embrace multiple audiences. In this thesis, I attempt to shift the scholarly conversation surrounding Elbow's work by arguing that Elbow's attention to audience provides a compelling and rich lens through which scholars can consider his work. My thesis examines the rhetorical strategies Elbow uses in order to make his texts accessible to a variety of readers: students, teachers, scholars, and the general public. It draws connections between Elbow's first book, *Writing Without Teachers*, his more traditional academic textbooks, and his essay collections, demonstrating that Elbow has been motivated by the same rhetorical impulses throughout his career, even as his situation as a writer and scholar have changed. I

argue that Elbow's commitment to reaching a diverse audience is a notable feature of his work and worthy of greater attention on the part of scholars.

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Shifting the Scholarly Conversation: A Rhetorical Reading of Peter Elbow's Work

By
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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Dorothy N. Slaton, Author

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Chapter 1:

“Universal Generalizations Upon a Sample of One”¹:

An Introduction to the Work of Peter Elbow

I realize now that much of the texture of my academic career has been based in an oddly positive way on [the] experience of complete shame and failure. In the end, failing led me to have the following powerful but tacit feeling: “There’s nothing else they can do to me. They can’t make me feel any worse than they’ve already done. I tried as hard as I could to be the way they wanted me to be, and I couldn’t do it. I really wanted to be good, and I was bad.” These feelings created an oddly solid grounding for my future conduct in the academic world. They made it easier for me to take my own path and say whatever I wanted.

—Peter Elbow, “*Illiteracy at Oxford and Harvard*” 7

Over the course of his long career—which ranges from the publication of his 1973 *Writing Without Teachers* to his 2012 *Vernacular Eloquence: What Speech Can Bring to Writing*—Peter Elbow’s scholarly work has been much discussed and much criticized. Elbow’s work has influenced generations of teachers and writers, but it has also met with criticism, particularly during the theoretical debates that dominated scholarship in rhetoric and writing in the late 1980s and 1990s. While scholars have debated whether Elbow is or isn’t an expressivist—and the theoretical and pedagogical consequences if he were—less attention has been paid to Elbow’s efforts to engage and embrace multiple audiences.

In my thesis, I posit that Elbow’s attention to audience provides a compelling and rich lens through which we can analyze his scholarly and pedagogical contributions, and I propose that Elbow has been motivated by the same rhetorical impulses throughout his career, even as his situation as a writer and scholar have changed. In making these arguments, I intentionally resist views, as Elbow did, that place his scholarship within a single taxonomical label, specifically

¹ This quote illustrates how Elbow found many of his ideas. “The Process of Writing—Growing” 16.

those described by James Berlin in his 1988 essay “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class.” Instead, I focus on a careful reading of a number of Elbow’s major works in an effort to explore the rhetorical strategies he employs to respond to the differing needs and situations of multiple audiences. One of these rhetorical strategies, I will argue, is his willingness to discuss moments of shame and failure as a writer, as in the epigraph that begins this chapter.

I also hope to encourage a richer understanding of Elbow’s pedagogical contributions in regard to audience. I believe that the title of Elbow’s 1987 essay “Closing My Eyes as I Speak: An Argument for Ignoring Audience” has led to misconceptions about Elbow’s position on audience. As an example of such a misconception, in *Teaching Composition as a Social Process* Bruce McComisky suggests that Elbow’s “Closing My Eyes as I Speak” represents an approach to writing that focuses solely on writer-based prose, prose not revised or adjusted to fit an audience (49). In fact, Elbow says in “Closing My Eyes as I Speak” that “[i]t’s not that writers should never think about their audience. It’s a question of when” (94).

In his essay, Elbow recognizes that audience can be empowering or inhibiting to writers, and he argues that in certain situations (especially early in the writing process) “ignoring audience can lead to better writing,” especially for those who are “thinking too much about how their readers will receive their words” (97). Even so, Elbow explicitly acknowledges the need for revising with “conscious awareness of audience”:

To celebrate writer-based prose is to risk the charge of *romanticism*: just warbling one’s woodnotes wild. But my position also contains the austere *classic* view that we must nevertheless *revise* with awareness of audience in order to figure out which pieces of writer-based prose are good as they are—and how to discard or revise the rest. (98-99)

In this thesis, I argue that attentiveness to audience represents an important theme in Elbow's work. I further argue that in his own writing Elbow demonstrates great sensitivity to audience and works hard to make a space in his writing for multiple and diverse audiences. And yet scholars have not often noted this aspect of Elbow's work, preferring to focus on the taxonomical issue of whether Elbow is or is not an expressionist, an issue I will touch on later in this chapter. I hope that by analyzing some of the most important elements of Elbow's rhetoric, my thesis can help shift the conversation surrounding Elbow's work and its contributions.

Readers may notice that in this thesis I use longer quotes than is typical in scholarly analysis. But because my focus here is on a rhetorical reading of Elbow's work, I believe it is important to provide a full portrait of Elbow's rhetorical strategies at work. Although I do refer to others' critiques and appreciation of Elbow's work, I focus primarily on the work itself to encourage readers to attend to consistent rhetorical strategies that I believe characterize his scholarly and pedagogical contributions from *Writing Without Teachers* and on.

I will say more about my goals for this thesis later in this chapter, but for now I would like briefly to narrate my own engagement with Elbow's work. From my first encounter with Peter Elbow's work as a new TA at Oregon State University, I have been intrigued by his ability to address the real-life issues I faced as a teacher and writer. I encountered Elbow's 1983 article "Embracing Contraries in the Teaching Process" as I was grading my first round of student portfolios, and I was struck by this article's acknowledgment of the complexity and difficulty teachers experience as they move back and forth between the role of coach and critic. I had felt torn between being a coach to my students and being an evaluator of their work, but thanks to Elbow's essay, I learned that my inner struggle was natural. I also learned productive ways to negotiate the inevitable contraries I experience as a teacher.

I didn't encounter Peter Elbow's work again until I enrolled in Current Composition Theory in Fall 2011. In this class, we studied two of his articles: "Ranking, Evaluating, and Liking: Sorting Out Three Forms of Judgment" and "Options for Responding to Student Writing." Both articles discuss methods of evaluating and responding to student writing and stimulated for me similar insights and suggestions for teaching that "Embracing Contraries in the Teaching Process" had provided a year earlier. It was after I read these articles that Lisa Ede, Ph.D and Professor at OSU, suggested Peter Elbow's work as a topic for my seminar paper and, ultimately, my thesis. Because the articles by Elbow that I had read directly addressed my needs as a teacher, I agreed—not yet fully aware of how much Peter Elbow has contributed to the field of writing and rhetoric.

My further investigation of Elbow has been fascinating and challenging—fascinating because he offers complex insights into both teaching and writing, and challenging because he has published so much on so many different topics. Teachers have especially valued Elbow's attention to concrete pedagogical issues and the strategies he offers to both teachers and writers. Anyone familiar with Elbow's work will note his emphasis on freewriting and other forms of invention, voice, peer response, revision, and so on. Along with Pat Belanoff, Elbow helped pioneer portfolio assessment.

Elbow played a central role in the theoretical debates that occupied the field in the late 1980s and the 1990s. I will discuss these debates and their impact on the reception of Elbow's work more fully later in this chapter. For now I will simply point out that despite harsh criticism from such well-known theorists as James Berlin and David Bartholomae, Elbow has continued to argue the case for, as he puts it in the subtitle of his 2000 collection *Everyone Can Write*, "a hopeful theory of writing and teaching writing." His most recent study is *Vernacular Eloquence*:

What Speech Can Bring to Writing, where Elbow argues that “speakers of all the many versions of English can not only *use* their mother tongue (or whatever language comes most easily to mind and mouth) for serious writing, but in fact *improve* their serious writing by doing so” (3). As I will explore more fully in this thesis, these recent collections allow Elbow to alternate long theoretical essays with briefer, more conversational pieces, which in *Everyone Can Write* he calls “fragments” and in *Vernacular Eloquence* “literacy stories.” In *Vernacular Eloquence*, Elbow also includes shaded boxes where, as he notes in the introduction, he has put “bits of scholarly references or discussion” that he feels are important but does not want to “clog up the text” (8).

The more I studied Elbow’s work, the more impressed I became with Elbow’s ability to address, many times simultaneously, a broad range of readers, including the general public, students, teachers, and scholars. I also noticed through my research how personally many readers engaged with his work, often feeling that he was speaking directly to them. In *Writing With Elbow*, for instance, Sondra Perl calls attention to the way Elbow’s words can “reach and grab and hold” readers:

Peter Elbow writes. He writes to himself, to figure things out, but also to us, his colleagues, students, and friends, to those he’s met and to so many others he may never meet. And even in the figuring out, in the sharing of his struggles, his words speak in uncanny ways. They reach and grab and hold. I wonder if he knows their weight and heft. (253)

I have encountered other instances where Elbow’s readers comment on his ability to evoke a personal connection with readers. In “Embodied Voice,” an essay that examines the metaphors Elbow uses to describe writing, Kate Ronald and Hephzibah Roskelly mention their first-year

writing students' reactions to Elbow's *Writing With Power: Techniques for Mastering the*

Writing Process:

They commented as much on the demeanor of the person on the page as they did the substance of the discussion. He says he couldn't *write* his dissertation. *He* couldn't write. They were amazed that the author of their textbook admitted he had problems with filling a page. They liked that admission; they liked him. (212)

As I noted earlier, as a scholar and textbook author, Elbow is unusual in the candor with which he writes about his own struggles with writing. Elbow's experience as a writer is hardly unique—if pressed, many academics could probably remember moments of shame and failure—but Elbow openly discusses these difficulties in the introductions to his books and collections, as well as in interviews and one essay in particular, “Illiteracy at Oxford and Harvard.”

While it is important to recognize that any person's insights into his or her own experience are only partial, especially when considered in hindsight, I believe that it is helpful to take Elbow at his word when reading his reflections on his experiences. Elbow doesn't hide his experiences of failure; instead, he uses them to establish his ethos and connect with his audience. In his first book, *Writing Without Teachers*, published in 1973, Elbow (then largely unknown beyond Evergreen State College [now Evergreen State University]), makes this statement:

The authority I call upon in writing a book about writing is my own long-standing difficulty in writing. It has always seemed to me as though people who write without turmoil and torture were in a completely different universe. And yet advice about writing always seemed to come from them and therefore to bear no relation to us who struggled and usually failed to write. But in the last few years I have struggled more successfully to get things written and make them work for at least some readers, and in watching myself do this I have developed the conviction I can give advice that speaks more directly to the experience of having a hard time writing. (vi)

As Elbow states later, he generalized his experiences from this “sample of one” (16).

Elbow doesn't discuss his writing as an undergraduate extensively, but he does say in "Illiteracy at Oxford and Harvard" that "my experience of writing [as an undergraduate at Williams College] was the experience of being knocked down, but then stubbornly picking myself up, dusting myself off, and finally succeeding. . . . I was eager to do well and I worked hard at it—and by the end of my first year had begun to do so" (6). Graduate school was a different matter. Thanks to a scholarship, Elbow attended Oxford. Here he encountered significant criticism from his first-year tutor. Comments like "Why don't you go off and read Dryden and write me something interesting" and "What are we going to do with these Americans they send us?" soon led to weekly sessions in which Elbow repeatedly had to tell his tutor, "I don't have an essay for you. I tried as hard as I could, but I couldn't write it" (6). Elbow explains, "I really had tried hard, spending the whole week writing initial sentences, paragraphs, and pages and throwing them all away" (6). With a change in tutors, Elbow tells his readers he "limped through [his] second year" of his MA (6).

According to Elbow, he experienced a crisis of confidence after beginning his PhD in English at Harvard: "I had a terrible time getting my first semester papers written at all, and they were graded unsatisfactory. I could have stayed if I'd done well the next semester, but after only a few weeks, I could see things were getting worse rather than better. I quit before being kicked out" ("Illiteracy" 7). In his 1992 interview with John Boe for *Writing on the Edge*, Elbow describes this struggle:

It wasn't just that I couldn't write the papers; I was unhappy. I was in therapy, shrinking my head. Being a prudent child, I didn't just quit, I took a medical leave of absence. I always felt this was perhaps a terribly cowardly thing to do, although I did feel that I was losing my mind because I was crying all the time. . . . So I quit, continued to shrink my head, and experienced myself as a total failure. (13)

As Elbow says in “Illiteracy at Oxford and Harvard,” “My sense of failure was total. It wouldn’t have been so bad if I had been less invested or hadn’t tried so hard” (7). Elbow had put effort into his work, but when he was unable to produce writing, or rather satisfactory writing, he abandoned his PhD studies.

Elbow credits his experiences teaching—three years at M.I.T. and two years at Franconia College in New Hampshire—as motivating him to complete his PhD. After leaving graduate school, he “gradually woke up to the fact that [he] was having a good time [teaching]” and that teaching was much different than being a student (“Illiteracy at Oxford and Harvard” 8). He also developed an interest in higher education thanks to his move from M.I.T. to Franconia College, a newly-created experimental college that focused on recruiting students who had not succeeded in conventional educational settings:

[M]y experience of moving from highly successful students at M.I.T. to highly unsuccessful students at Franconia convinced me that something was deeply wrong with how education worked. For it became clear to us that these students whom everyone defined as failures were very smart, and they did good work given good learning conditions. I wanted to speak out about higher education, but I realized that unless I got a PhD, people would say, “You just don’t like it because you couldn’t do it.” (9)

Elbow re-entered a PhD program, this time at Brandeis University—but not without anxieties about his failures in the past.

This time Elbow succeeded in his studies, but this success required great diligence. In his interview with John Boe, Elbow described his writing process at Brandeis: “I did OK, although I was very scared of writing. I made myself a rule: every time a paper was due, I had to have a draft (of the same length as the paper) done a week before the paper was due. So then I knew I

had a week to play with it” (15). Elbow further explains, talking about a method he used while writing his dissertation:

If something happened that struck me, I would write a note—sometimes just on a little scrap of paper—and would slip these pieces of paper into a folder. Especially if I got stuck, I would take another piece of paper and say, “You’re stuck on the damn paper, so write about why you got stuck.” I thought if I learned what had happened, maybe it wouldn’t happen next time. And then when I got unstuck, I would try to remember to take a moment to write about how I got unstuck. (Boe 15)

As Elbow has pointed out, this process played a key role in the insights that led to *Writing Without Teachers*.

Elbow’s willingness to share his own difficulties with writing undoubtedly played a role in the success of *Writing Without Teachers*. This book was followed by *Writing With Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process* (1981) and *Embracing Contraries: Explorations in Learning and Teaching* (1986). (Along the way, Elbow also published a revised version of his dissertation, *Oppositions in Chaucer* [1975].) In all of these books, Elbow mentions his own struggles with both writing and teaching.

In the late 1980s and the 1990s, Elbow would experience a different kind of struggle: theoretical debates that often characterized his approach to the teaching of writing in negative ways. As Elbow observes in the introduction to his 2000 edition of *Everyone Can Write*, a collection of previously published and new work:

I began to feel that I was writing to an audience that was hostile to my whole approach to writing and teaching writing It’s probably fair to say by the late ‘80s, I was seen as a prime exemplar of a theory and philosophy of writing judged to be suspect or even wrong-headed by most of the dominant scholars in the important scholarly journals. (xvi)

The focus in my thesis is not on what some have termed the “theory wars” that absorbed the field of rhetoric in the late 1980s and the 1990s. But since this time period was critical to Elbow’s ongoing development as a scholar, I need to present a brief overview. Most basically, during this time period, the consensus that had coalesced around the process approach to teaching writing began to fragment. There were multiple reasons for this, including an increasing interest in and commitment to poststructural and postmodern theories on the part of many scholars in the field; James Berlin’s 1988 “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class” played a key role in this process.

In this article, Berlin identifies three prominent rhetorics at play in theory and practice of the teaching of writing: cognitive rhetoric (characterized by the work of Linda Flower and John Hayes); expressionistic rhetoric (characterized by the work of Peter Elbow); and social epistemic rhetoric, Berlin’s preferred category, a rhetoric strongly influenced by postmodern theory, especially in its views of ideology, knowledge, power, and the self.

The impact of Berlin’s taxonomy is difficult to overstate. Elbow recognizes the influence Berlin had on the scholarly community in his interview with John Boe: “James Berlin’s picture of the field and its history has become so definitive that his terms are sort of cast into stone” (16). And, as Elbow points out in *Everyone Can Write*, this influenced how his work was viewed in the field: “most graduate students experienced it as a problem if they said or wrote something that someone could characterize as ‘expressivist’ or as ‘defending an approach like Elbow’s’ ” (xvi).

The scholarly conversation around expressivism catalyzed significant and widespread criticism of Elbow and his work, but as Lad Tobin points out in his chapter in *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies*, “the bitter debates that were raging in the professional journals

between advocates of various theoretical camps caused much less conflict in the classroom, where practitioners usually found something to borrow from each approach” (10). As a result, practitioners were much less likely to dismiss Elbow’s work, and Elbow recognizes this as he makes another important observation about his audience in *Everyone Can Write*: “interestingly enough, many classroom teachers do not share this distrust of so-called expressivism, and I could usually count on a sympathetic audience of teachers when I gave a talk or a paper. This split between scholars and teachers bears pondering” (xvi). In this thesis, I will demonstrate that Elbow not only pondered this split but also worked productively to reach diversely situated readers, including ordinary writers, teachers, and scholars.

Berlin’s taxonomy as articulated in “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class” was so influential that scholars still see its impact. In his 2012 article “Remapping Revisionist Historiography,” for instance, David Gold observes that Berlin’s work “has been so influential that it has had a normative effect; it is not uncommon to witness instructors still describe their classroom practice using vocabulary he developed” (20). Gold goes on to argue, however, that:

Berlin’s own theories were themselves socially constructed, emerging out of particular historical exigencies, most notably the concomitant ascent of both cultural and composition studies in the 1980s, the former driven by postmodern and Marxist readings in history, the latter by a burgeoning self-awareness and desire for academic legitimacy. (20)

Given changes in both theory and practice since Berlin wrote his essay, “[w]e can no longer assume,” Gold argues, “that Berlin’s taxonomies adequately map the field” (19).

As I noted earlier, I am not attempting to develop a new taxonomy nor am I entering the argument about whether Elbow is or is not an expressivist. I agree with Gold that the field needs to acknowledge the limitations and situated nature of Berlin’s taxonomy. The critical debate

surrounding the theory wars in the field did influence Elbow, however, for despite the criticisms of his work, he continued to publish and reached out to a more scholarly, and sometimes very resistant, audience, than he did when he published such early works as *Writing Without Teachers*. By the time he wrote *Everyone Can Write*, he observes in his introduction, “I *did* feel myself a member of the profession and the scholarly discipline of English and composition studies—and I *was* writing to and thinking about the profession” (xvi). However, Elbow continues his loyalty to his steadfast audience of teachers, learners, and supportive researchers and scholars. He explains this attempt in *Everyone Can Write*: “of course I did have supportive readers. That’s probably what kept me writing. But now as I gather these essays together, I notice a kind of double rhetoric: I am fighting and not fighting my audience. That is, I am often writing *from* an adversarial stance *toward* a nonadversarial goal” (xvii).

Even in the midst of the theory wars, a number of scholars continued to support Elbow, as Elbow himself acknowledges. One of the major themes in Elbow’s writing and in the commentary about Elbow’s writing is his ability to embrace contraries. *Writing With Elbow* (2002), a collection of essays about Elbow’s contributions edited by Pat Belanoff, Marcia Dickson, Sheryl I. Fontaine, and Charles Moran, devotes a section to essays about Elbow’s ability to see and embrace contraries, and Charles Moran opens the discussion of that section describing how Elbow sees a need to hold “two ideas that are in radical opposition to one another” (61). This ability, several authors of chapters in this section argue, is both rare and noteworthy.

Over the years Elbow has been a strong advocate for freewriting. His 1991 collection *Nothing Begins with N* (1991), coedited with Belanoff and Fontaine, focuses on “investigation and reflection rather than on partisanship” (xii). The collection focuses on what freewriting looks

like, its uses in the classroom, the effects on students, and the authors' connections to freewriting.

I am not attempting to write an extensive review of the literature surrounding Elbow's oeuvre, but I would be remiss to not mention Elbow and Belanoff's work on assessment and writing portfolios. The importance of this work is acknowledged in essays such as Kathy Blake Yancey's "An Inquiry into Writing Assessment: Defining the Elbovian Legacy" and in her 1992 edited collection *Portfolios in the Writing Classroom*.

As these examples suggest, the scholarly conversation surrounding Elbow's work and practices is extensive. Many focus on his pedagogical ideas and his scholarly contributions, but few write about Elbow's rhetorical strategies as a writer as a key contribution of his work. Often, these commentaries appear almost as anecdotal comments, as is the case with Ann E. Berthoff's comment in the forward to *Writing with Elbow*:

For as long as I've known Peter, I have admired his lively pedagogical imagination. His openness to new ideas, new points of departure, new theories would be notable in any case, but it's what he does with them that has made [him] such an important guide for a generation of writing teachers. He has been influential because he knows how to transform philosophical and psychological insights so that they can be acted on, so that they can help us defend ourselves against gangster theories. He knows how to make such ideas accessible to others, encouraging them to go on from there, as he does himself, continually. (ix-x)

In my thesis, I hope to encourage a shift in the scholarly conversation surrounding Elbow's work and its contributions so that his attention to audience takes center stage.

Wendy Bishop is one scholar who has looked with particular care at Elbow's rhetorical strategies and attention to audience. In her 2002 essay "My Favorite Balancing Act," Bishop

comments on the radical nature of Elbow's approach to audience and on his ability to make his "ideas accessible to others" in *Writing Without Teachers*. She observes that:

[*Writing Without Teachers*] provided a strong attack on the status quo, couched in a disconcertingly brave language that was very much I/you, student-writer-friendly (in a way that seemed to strike fear in certain teachers and academics), filled with analogies to psychology and self-help, urging introspection and empowerment for all" (241).

Even a quick skimming of the text confirms Bishop's claim. The tone throughout is casual, and the organization focuses on the writing process itself rather than issues of correctness or form. There is an "Autobiographical Digression" where Elbow discusses his own difficulties with writing (16). While I will not provide a long description of *Writing Without Teachers*' table of contents, it's important to mention that chapter 2 ("The Process of Writing—Growing") and chapter 3 ("The Process of Writing—Cooking") utilize metaphors to which his readers can relate to discuss the writing process.

Moreover, Elbow addresses real-life issues that his writers face in a way that helps him connect with readers. For instance, in chapter 3, Elbow discusses the doubts and fears a writer might face and encourages them to trust themselves and their instincts:

Some readers feel I am asking them to write as badly as possible. I am not. Your goal is good writing. The mind is magic. It can cook things instantaneously and perfectly when it gets going. You should expect yourself at times to write straight onto the paper words and thoughts far better than you knew were in you. You should look for it and want it. To expect anything less is to consider yourself brain-damaged. (69)

With these and other encouraging words, Elbow invites readers who feel intimidated by writing to feel less "helpless" as writers (vii). He is clear about his goal, saying in the preface "If you

want a book to tell you the characteristics of good and bad writing, this is not it” (vii). Instead, his goal is “1) to help you actually generate words better—more freely, lucidly, and powerfully; . . . [and] 2) to help you improve your own ability to make your *own* judgments about which parts of your writing to keep and which parts to throw away” (vii-viii).

In her essay, Bishop focuses on *Writing Without Teachers*, but her insights apply, I believe, to Elbow’s more formal textbooks and even to his essay collections. As I look at Elbow’s pedagogical contributions in the next chapter, I will discuss how many of the traits Bishop observed, such as his willingness to share his own shame and failure in writing in *Writing Without Teachers*, are also present in his other textbooks. To do this, I will examine specific strategies from *Writing Without Teachers* to strengthen his ethos and indicate where and how I see these strategies being used in Elbow’s more formal textbooks: *Writing With Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process*, *A Community of Writers: A Workshop Course in Writing* (coauthored with Belanoff), and *Being a Writer: A Community of Writers Revisited* (a condensed version of *A Community of Writers* also coauthored with Belanoff).

In chapter 3, I will explore Elbow’s essay collections *Embracing Contraries: Explorations in Learning and Teaching*, *Everyone Can Write: Essays Toward a Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching Writing*, and *Vernacular Eloquence: What Speech Can Bring to Writing*. As mentioned before, Elbow describes a shift in his approach to audience as he became more aware of his scholarly position in the field of composition and rhetoric, and he specifically mentions a split between scholars and teachers. In my consideration of these texts, I will describe how Elbow negotiates this split, making his texts more accessible to a variety of readers. From using simple descriptions preceding the essays in *Embracing Contraries* to blocking off theoretical text in shaded boxes to keep the text accessible for those not as interested in the

theoretical conversation in *Vernacular Eloquence*, Elbow demonstrates attentiveness to the needs of his readers.

I will also discuss his two collections of previously published material, *Embracing Contraries* and *Everyone Can Write*. Both contain representative articles of Elbow's scholarly work that he has adapted for a readership beyond the scholarly journals and books in which they originally appeared. Even in collecting his previously published work, Elbow had the needs of readers in mind. Both collections were motivated by Elbow's recognition, as he says in *Embracing Contraries*, "they could be of use if they were more readily available" (ix).

In my concluding chapter, I will briefly discuss Elbow's pedagogical teachings about audience and demonstrate why Elbow's own writing practices and the rhetorical advice he gives his students are congruent. I will also explore Elbow's well-known essay on audience, "Closing My Eyes as I Speak: An Argument for Ignoring Audience," and explain why the subtitle does not adequately reflect Elbow's views on audience.

Elbow's work invites me—as a writer, teacher, and student in the field of writing and rhetoric—to explore his practices and ideas. I was drawn to Elbow's work because he offers advice on real-life issues in writing and teaching and applies this advice to his own experiences. But the longer I have studied Elbow, the more impressed I am with his rhetorical sophistication, his generous embrace of readers, and his hard-won ability to, as he says in the epigraph that opens this chapter, "take [his] own path and say what [he] wanted to say" (7).

Chapter 2:

“To Everyone and Anyone Who Has Ever Tried to Write”:

Prominent Rhetorical Strategies in Peter Elbow’s Textbooks

In the previous chapter, I emphasized Peter Elbow’s effort to engage a broad and diverse audience, including readers inside and outside academia. I noted while the composition theory wars of the late 1980s and the 1990s influenced Elbow’s view of himself as a scholar and member of academia, he maintained a commitment to reaching a broad audience even as he addressed scholarly critiques of his work. Further, I emphasized the importance of looking at prominent rhetorical strategies in Elbow’s work, especially those strategies that help establish his ethos and enable him to connect with diversely situated readers. One such strategy is Elbow’s willingness to discuss his own difficulties with writing. Central to my analysis is my belief that however important the theory wars were in their own time, those wishing to assess Elbow’s contributions to the field today would benefit from shifting the conversation from Elbow’s position in Berlin’s taxonomy to a consideration of his writing *as* writing.

This chapter will examine the rhetorical strategies that Elbow employs—especially those strategies involving audience—in his textbooks: *Writing Without Teachers* (1973), *Writing With Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process* (1981), *A Community of Writers: A Workshop Course in Writing* (coauthored with Pat Belanoff [2000]), and *Being a Writer: A Community of Writers Revisited* (a condensed version of *A Community of Writers* also coauthored with Belanoff [2003]). In so doing, I demonstrate how, even as his texts evolve to reach a more academic audience—most often students enrolled in required first-year writing classes—Elbow continues to create spaces for a variety of readers inside and outside academia.

This chapter will also explore how Elbow uses his personal struggles as a writer to help establish his ethos with his readers. This strategy plays a particularly prominent role in Elbow's first book, *Writing Without Teachers* and continues to play an important, if lesser role, in his later textbooks, including those coauthored with Belanoff. Further, I demonstrate how Elbow personalizes his texts with his conversational tone, brief discussions of his thoughts and feelings about writing, and examples of his own writing. Again, these strategies are particularly evident in *Writing Without Teachers* but are still present in his more formal textbooks. I also discuss how Elbow's emphasis on introspection into one's own writing process empowers readers who might otherwise disregard his approaches to writing.

Since *Writing Without Teachers* plays a key role in my argument, I will begin by reviewing its basic goals and features. From the start, *Writing Without Teachers* presents itself different from more traditional academic textbooks:

Most books on writing try to describe the characteristics of good writing so as to help you produce it, and the characteristics of bad writing to help you avoid it. But not this book. Here you will find no descriptions of good and bad constructions, strong and weak sentences, correct and incorrect usages. When people tell me about good and bad writing it doesn't usually improve my writing at all; and when I try to tell other people it seldom improves their writing either. If you want a book to tell you the characteristics of good and bad writing, this is not it. (v)

Writing Without Teachers is grounded in Elbow's own method of writing, a process-approach that strongly emphasizes the value of freewriting exercises, a relatively new idea at the time of publication. But further, it offers descriptions for revising, editing, and peer-feedback that are enriched by Elbow's discussion of his own experiences as a writer and teacher. It is important to note, however, that although Elbow emphasizes his own experience in *Writing Without Teachers*, he was hardly writing in a void. At the same time that Elbow's early work was

appearing, Ken Macrorie was publishing such works as *A Vulnerable Teacher*, *Telling Writing*, and *Writing to be Read*—works congruent with Elbow’s vision and approach.

One of the most striking characteristics of *Writing Without Teachers* is its informal, autobiographical tone. Throughout the work, Elbow discusses his personal difficulties with writing, shares various freewrites from his dissertation, and emphasizes the values of writing as a process, for which he uses the metaphors of growing and cooking. Elbow admits to “making universal generalizations upon a sample of one,” but also suggests that his readers only “*try on* this way of looking at the writing process,” especially if they have struggled with other methods of writing (16).

As the title suggests, *Writing Without Teachers* focuses on writing outside the traditional classroom setting in writing groups. He emphasizes the value of getting multiple responses to work in progress—something that he feels can happen especially well when groups of writers gather together to discuss their work as equals. As Elbow observes, “it didn’t take me long to realize that it would be better if the student could get the experience of more than one reader. He would get a wider range of reactions to offset the one-sidedness of a single reaction” (121). In later textbooks, Elbow refers to this process as peer feedback and sharing, activities that quickly became standard in most writing classes and are used in most writing classes today.

In *Writing Without Teachers*, Elbow’s hoped for audiences is ambitious: “all who want to work on their writing, . . . a huge and diverse audience” (v). Even this early in his career, Elbow is already thinking of multiple audiences. In a note to teachers, for instance, Elbow recognizes that even though his book is explicitly addressed to writers outside of school, teachers and students in traditional classes might find his approach helpful:

Though I particularly want this book to help students not

enrolled in a writing class and people out of school altogether, nevertheless I think that most of the book will also be useful to students in a writing course. No matter what kind of writing course it might be, no matter what the age group, students will benefit from the freewriting exercises, the model of the writing process, the advice for self-management on that model, and the techniques for finding out what words do to actual readers. (vi-vii)

And, indeed, over the years *Writing Without Teachers* found its way into many required first-year writing classrooms.

As I will discuss in subsequent chapters, Elbow did not view himself as a scholar in rhetoric and writing until later in his career—this is something he comments on in the introduction to *Everyone Can Write*—but even as early as *Writing Without Teachers*, he could imagine this audience and attempt to address it. As he says in the introduction to the second edition of *Writing Without Teachers*, Elbow foresaw resistance to his ideas, which would indeed come to pass: “For as I was writing the [first edition of the] book, I felt an accusation forming in the minds of intellectuals and academics who might read it” (xx). To satisfy these anticipated accusations, Elbow places a theoretical essay, “The Doubting Game and the Believing Game—An Analysis of the Intellectual Enterprise,” in the appendix of both editions because, as Elbow explains, “I didn’t want my theoretical analysis to get in the way of practical people using the book in practical ways” (xx).

This effort to anticipate the needs of and address multiple audiences is, I would argue, one of the most salient aspects of Elbow’s work from 1973, when he published *Writing Without Teachers*, to the present time. As I will discuss more fully in chapter 3, in his 2012 *Vernacular Eloquence*, Elbow not only structures his text so that it is of interest to a variety of readers—from scholars to readers of such publications as *The New Yorker*—he also provides explicit

instructions on how diversely situated readers might approach his text. Some, he observes, might want to read the shaded theory boxes, while others might not.

Both Elbow's acknowledgement that *Writing Without Teachers* is based on his own experience and his decision to place his theoretical essay in the appendix to keep from deterring readers uninterested in the theoretical aspects of his ideas are moves aimed to accommodate readers. Further, Elbow invokes readers who have become frustrated with other textbooks on writing by characterizing his *Writing Without Teachers* as different from other books on writing. Additional rhetorical strategies—such as his self-disclosure, his personalization of the text with his own examples and thoughts, and his urging of introspection into one's own writing process—demonstrate Elbow's ability to address a variety of readers.

Because of the nontraditional nature of *Writing Without Teachers*, Elbow needs to take special care in establishing his ethos. As I discussed in chapter 1, Elbow claims his authority primarily in his own experience as a failed writer. To fully develop his credibility as a blocked writer, Elbow chooses to elaborate on his struggles in the second chapter of *Writing Without Teachers*, offering what he calls an “Autobiographical Digression” to help his readers “try on [his process] better”: “you will try it on better if you sense how it grows out of my experience” (16). In a narrative, Elbow offers vivid, applicable descriptions of his experiences:

Whether or not I succeeded in getting something written seemed related only to whether I screwed myself up into some state of frantic emotional intensity: sometimes about the subject I was writing about; occasionally about some extraneous matter in my life; usually about how overdue the paper was and how frightened I was of turning in nothing at all. (16)

Elbow discusses feelings to which his readers can relate, especially in admitting that, generally, the “frantic emotional intensity” came from being expected to turn something in. Elbow openly admits his failures in *Writing Without Teachers*, as he does later do in his other texts:

Writing became more and more impossible. I finally reached the point where I could not write at all. I had to quit graduate school and go into a line of work that didn't require any writing. Teaching English in college wasn't what I had in mind, but it was the only job I could get so it had to do. (17)

Elbow's admission of feelings of inadequacy and failure builds bridges between him and his intended audience, those who, as he observes in the first sentence of his preface, are “trying to become less helpless, both personally and politically: trying to claim more control over their own lives” (vii).

Through his own struggles, Elbow is able to relate to readers who feel “helpless” with writing. Tellingly, he calls upon the same experiences of failure in *Writing With Power* and in his textbooks with Belanoff, *A Community of Writers* and *Being a Writer*, to establish ethos. Before I describe how Elbow uses self-disclosure as a tool to relate to his mixed audiences in his other textbooks, I must provide a succinct, pointed description of these texts.

The format and message becomes more academic, but the main ideas in *Writing Without Teachers*—freewriting, revision, editing, and peer-feedback—carry over to *Writing With Power*, as does Elbow's desire to reach a broad and diverse audience:

I direct this book to a very broad audience. I'm not trying to tailor my words to beginning or advanced writers in particular, or to students, novelists, professional people, pleasure writers, or poets. Perhaps I shouldn't try to talk to so many different kinds of people, yet in truth I feel my audience is very specific. I am talking to that person inside everyone who has ever written or tried to write: that someone who has wrestled with words, who seeks power in words, who has often gotten discouraged, but

who also senses the possibility of achieving real writing power. (“An Approach” 6)

Writing With Power is longer and more fully developed than *Writing Without Teachers*; it looks more like a traditional first-year writing textbook. Yet the tone, while less autobiographical, remains conversational and casual. And the goal remains the same: “getting power over yourself and over the writing process; knowing what you are doing as you write; being in charge; having control; not feeling stuck or helpless or intimidated” (viii).

Elbow’s subsequent textbooks were coauthored with his colleague Pat Belanoff. *A Community of Writers: A Workshop Course in Writing* presents the same activities and methods Elbow presents in *Writing Without Teachers* and *Writing With Power*. While *A Community of Writers* is designed with a specific audience in mind, first-year college students in a one-semester writing course, Elbow and Belanoff quickly emphasize the inclusive qualities of their text:

The book is also appropriate for a one- to two-quarter course—and perhaps a full-year course if supplemented with additional readings. *A Community of Writers* will also be useful for high school seniors or college sophomores or juniors—for we haven’t much differentiated our audience in terms of age or skill level. That is, when we work with unskilled or reluctant students, we find they benefit from working on the same interesting, substantive, and sometimes difficult writing tasks we ask of our most skilled students—so long as we explain clearly what we are asking and why we are asking it, and give lots of support. On the other hand, even when we are working with very skilled and experienced students, we give lots of encouragement and take the informal, non-technical stance you see here. The core of our book is a series of writing activities that we have found appropriate whether we’re working with young children or college faculty. (xvii)

With this broad audience in mind, Elbow and Belanoff explain, “We’ve made our book as practical as we can, with lots of hands-on workshop activities. But we don’t hide our interest in

theory; our book reflects much recent scholarship in composition. And we push students to become thoughtful about their writing process” (xvii). Moreover, Elbow and Belanoff emphasize the appropriateness of their pedagogical practices for learners of all ages.

First published in 2003, *Being a Writer* “is much like its parent,” *A Community of Writers*. According to the authors:

[i]t teaches writing through a series of active experiential workshops rather than through discursive instruction. But we’ve eliminated almost all readings because we recognize that many teachers like to provide their own readings and some programs require students to use a separate reader of some kind. (xxii)

While the text is still directed primarily at first-year college students in one-semester writing courses and the authors still comment on the book’s ability to support a broad audience (see, for instance, the footnote on xxii), it addresses another need in terms of audience: teachers who would rather choose, or are required to use, a separate reader.

As I hope is clear, even in textbooks designed to compete in the traditional academic textbook market, Elbow reaches out to other audiences and attempts to meet their needs and expectations. As I move into my further discussion of these texts, I will demonstrate how these later textbooks reflect his earlier rhetorical decisions in *Writing Without Teachers* and emphasize that these strategies maintain Elbow’s ability to address a diverse readership.

In these later texts, Elbow doesn’t demonstrate as much need to establish an ethos based on his difficulties with writing. As a result, he doesn’t offer a section similar to autobiographical digressions in any of the later textbooks. Instead, Elbow brings these experiences into the text at relevant moments. For instance, in *Writing With Power*, Elbow comments on his own experience when discussing trying to get writing right the first time: “The need to get things right the first

time, I suspect, is often the culprit in the case of people who want to write but don't do so or stop doing so. I certainly wouldn't have gone through two years of total inability to write if I hadn't been trapped by the dangerous method" ("The Dangerous" 43).

Comments such as these appear elsewhere in *Writing With Power*; for example, as part of a discussion of revision when Elbow reflects on his own experience of writer's block:

I also reflected on the question of *why* I spend so much of my time revising. One reason, not surprisingly, is my temperament: I am a worrier and always think of how readers will object or disagree. This was the temperament that led to my being totally blocked and unable to write for a couple of years. ("More Ways" 122)

Later, Elbow mentions his failure when he discusses writing for teachers:

But other teachers later brought me to anxiety and fear of writing that seemed just as deep as my original caring for it. Writing became harder and harder till I finally reached the point in graduate school where I couldn't write anything no matter how hard I tried. (Being unable to write, I had to stop being a student and take a job as a teacher.) ("Writing for Teachers" 217)

While these instances of self-disclosure are brief, they help keep Elbow's experiences present in the text, helping him to maintain his ethos and to connect with readers.

Even in his coauthored textbooks, Elbow at times mentions his struggles with writing.

When they introduce process writing—writing about the process of writing—Elbow and Belanoff explain:

The coauthor this book, Peter Elbow, became interested in writing because he went through a long period of writer's block. He had to quit graduate school because he couldn't write his papers. The way he got himself going again (five years later) was by doing process writing about almost every writing session – and discovering what was getting in his way. This process writing grew into Elbow's first book, *Writing Without Teachers*. (*A Community of Writers* 18; *Being*

a Writer 23)

Elbow and Belanoff do not discuss Elbow's struggles with writing extensively, but they do mention it as a means of encouraging students to experiment with process writing and, possibly, benefit from it.

By sharing his experiences with shame and failure as a writer, Elbow establishes his ethos not only with those who have also struggled but also with those who can recognize and value Elbow's honesty and integrity as an author. His openness helps appeal to readers who might otherwise feel overwhelmed with writing. Yet Elbow brings other elements to his books to expand his ethos: his further personalization of the texts through his sharing of his own thoughts and his own writing samples. These instances are very common in *Writing Without Teachers* but become, as his sharing of his experiences does, more subtle in his later texts.

Although Elbow doesn't distance himself from his readers in *Writing With Power*, he clearly reflects a more academic pursuit in terms of audience. Here and in his later coauthored textbooks, Elbow uses a more traditional, instructive tone. He incorporates more examples of student writing, a common feature of traditional textbooks. He does, however, refer occasionally to his experiences in these texts. In *Writing With Power*, for instance, Elbow reflects on his own experience of the direct writing process, a process where the writer spends half the time writing raw material and the other half revising:

As I wrote many parts of this book, for example, I didn't have my thinking clear or worked out by any means, I couldn't have made an outline at gunpoint, and I cared deeply about the results. But I knew that there was lots of *stuff* there swirling around in my head ready to go down on paper. I used the direct process. I just wrote down everything that came to mind and went on to revise. ("The Direct" 30)

While admitting this difficulty and offering this suggestion, Elbow relates his own process while providing the reader with a finished product, the book he or she holds in hand. This establishes, for the reader, the success of the direct writing process and helps him or her see that the process isn't merely a process to use for student assignments, but rather a practice that is beneficial in all types of writing, from memos to books.

As noted earlier, *Writing With Power* includes examples of student writing, but Elbow still incorporates some of his early writing, which helps to further personalize his text. Discussing a point in time when he “was trying to say some things . . . that were very important to [him] about teaching and learning,” Elbow talks about how “the writing was going terribly. The whole thing was a mess” (210). He provides a note—freewrite—he wrote to himself once his writing “went better”:

6/11/71. I'm correcting a near-to-final draft. Finally I'm making it much clearer and better. I'm rearranging sentences and points so they finally work. I had it all screwed up—my interpretation all mixed in with my information in an ineffective way—and my information unclear. Then a series of rearrangings make things fall into place with a click. (“Three Tricky” 210)

By providing his readers with examples of his own writing and interjecting his thoughts and ideas alongside his theory, Elbow reminds readers that he is an ordinary person, like them, with strengths and limitations as a writer. Additionally, Elbow acknowledges that while his methods work for him, they may not be helpful for all writers, hence his emphasis on the importance of introspection via process writing. In *Writing Without Teachers* Elbow describes how he would write about “stuckpoints” and “breakthroughs” in his own writing: “I recommend this practice. If you keep your own data, you may be able to build your own theory of how *you* can succeed in writing since my theory of how I can succeed may not work for you” (“The

Process” 18). Elbow’s invitation to readers to build their own theory of what works best for them is characteristic of effort to accommodate the needs of diverse readers.

Elbow’s description of process writing in *Writing With Power* parallels his description in *Writing Without Teachers*. Elbow tells his readers, “There are certain times in the natural cycle of any enterprise—a job, a trip, a relationship, a course of study, a writing task—when it is useful to stop and write out some of your thoughts and feelings” (“Writing While” 97). Elbow highlights using this writing at the start, with stuck points, with breakthroughs, and as a final reflection. Of stuck points and breakthroughs, he states:

Stuck points. When you are stuck at any task, you can often get going again by writing down everything that is going on. When did things start to go wrong? How would you describe the problem from where you now sit? Tell the sequence of events inside you; outside you. Even if this writing doesn’t solve the problem, it heightens your awareness of this kind of problem so that next time you’ll notice it sooner and deal with it better.

Breakthroughs. It’s such a relief to get out of a jam that you just want to forge ahead. But if you use some of that relief to fuel a short writing-break to tell yourself what you did right or what the necessary ingredients seemed to be—while it’s fresh in your mind—you will be more in charge next time and not just have to trust luck. (97-8)

Process writing also plays a major role in Elbow’s coauthored textbooks with Belanoff. In the first chapters of both *A Community of Writers* and *Being a Writer*, Elbow and Belanoff introduce a process journal as a requirement and as a tool for students.

We ask you to keep a process journal for this course.
 . . . We make regular process writing a requirement
 in our courses. . . .

The best time to do process writing is right after you have been writing. The goal is to find out what really happened—the facts of what occurred on that particular occasion. Don’t struggle for conclusions; trust that they’ll come.

We spoke earlier of doing process writing in the form of a

story of your writing session. Another good approach is to plunge into an exploration of what was most difficult or frustrating for you in that session. Explore what happened: What led to this difficulty? How did you deal with it? Tell everything you can. Interesting insights will come. (*A Community of Writers* 14; *Being a Writer* 19)

In emphasizing the value of process writing, Elbow encourages students to draw on their own experiences with writing—to observe and value what works well for them. This makes his textbooks not only appealing to writers who can benefit from his writing process but also to writers who need to discover their own composing preferences and strategies, opening the text to a more diverse readership.

In all of his textbooks, Elbow seeks to address the needs of a variety of writers and to develop an invitational rhetoric. This goal is particularly evident in *Writing Without Teachers*, with its strongly autobiographical tone, personalized nature, and empowering ideas about introspection. But Elbow still manages to utilize these features in his more traditional textbooks, allowing him to continue to address and invite a diverse group of readers.

In this chapter, I've explored the rhetorical strategies that play a key role in all of Elbow's textbooks. I've demonstrated that even as his rhetorical situation and genre have changed, Elbow has found ways to embrace and address the needs of a variety of readers in these textbooks. As I move into the next chapter, I will illustrate similar trends in Elbow's work while discussing his essay collections: *Embracing Contraries: Explorations in Learning and Teaching*, *Everyone Can Write: Essays Toward a Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching Writing*, and *Vernacular Eloquence: What Speech Can Bring to Writing*. These collections—particularly *Everyone Can Write* and *Vernacular Eloquence*—have raised additional challenges for Elbow, who hopes to address a scholarly audience while remaining accessible to general readers.

Chapter 3:

Making the Academy “More Open to More People”:

A Rhetorical Analysis of Audience Awareness in Peter Elbow’s Essay Collections

In the introduction of his first section in his 2000 collection, *Everyone Can Write: Essays toward a Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching Writing*, Elbow writes, “My mission in life is to change the academy: to make it more supportive to students, more open to more people, and more hospitable to a larger part of the human creature” (2). Elbow’s scholarship embodies this mission and does so in rhetorically sophisticated ways. In my previous chapter, I explored Elbow’s ability to address a broad and diverse audience in his single and coauthored textbooks. From sharing his experiences of shame and failure with his students, to personalizing his texts, to empowering his students by suggesting introspection into their own writing processes, Elbow opens his textbooks to readers with diverse needs and expectations. And while the needs and expectations of the readers of his essay collections—*Embracing Contraries*, *Everyone Can Write*, and *Vernacular Eloquence*—differ in some significant ways, I see Elbow making careful and conscious rhetorical decisions to address these needs.

As I mentioned in chapter 1, and quote again here, in the general introduction to *Everyone Can Write*, Elbow suggests that, “[The] split between scholars and teachers bears pondering” (xvi). This chapter will focus on how Elbow negotiates this split in his essay collections. In looking at these collections, I examine how Elbow is able to balance his desire to reach a more scholarly audience and his commitment to addressing and including a diverse readership.

I will first examine *Embracing Contraries* and *Everyone Can Write*, collections that primarily include previously published work. In analyzing these collections, I will demonstrate how Elbow attempts to open these scholarly essays to a broader audience by providing helpful contexts for these essays—and in some cases by revising them. *Vernacular Eloquence* differs from these collections in that the material wasn't published previously in academic journals, so Elbow is, simultaneously, approaching scholars with new material and attempting to reach a broad audience. I will discuss a number of strategies Elbow employs in this collection, including the decision to separate his more theoretical work appearing within the text into shaded boxes which readers can choose to skip, skim, or read.

Before discussing these collections I want to elaborate on Elbow's views of academia. First, I want to establish that by the time he wrote *Everyone Can Write*, Elbow identified as an academic writing to academics, something he says he didn't do before. Next, I want to establish that Elbow, while identifying as an academic, doesn't exclude readers through academic discourse, which, as I see it, is why he works so graciously to include a variety of readers.

As Elbow explains in *Everyone Can Write*, "I tend to identify in opposition to academics or away from the academy. And yet I am an academic through and through. Once I finally came back to the academy, after feeling I'd been kicked out, I've never wanted to leave it" (2). Yet Elbow doesn't completely concur—as most probably don't—with some aspects of academia. In Elbow's case, his discussions of academic language reveal a conflict between his being an academic and his desire to address a diverse audience. In his essay "Reflections on Academic Discourse: How It Relates to Freshmen and Colleagues," Elbow explains, "I love what's in academic discourse: learning, intelligence, sophistication—even mere facts and naked

summaries of articles and books; I love reasoning, inference and evidence; I love theory. But I hate academic discourse” (235). Elbow continues:

Academic discourse . . . teaches a set of social and authority relations: to talk to each other as professionals in such a way as to exclude ordinary people. That is, in the academic convention of using more formal language and longer and more complex sentences with more subordinate clauses . . . academics are professing that they are professionals who do not invite conversation with nonprofessionals or ordinary people. Many groups act this way. . . . It may be common for groups to try to prove that they are professional by means of this kind of exclusionary language, but I wonder if we really want to teach this discourse-stance once we notice the message it sends: “We don’t want to talk to you or hear from you unless you use our language.” (Ostensibly the goal is to exclude the *hoi polloi*, but perhaps there is also some fear of intellectual nonacademics who may be more thoughtful and learned.) (247-8)

Elbow resists the urge to exclude readers with academic language, but this brings with it ramifications. As Elbow states in the introduction to *Everyone Can Write*, “Some scholars don’t consider even my recent essays as works of scholarship” (xvi). While Elbow doesn’t elaborate on why his work isn’t accepted as scholarly by some in the field, he clearly relates a link in *Vernacular Eloquence* to casual, conversational speech and its inadmissibility in scholarly journals: “I’ve learned to use my spoken language for all early and middle drafts, and even during much revising. And I use a good deal of it in this book since I haven’t tried to get it accepted in a scholarly journal” (“How Does Revising” 353).

This statement reveals that Elbow has thought a good deal about the limitations, as well as the advantages, of publishing one’s work in scholarly journals. It also helps explain why Elbow was drawn to collecting work previously published in scholarly forums and republishing them with additional commentary in *Embracing Contraries*. The simple gathering of his

academic journals into a collection makes the publications more accessible to a teacher or learner who isn't subscribing to scholarly journals.

As discussed in Chapter 1, Elbow returned to his Ph.D. studies to “speak out about higher education,” and one of Elbow's most significant concerns in this regard is the restrictive nature of academic discourse. Moving into my discussion, I will demonstrate why, as I see it, Elbow's rhetorical decisions while constructing his collections work to build inclusive texts. Aside from personalizing his texts with his own experiences and using a more accessible, nonacademic discourse, Elbow clarifies and extends his thoughts for his readers, provides shorter pieces alongside his longer and more theoretical essays, uses introductions to his chapters, and (in the case of *Vernacular Eloquence*) places theoretical discussion in shaded boxes.

Elbow's essay collections, like his textbooks, attempt to make the academy, or at least his work in the academy, “more open to more people.” As noted earlier, the pieces included in *Embracing Contraries* and *Everyone Can Write* are, mostly, Elbow's previously published scholarly articles. Simply gathering them together makes them more accessible since teachers and others who might not subscribe to journals like *College Composition and Communication* might—as a result of being familiar with Elbow's earlier work—choose to read these collections. Elbow comments on this in the introduction to *Embracing Contraries*: “I've gathered here a small selection of essays about learning and teaching that I've written over almost twenty years. I risk the hubris of collecting them in a book . . . because I think they could be of use if they were more readily available” (ix). But Elbow doesn't simply compile essays for the collection; he works to establish understanding and inclusion for his readers.

In the introduction to *Everyone Can Write*, Elbow charts his development as an author and as a scholar:

When I wrote previous books (most notably *Writing Without Teachers* and *Writing With Power*, Oxford 1973 and 1981) I certainly was an academic, but those books didn't feel academic or theoretical—to me or to readers. I was not writing *as an academic but rather as a writer and a teacher*. I was not writing to academics but rather to everyone and anyone who has ever tried to write. When I wrote most of the essays collected in *Embracing Contraries* (Oxford 1986), I was trying to write to anyone who has ever tried to teach or learn” (xv).

Writing to “anyone who has ever tried to teach or learn,” Elbow, as he says in *Embracing Contraries*' introduction, “largely omitted any work about writing or the teaching of writing” in an attempt to open his discussions to multiple disciplines (ix). For example, when Elbow discusses using more than one factor in grading in “Evaluating Students More Accurately,” he talks about how math teachers might respond:

“I teach mathematics! The grades I give are the sum of clear and unambiguous tests on mathematics!” Such a teacher could easily use the one category that fits best, perhaps “understanding central concepts” or “effectiveness on examinations.” But one could fairly say to him that if he cannot distinguish between the different cognitive or heuristic ingredients of his examinations, he proves he is no teacher of mathematics, however skillful he may be at computing correct answers. (*Embracing* 175)

Elbow's approach is multidisciplinary; he wants to include a broad audience. But as he indicates in the introduction to *Embracing Contraries*, he also wants to make a place in the academy for himself and others like him, those who “don't ‘do things right,’ they don't fit well into the existing models of thinking and intelligence in schools and colleges” (xiv):

Even if all these students and teachers were as perversely blessed as I seem to have been with an unrelenting hunger to be accepted in the academy, that wouldn't be enough. For none of us can function at our best unless we are *seen* as smart by ourselves and others. One of the main reasons why smart students function so well is that they are *seen* as smart. We cannot take advantage of the complicated patterns of intelligence unless we experience them working for us,

not against us.

Thus, these essays have a kind of subtheme which often I was not fully conscious of as I wrote—a kind of table-turning or underdogism—namely, that people who experience themselves as dumb, and are seen that way, are really smart. (I have also been tempted by the vindictive corollary, but I think I now see that *everyone* is smart—even, grudgingly, those who think they are.) Thus I cannot escape an *ad hominem* critical reading of this book, for in the end I am really engaged in trying to work out a definition of good teaching and learning that doesn't exclude me. (xiv)

In trying to work out a place for his type of thinking, Elbow also appeals to others who don't relate to the conventional molds of teaching and learning and seeks to include them and himself in the academy. As in his other texts, Elbow appeals to, as Wendy Bishop said in her 2002 essay "My Favorite Balancing Act," the "disenfranchised"—but he doesn't exclude the enfranchised in his pursuits (240).

In trying to build a text supportive of a variety of readers—"anyone who has ever tried to teach or learn" includes all levels of teachers and learners—Elbow organizes *Embracing Contraries* into four sections: "The Learning Process," "The Teaching Process," "The Evaluation Process," and "Contraries and Inquiry." Preceding each section, Elbow introduces the essays included in that section and discusses its overall theme, providing details about his experiences to help his readers situate his thinking. For example, introducing "The Teaching Process," Elbow explains:

In these essays I tend to speak of myself as a teacher, but it seems clear to me now that whatever *sense* I manage to make about this tricky matter of authority probably comes from the fact that I am also speaking about myself as a learner—my past self as a student (and how I reacted to *my* teachers) as well as my present self as someone who learns or doesn't learn in my own classroom. (65)

Very conversational in tone, these introductions further help to personalize the text for the readers, which is important as Elbow brings these articles from academic journals into a more publicly accessible collection.

In addition to the section introductions, Elbow also introduces each essay. Again, these introductions are casual and establish the context of the essay and often elaborate on Elbow's experiences. Introducing the essay "Nondisciplinary Courses and the Two Roots of Real Learning," Elbow describes his experiences at Franconia College and how those experiences inspired him to return to graduate school. He reveals his interest in cognitive psychology, noting that he studied it the first summer he returned to graduate school, and, later, he describes how the essay results from these experiences (6):

I'm arguing [in the essay] that, whereas plain, garden variety, in-school learning consists of the ability to apply academic concepts to academic contexts, "real learning" consists of two further skills: the ability to apply known concepts more widely—to situations never found in school; and the ability to *invent* new concepts never presented in school. By fostering these two skills, nondisciplinary teaching can teach the ability to learn. (6-7)

In presenting the context of the essay, Elbow builds a foundation for readers. These discussions facilitate understanding by giving the reader a glimpse of the experiences that encouraged the essay and by offering a succinct summary. These introductions also give readers options in terms of how they choose to read Elbow's collection. Some readers—scholars for instance—might read the collection from start to finish. Other readers—teachers familiar with and interested in Elbow's work but limited in time—might read the introductions as a substitute for reading at least some of the chapters, or they might read them to determine which chapters they want to

read. The presence of the introductions gives readers both a helpful context and a guide for deciding how and what to read.

Elbow's introductions provide context and situate readers, thus representing a reader-friendly strategy consistent with his goal of addressing the widest and most diverse audience. Furthermore, Elbow's moments of self-disclosure, when he brings his personal experience into the introductions, strengthens his ethos with his audience as it does in his textbooks. These strategies are also evident in his subsequent collections *Everyone Can Write* and *Vernacular Eloquence*, but in these essay collections Elbow positions himself as a scholar and part of academia. In seeing himself this way, however, Elbow doesn't move exclusively towards a more academic audience. Instead, he continues to construct rhetorically sophisticated texts that accommodate a diverse readership while also addressing his scholarly audience.

Elbow's 2000 collection, *Everyone Can Write: Essays Toward a Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching Writing*, displays the pivotal role the theory was played in Elbow's development as a scholar and his determination to respond to his critics: "As I wrote many of these essays, I was indeed trying to prove myself a scholar and member of a discipline—not just someone writing to writers, students, and teachers" (xvi). Here in the introduction, Elbow attempts to reach a more scholarly audience, some of whom are resistant to his approach:

It's a tricky dance. In some essays I start right off with my dukes up, fighting the enemy in defense of the underdog ("We need careless writing, wrong words, bad writing! Down with quality!), and then having done that, I climb to higher ground and build a larger argument on the principle of balance and fairness and nonexclusion ("Of course, we need to strive for quality, care, criticism. I myself spend far more time revising than generating."). (xvii)

Yet he wants his essays to continue to be relevant to general readers. One way he does this is by revising his previously published essays:

Where I felt I could make my thoughts clearer, I've made changes from what was originally published. I've done a great deal of rephrasing, a fair amount of cutting, and a bit of restructuring. I reworked extensively my essay on binary thinking. But I didn't change the points or arguments in any essays. (xxiii)

Here, Elbow distinctly implies that he attempts to make his work clearer, more understandable, for his readers. As I see it, he's making the language more accommodating to his general readers while maintaining the academic integrity of his work.

In his "Note to General Readers," in the introduction, Elbow goes out of his way to suggest productive strategies for approaching his text:

In most of the pieces gathered in this book, I am speaking to teachers of writing and members of the academic field of composition or writing. Other readers—general readers who want to explore the nature of writing and language—will find all the essays clear and direct, I think, but they should probably start with the following pieces. (xiii)

Following this, Elbow suggests different essays for the academics, the general readers, and the teachers of writing. By guiding his "general" readers, Elbow encourages them to engage with his text with what he believes will most interest them.

Everyone Can Write is organized into six sections, each containing three or four essays. The sections include "Premises and Foundations," "The Generative Dimension," "Speech, Writing, and Voice," "Discourses," "Teaching," and "Evaluation and Grading." Also, Elbow includes "fragments," shortened versions of previously published essays, at the end of each chapter. These fragments enable him to develop his ideas and to respond to criticism, while also allowing for a break between the longer and more theoretical essays. The fragment that

concludes the first section, for instance, is “The Believing Game: A Challenge after Twenty-Five Years,” a short section from Elbow’s introduction to the 1998 edition of *Writing Without Teachers*.

Each section is also prefaced by an introduction, as is the case with *Embracing Contraries*. While the first section’s introduction is very similar to the introductions in *Embracing Contraries*, the other introductions differ in that they answer what Elbow sees as criticisms of himself and his work. Interestingly, in the remaining five sections of *Everyone Can Write*, Elbow inscribes a self-reproach in italics at the top of each introduction and offers a response. For instance, to introduce his chapter on teaching, he offers this reproach:

Peter, you’re always telling that story of how you quit graduate school and felt you never wanted to deal with books or classrooms again, but then discovered that you liked teaching—that it wasn’t books and classrooms you hated, but being a student. Enough already. Don’t become an old geezer repeating old stories. This comfy one just masks the old authority game: you hate following orders but you’re happy once you can give them. (320)

Elbow responds in a conversational tone:

Well, it’s true, I am getting old. And what you call my “comfy” story is precious to me. And it’s true that I hate following orders. But as for giving orders, I’m not quite happy doing it. I’m continually perplexed, frustrated, and dissatisfied by teaching—and especially by wielding authority and giving orders. (320)

What ensues is a discussion of “teacher authority and student empowerment” and the paradox that ensues in the classroom (320).

Elbow frequently situates his readers in his collections, and the reproach/response approach introducing these chapters allows Elbow to do this. These introductions allow his critics to see his responses to different accusations and also provide context to those not familiar

with the criticism. In doing this, the readers understand the premises of the essays and the criticism that corresponds to them. Elbow's rhetorical choices in these prefaces demonstrate his ability to ponder the "split between scholars and teachers" while also demonstrating his loyalty to his other readers: learners and the general public. Further, by offering a collage approach via the fragments that conclude each section, Elbow is not only able to include more of his work, he is able to offer respite for his readers while making a strong point. For instance, in *Everyone Can Write*, the fragment "Can Personal Expressive Writing Do the Work of Academic Writing?" discusses how objectivity in academic writing "is passé. Few academics now believe that they can achieve writing objectivity—or that this view from everywhere-and-nowhere is even a desirable goal" (315).

Before turning to Elbow's most recent study I need to acknowledge that his ability to collect, comment on, and re-situate his earlier work—and convince Oxford University Press to publish it—is a sign of professional and scholarly privilege. What writer wouldn't appreciate the opportunity to re-present—and thus in effect re-argue the value—of his or her earlier work? Few writers and scholars are able to persuade editors and publishers that a readership for such a collection exists. Elbow also has clearly benefitted from his long association with Oxford University Press, which has published all of his book-length studies with the exception of his and Belanoff's coauthored textbooks. Nevertheless, I would argue that Elbow's attentiveness to addressing the needs and expectations of multiple audiences over his long career is not just a sign of privilege but also reflects a profound drive on Elbow's part to connect with readers, one that those who associate Elbow primarily with expressivism, with its emphasis on individual self expression, might easily miss.

I now turn to Elbow's latest study, *Vernacular Eloquence: What Speech Can Bring to Writing*. As I noted earlier, *Vernacular Eloquence* does not include previously published work and represents, as Elbow points out in his introduction, eight years of research and writing. Elbow's goals in *Vernacular Eloquence* are ambitious: he wants his readers to "rethink the very nature of speech and writing and how they relate to each other. Above all, I want to rethink what our culture means by *literacy*" (5). In the years since Elbow published *Writing Without Teachers*, literacy has become a central topic and theme for scholars in rhetoric and writing. In this book, Elbow is clearly attempting to connect with scholars doing cutting-edge research on literacy while also continuing to address the needs and expectations of teachers and writers who may not be so involved with scholarly writing.

As was the case with *Embracing Contraries* and *Everyone Can Write*, Elbow organizes his collection into sections, providing an introduction for each section. And as he did with *Everyone Can Write*, Elbow inserts shorter pieces, this time between each chapter, called "Literacy Stories":

Between most chapters I have inserted very short "Literacy Stories." They sketch moments in the history of writing and literacy at different periods in history and in different places around the globe. I want to immerse readers in some wildly diverse ways in which humans have used written language.

I also intend these stories as entertaining interludes or changes of pace from the longer discursive chapters. . . . But cumulatively, I trust they will reinforce the larger project of the book. I want to jiggle the widespread assumption that there is some kind of best or Platonic form for writing—or that changes in writing always follow some kind of natural evolutionary process. In particular, I'm trying to show that changes in writing and literacy standards can often come suddenly and are likely to result from strong cultural and political forces. (10)

As the fragments in *Everyone Can Write* do, these literacy stories break up the longer, more theoretical pieces, offering an “interlude,” as Elbow says. More significantly, they allow Elbow’s readers to come to see how written language has been used and to open his more resistant readers to Elbow’s larger argument. Overall, they offer another way readers can negotiate the reading of his text.

The literacy stories cover a variety of topics, and while Elbow admits to not being an expert in all the areas he covers in the stories, he is able to further the discussion of his topic with anecdotes that make the work more accessible as a whole (11). For instance, after talking about some of the objections that academics may have with using everyday speech for writing, Elbow offers the literacy story “Everyone Complains about Language, but No One Does Anything about It—Except Now and Then.” In this narrative, Elbow discusses the unique history of the Korean language and the central role that King Sejong (CE 1446) played in the development of a written Korean language. Elbow explains that despite several attempts to override this system, such as during the Japanese occupancy of Korea during World War II, Koreans have kept the system in use. Elbow says:

Korea presents us with a remarkable example of a person with great political power utterly changing a writing system in order to make writing and reading more widely available to people without privilege. And in the face of subsequent resistance, the country hung on to this form of writing—a form that invites speech for writing. It’s a lovely example showing that it’s not really so hard to make a progressive change in writing. (197)

Stories such as this not only provide respite to readers engaged in Elbow’s theories and ideas, they provide real-life examples that relate to his theories and help establish the credibility of Elbow’s claims and theories.

Vernacular Eloquence is more tightly focused than Elbow's other collections, as a quick overview of the table of contents suggests. It is divided into four sections, each of which Elbow describes in the introduction. In part one, "What's Best in Speaking and Writing," Elbow discusses "the various advantages in both speech and writing as human ways of using language"; part two, "Speaking onto the Page: A Role for the Tongue in the Early Stages of Writing," focuses on freewriting "during the early exploratory and drafting stages of writing"; part three, "Reading Aloud to Revise: A Role for the Tongue during Late Stages of Writing," discusses reading aloud as part of revision; and in part four, "Vernacular Literacy," Elbow explores, "how our culture will begin to take multiple written versions of English in stride and how this change will actually *advance* literacy in the true sense" (9-10). Throughout, Elbow maintains a strong focus on developing his overall argument while also offering the literacy stories, essays, shaded scholarly discussions, and multiple pathways his readers can choose through the text.

It is perhaps fitting that Elbow's most recent work is in some ways his most ambitious—at least in terms of audience. In the introduction to the collection, Elbow explicitly discusses his goals vis-à-vis audience. The following represents Elbow's response to a self-inscribed question: "Is this a book for a broad audience or for teachers and scholars?" (8). Elbow's response is telling.

When I wrote *Writing Without Teachers* in 1973, I didn't worry about teachers and scholars. I was trying to stand on a hilltop and shout to everyone who wants to write. But teachers and scholars eventually read my book and it affected the way many of them thought about writing and taught it. This time I'm making my job harder by trying for a more diverse audience: not just writers and potential writers, but teachers too—and also scholars and researchers

Trickier still, I'm also trying to write for people in the general intellectual community who think about writing and

literacy but don't care about the scholarship. I'm thinking about people who read articles and reviews about writing in *The New Yorker* and the *New York Times* by writers like Louis Menand or Adam Gopnik; or books about literacy like Sven Birkert's *The Gutenberg Elegies*, Lynne Truss's *Eats, Shoots, & Leaves*, Richard Lanham's *The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology, and the Arts*, and Robert Darnton's *The Case for Books: Past, Present, and Future*; or books about language and thinking by writers like Steven Pinker, Oliver Sacks, and Malcolm Gladwell. (8)

It takes confidence for a writer to put himself in the same company as Steven Pinker, Robert Darnton, Oliver Sacks, and others. While some readers might view this statement as hubristic, I would argue that it reflects the depth and breadth of Elbow's commitment to reaching diverse audiences.

This commitment is demonstrated in the inventiveness with which Elbow approaches the needs of general readers. The following is a particularly thoughtful reflection in that regard:

But how can I speak to scholars without clogging up the text for general readers? I won't use footnotes, but I have put bits of scholarly reference or discussion into shaded boxes—right at the spot on the page where they pertain. Readers can simply glance at a box when they encounter it and make a quick decision about whether to read it, skim it, or skip it. (8)

Again, Elbow allows flexibility in the reading, providing a more practical reading of his text for those not interested in theory or academic discussion.

While Elbow avoids clogging the central text with "scholarly reference or discussion" with the shaded boxes, it doesn't mean that he is lowering his standards or watering down his text for general readers. In fact, he points how much he values theory and how much he hopes that all of his readers will find the shaded boxes of value:

I love the information, ideas, and complications in these boxes and deep down hope that everyone will read them, but I recognize that many readers will simply want to follow

my main line of thinking and not be slowed down. But the material in the boxes is not usually very technical and will often interest general readers. (9)

As in his other texts, even when presenting theory or scholarly information, Elbow makes the text manageable for his readers. For example, when he discusses “our culture’s sense that ‘serious writing’—especially school and academic writing—is supposed to be fairly impersonal,” Elbow adds a shaded box:

In the next chapter I’ll explore linguistic involvement strategies and show how serious writing can give a sense of presence or even intimacy. People notice this most when the writer adds personal elements. But it’s possible to convey a subtle but effective sense of presence *without* including any explicitly personal details—without even necessarily using “I.” It’s a matter of using many of the fine-grained syntactic features in *spoken* language that convey a sense of presence to readers. (“Speaking as a Process” 69)

Other shaded boxes expand on or contextualize a quote in the main text, still others provide more theory—but the shaded box discussions remain approachable even to general readers.

In fact, Elbow’s tone, while not as casual as in *Writing Without Teachers*, reflects his commitment to bringing aspects of spoken language into academic writing. Elbow backs up claims with quotes, leans heavily towards signposting, and presents theories in shaded boxes so that readers can choose whether or not to read them. But his writing, overall, remains more conversational than scholarly and includes many places where he inserts his personal freewriting and discusses his processes and thoughts, much as he did in his textbooks and in the introductions in his earlier collections. Here is a particularly striking example of Elbow’s bringing his own freewriting into his text:

At one time as I was trying to revise one of these chapters, I got confused about what I was really trying to say. So I did what I often do. I stopped and hit the CAPS LOCK key

(to signal *Time out from “real” writing*) and simply blurted a freewritten response to my perplexity:

TIME OUT. IN A WAY I’M JUST INTERESTED IN EASINESS. DOESN’T HAVE TO BE SPEECH. BUT SPEECH IS THE EASIEST LANGUAGE WE HAVE. BUT ACTUALLY I AM INTERESTED IN SPEECH. CAUSE SPEECH HAS VIRTUES I WANT TO HARNESS

This quick blurt helped me realize I that I was tangled up between two different main themes, speech and easiness. The blurt helped me to see how they overlap but differ, and start to figure out how they relate to each other. (“Speaking as a Process” 66)

By using his own examples and discussing his own process, Elbow gives his readers a sense of him as a person rather than simply as an author, and he also demonstrates his own recommended writing process in action.²

Vernacular Eloquence, while slightly different from Elbow’s earlier collections, utilizes many of the same rhetorical strategies that Elbow relies upon in earlier work. This continuity is especially clear if one considers how Elbow separated his theoretical material in his first book *Writing Without Teachers* via his appendix essay and how he uses shaded boxes to separate the theoretical text for his readers in *Vernacular Eloquence*. The shaded boxes help maintain a flow in the reading for those readers not interested in the theory while the literacy stories, similar to the fragments in *Everyone Can Write*, offer readers an opportunity to explore the uses of writing in other cultures and other time periods. This demonstrates considerable skill and awareness of audience.

As with his textbooks, Elbow works hard in his essay collections to accommodate a variety of readers with different levels of interest in theory and in academia in general.

² Elbow doesn’t mention his struggles as a writer in *Vernacular Eloquence*’s main text but does so in an appendix essay: “How Freewriting Went from Dangerous to No Big Deal in the Composition and Rhetoric Community.”

Throughout this chapter and the previous chapter, I've shown that this commitment to audience awareness and response is a continuing thread throughout Elbow's career. Even as Elbow's personal and professional situation has evolved, and even as he has worked in multiple genres, he finds ways to address diverse audiences, and has done so even during and after the theory wars where his work was the subject of intense criticism.

This consistent attention to audience strikes me as an important aspect of Elbow's scholarly and pedagogical contribution—and yet it has received little attention, particularly in the context of the many discussions of Elbow's status as (in terms of Berlin's taxonomy) an expressivist. I hope that my thesis encourages scholars to shift the conversation about Elbow's work to the rhetorical commitments and strengths he manifests in his writing. To support this endeavor, in my conclusion I will demonstrate that the pedagogical advice that Elbows offers to writers in regards to audience to a great extent parallels his own practices as a writer. Despite what the title of his well-known essay “Closing My Eyes as I Speak: An Argument for Ignoring Audience” may imply, Elbow is committed to teaching his own students about the needs of their audience(s).

In discussing Elbow's rhetorical choices in regards to audience, I have illustrated a conscious awareness on Elbow's part to encompass a diverse readership that, even while attempting to address academics, doesn't exclude Elbow's more general readers. In *Everyone Can Write*, Elbow states:

It strikes me that academic discourse is one of the least powerful discourses in our culture In academic discourse, better tends to mean longer and more complex, but these qualities are usually vices in the discourse of power. It's my sense that the discourse of power in society is sometimes quite natural and personal. (“Discourses” 232)

In choosing to make his texts more personal and avoiding the complexities of academic language, Elbow embodies his mission with his own work: to make the academy “more open to more people.”

Chapter 4:

“So What Does All This Mean?”³:

Closing Thoughts

Throughout his career, Peter Elbow has consistently demonstrated a commitment to addressing a diverse and broad audience. In his textbooks, he utilizes his own experiences of failure to help establish his ethos and to connect with readers, and he consistently personalizes his texts in ways that facilitate understanding: through personal reflections that provide insight into his theories and practices; a conversational tone that is invitational to all readers; and his personal writing, in the form of freewrites and process writing, as examples.

In the collections where Elbow reprints previously published work, as he does in *Embracing Contraries: Explorations in Learning and Teaching* and *Everyone Can Write: Essays Toward a Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching Writing*, he similarly anticipates the needs of his readers by providing introductions to and summaries of the material he presents. In his most recent books, Elbow has faced the challenge of addressing scholarly audiences while also writing in such a way that general readers can engage his texts, leading to his decision to separate his more scholarly material into shaded boxes in *Vernacular Eloquence: What Speech Can Bring to Writing* and to provide a note to guide his general readers in *Everyone Can Write*.

Throughout his career, Elbow has shown a commitment to, as the title of his most recent book suggests, vernacular eloquence as a goal of academic writing. In this regard, Elbow might be viewed as somewhat utopian. In *Vernacular Eloquence*, Elbow optimistically suggests that “Before too long, academics will finally learn to exploit comfortable, vernacular language to

³ Quoted from the conclusion of Elbow’s “Closing My Eyes as I Speak: An Argument for Ignoring Audience,” 108.

make even their academic and scholarly writing clearer, stronger, and livelier” (“A New Culture” 378). As I hope to have shown in this thesis, Elbow’s own scholarly and pedagogical work certainly embodies this goal. Scholars might question whether Elbow has succeeded in challenging the norms of academic writing, which do not seem to have shifted significantly in recent years—but they cannot deny his influence on a wide range of writers and readers. My discussion of Elbow’s work also calls attention to the radical nature of his goals, for, as Elbow observes in *Everyone Can Write*, “My mission in life is to change the academy: to make it more supportive to students, more open to more people, and more hospitable to a larger part of the human creature” (“Premises” 2). This is an important and laudable goal that has often been undervalued by scholars critiquing Elbow’s work.

In this concluding chapter, I want to turn from a rhetorical reading of Elbow’s work to consider the pedagogical advice Elbow offers to both beginning and advanced writers. As I do so, I continue to resist placing labels on Elbow’s work—expressivist or not—and instead call attention to the extent to which Elbow’s own rhetorical choices in regards to his audience parallel his pedagogical ideas and practices.

As part of this discussion, I will address Elbow’s recommendation that at times writers might do well to ignore audience, especially if an awareness of audience inhibits their writing.

For instance, in *Writing With Power*, Elbow tells readers:

Start off by thinking carefully about the audience (if there is one) and the purpose for this piece of writing. Doing so may help you figure out exactly what you need to say. But if it doesn’t, then let yourself put them out of mind. You may find that you get the most benefit from ignoring your audience and purpose at this early stage of the writing process. (“The Direct Writing Process” 26)

I will argue that while Elbow emphasizes the strategic value—for himself and for other writers—of ignoring audience at certain moments in the writing process, this does not represent a unilateral dismissal of audience.

Indeed, Elbow often calls attention to the audience's importance. In *Writing With Power*, Elbow reminds his readers that writers and readers are often solitary, and therefore, readers require special consideration:

Not paying enough attention to your audience is a problem inherent in the nature of writing itself. After all, in speaking we have our audience right there, hearing each word as we speak it. We can scarcely forget its needs. But writing is solitary. The readers aren't with us as we put the words on paper so we are liable to use only our own frame of reference and ignore theirs. By the same token, of course, readers are solitary, too. They don't have us with them as they read and they lack all those cues they would get from watching our movements and hearing our tone of voice and emphasis. In writing we must get the words on the page so clear that there's no need for audio-visual aids. Thus, readers in their solitariness need more of the very thing that writers in their solitariness are most likely to omit. The moral of the story is obvious: pay lots of attention as you write to your audience and its needs. ("Audience"177)

The fact that writing and reading are so often solitary activities may be one reason why Elbow is such an advocate of peer response groups and contributes to his publishing class magazines, which contain finished pieces from each student, in his first year writing courses. As he says in *Being a Writer vs. Being an Academic*, "This may be the single most important feature of the course that helps students begin to experience themselves as members of a community of writers" (380). These class magazines provide the students with a genuine readership and facilitate further discussion of the published essays, which can further their consideration of how their work is perceived by different readers.

Perhaps, Elbow’s most general advice about audience to writers—advice that he offers consistently throughout his work—is the importance of sharing drafts with real, corporeal readers. Elbow emphasizes the importance of letting the writing “speak” for itself:

Above all, never say [in peer-feedback groups] what you want your writing to do, how you want your readers to respond. You’ll destroy any chance of getting trustworthy evidence of whether or not you did it. After you get your audience to tell you how they themselves perceived it, *then* you can ask them how they think some different audience might respond. (“The Teacherless” 101)

By teaching his students to let writing speak for itself, the writer is able to learn when further guidance for the reader is necessary and is able to learn how various audiences react to the text.

Elbow acknowledges that multiple forms of feedback can be helpful for writers. In *Writing With Power*, for instance, Elbow devotes chapters to both reader-based and criterion-based (teacher-like feedback on organization, structure, transitions, error, etc.) feedback and argues that both forms of feedback provide readers with helpful information. Finally, however, Elbow expresses a preference for reader-based feedback:

Reader-based feedback gives you someone saying, “I get mad at you when I read this because I feel you are being arrogant or snotty. You just ski as fast as you can and you don’t give a damn whether I fall down or not as I try to follow you. You never even look back.” Most of the time that kind of reaction helps you more than “Too many abrupt changes, too few clear transitions, too many abstractions without illustrations, and even when you do give illustrations they are not obvious ones.” (“Reflections” 249)

In *Writing With Power*, Elbow offers 41 questions readers can ask themselves when responding to work in progress. Elbow notes that these questions “are just specific practical ways to ask your reader three broad questions about how your words affected him” (“A Catalogue” 255):

- a. What was happening to you, moment by moment, as you were reading the piece of writing?

- b. Summarize the writing: give your understanding of what it says or what happened in it.
- c. Make some images for the writing and the transaction it creates with readers. (255)

In his advice to writers, Elbow emphasizes the importance of valuing the responses of all members of the group and emphasizes the writer's responsibilities in this exchange. In *Writing Without Teachers*, for instance, he points out that:

If you are not learning much about how they really reacted it is probably your fault. Not theirs. If you are too afraid of hearing how they really experienced your words, that fear will come across and they will find some way of not telling you. Also if you don't really listen or take them seriously, that will get across and they will withhold reactions. If you oversimplify and pigeon-hole everybody—saying to yourself, “this is the grammar nut, this is the sentimental one, this is the overly logical one”—this too is a way of not really listening to them: defending yourself against really having their experience. They will feel it and hold back. (“The Teacherless” 104)

This is not to say that Elbow encourages writers to view all responses as equally valid. Rather, he reminds writers that they need to remain open to each reader's response. What worked for one reader may not work for another, but it doesn't mean that any one person's response is less important.

Elbow's understanding of audience is rich and nuanced, as the following excerpt from *Writing With Power* attests:

some of the best writing by beginners comes when they just plunge in with full attention to what they are seeing and saying so that they ignore considerations of audience and point of view. And some of their worst writing—both jumbled and flat—comes from worrying too much about audience all the time. Blindingly full attention to your meaning is what often gets the audience with you. And yet of course it is also true that the most frequent *weakness* in the writing of beginners—especially in expository or nonfiction writing—is too little attention to the needs of readers. It's so easy to take too much for granted and assume that readers

will understand you as they usually do in face-to-face speaking situations. (“Audience”178)

And yet Elbow’s emphasis on audience in his textbooks and his pedagogical advice are seldom noted, perhaps because of the ubiquity of “Closing My Eyes as I Speak: An Argument for Ignoring Audience,” the frequently anthologized article I discussed in the first chapter. James Berlin’s taxonomy, which presents Elbow as a prime exemplar of expressivist rhetoric, may have also encouraged scholars to overlook Elbow’s interest in and commitment to audience. Just the term expressivist implies a much stronger focus on self-expression than on audience.

In “Closing My Eyes as I Speak,” Elbow tells his readers that the audience is a “field of force” that can invigorate or obstruct writing (94). In this chapter I have argued that Elbow’s overall position on audience is more complex than the subtitle of his essay—“An Argument for Ignoring Audience”—suggests. Here, for instance, is Elbow’s closing advice for teachers of writing from this article:

So what does all this mean for teaching? It means that we are stuck with two contrary tasks. One the one hand, we need to help our students enhance the social dimensions of writing: to learn to be *more* aware of audience, to decenter better and learn to fit their discourse better to the needs of readers. Yet it is every bit as important to help them learn the private dimension of writing: to learn to be *less* aware of audience, to put audience needs aside, to use discourse in the desert island mode. And if we are trying to advance contraries, we must be prepared for paradoxes. (108)

Elbow sees both a need to accentuate attention to audience and the “force” it can provide but also recognizes that there are times in the writing process where writers must focus on generating words and ideas, rather than on audience.

In this chapter, I focused on the advice about audience that Elbow gives both novice and experienced writers—advice consistent with his own practices. Elbow clearly emphasizes to his students a need to address audience, but he advises them to do so strategically, considering both where they are in the writing process and their goals in any particular writing situation. This concern with audience has been present from Elbow's earliest published work. In *Writing Without Teachers*, for instance, Elbow explains to his readers that "Writing is not just getting things down on paper, it is getting things inside someone else's head" ("The Teacherless" 76). Elbow recognizes a writer's responsibility to audience and promotes this recognition to readers of his books throughout his work.

From his early decision to include a theoretical essay as an appendix to *Writing Without Teachers* to the shaded theory boxes and literacy stories that appear in *Vernacular Eloquence*, Peter Elbow has demonstrated great rhetorical sensitivity and attentiveness to audience. Over the course of his long career, Elbow's theories and ideas developed and evolved. *Writing Without Teachers* is a trade publication more similar to such books as Anne Lamott's well-known *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* than to traditional composition textbooks. And *Vernacular Eloquence* is an ambitious scholarly work that nevertheless hopes not only to attract general readers but to merit favorable comparison with the works of such writers as Steven Pinker and Sven Bickerts. Yet as I hope to have shown, there are common threads that unite Elbow's major publications.

I hope that my thesis will encourage others to shift the scholarly conversation that surrounds Peter Elbow's work and its reception. It is certainly true that scholars have attempted to appreciate and value Elbow's work on its own merits. I should also acknowledge that Elbow has been a consistent and vigorous advocate of both his own work and his own "story." It is no

accident that a good deal of the essay that appears as Appendix I in *Vernacular Eloquence*, “How Freewriting Went from Dangerous to No Big Deal in the Composition and Rhetoric Community,” focuses yet again on the difficulties that Elbow experienced at a graduate student at Oxford, Harvard, and Brandeis.

I would argue, however, that Elbow’s is such a powerful and important story that it deserves to be retold. Each telling reminds readers, in effect, “I am just like you. I have struggled and despaired over my writing. I have had my writing rejected. And I found a way to go on.” Peter Elbow did find a way to go on as a writer and over the course of multiple decades of work has found ways to share experiences and insights with diverse audiences. And he has demonstrated great rhetorical sensitivity as he has done this.

I hope that this thesis encourages other scholars to consider Elbow’s contributions to the field of rhetoric and writing less through the lens of James Berlin’s taxonomy (however important it was in its time) and more through careful attentiveness to the words on the page and to the rhetorical strategies that they embody. I also hope that my thesis encourages scholars to acknowledge the ambitious nature of Elbow’s scholarly and pedagogical project.

As I mentioned in chapter 1, I remember first reading Elbow’s “Embracing Contraries in the Teaching Process” and appreciating the advice he offered as I struggled with being both an ally and gatekeeper to students. This advice has resonated with me in my career and will continue to influence me in future endeavors. But Elbow’s work has affected me in many other ways as well: his advice to writers was crucial in helping me gather and present the ideas in this thesis; his insights about vernacular eloquence inspire many of my practices with my English language learners and writers unfamiliar with academic language; his thoughts about introspection allow me to empower students struggling with writing or language learning; and

his theories about learning improve my practices as I work with writers of all ages and ability.

It's my hope that this thesis will encourage future readers—whether they be other students like myself, scholars, or readers generally interested in Elbow and his work—to engage his work with renewed interest and insight.

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