Book Review
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WRITING WITH POWER:
Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process
Peter Elbow, Oxford University Press

The key to the value of Peter Elbow's new book, Writing With Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process, is found in the final word of the subtitle: process. At a time when the majority of books on writing still attend primarily to the written product, this book, with its specific suggestions to facilitate the composing process, is a treasure of helpfulness to writers of all kinds and to teachers of writers. In WWP Elbow reformulates the teaching of writing to emphasize the art of generating ideas and information into prose. He clarifies and develops the process approach to writing that he described in his earlier book, Writing Without Teacher (WWT).

Basic to Elbow's approach in both texts are freewriting and feedback groups. Both are important to the invention process—freewriting because it allows the writer to create spontaneously in a writing-as-a-way-of-thinking exploration and feedback groups because they play an important role in helping the writer to revise.

In Writing With Power Elbow expands the ideas in Writing Without Teachers and develops new and related ones. The chapters in WWP on freewriting and the open-ended writing process incorporate much of the material in the earlier book, and WWP includes a much fuller discussion of how and why feedback groups work. In the discussion, Elbow makes an important distinction between criterion-based and reader-based responses and shows how each kind can be helpful to the writer. It is unfortunate, however, that Elbow did not include in the new text the guidelines from "The Teacherless Writing Class" that cause "Elbow" groups to work so well.

There are several changes in emphasis in WWP that advance Elbow's thinking. He insists on more time for reflection, thus allowing the necessary interaction between immersion and perspective that those of us who have used and taught the developmental approach of WWT realized was necessary. His explanation of open-ended writing becomes clearer when compared to the other approaches he suggests. What Elbow describes is a two-step operation which is, essentially, repeated again and again as a piece of writing is coaxed to develop. The operation involves, first, performance of the freewriting, or "focused" freewriting exercise—according to set guidelines. After the exercise is completed, the operation requires the writer to read and reflect on what he or she has written, seeking to identify its "center of gravity." This "center" is then formulated into a statement, and the statement is used as the basis for another focused freewriting exercise.

Elbow also shows more clearly in this book how revision is part of invention. Revising for Elbow is not merely editing, but a vital part of the composing process—really writing again, repairing the text in major ways, re-seeing and re-thinking it. Editing—getting rid of mistakes in grammar and usage—is only the final step of eight in his chapter on quick revising. Minimizing the role of editing may be defensible: it can be argued that students who handle the convention of grammar and usage well do so because they have figured out what they want to say and how they want to say it. One of the interesting results of the freewriting/probemsolving study mentioned above was that the freewriters were superior to the problemsolvers in their handling of conventions of grammar and mechanics.

The most speculative and exploratory sections of the book are "Audience" and "Power in Writing." I found the most powerfully written chapter in these sections to be "Writing for Teachers" and think it should be required reading for every student writer. Elbow captures perfectly teacher reactions to the task of reading papers. Beginning with the telling image of teacher-at-desk-with-papers, Elbow articulates the nuances of the special relationship between composition teacher and student-writer, explaining how the teacher as a captive reader provides a helpful, if unique, audience. He offers good advice on how to tap the teacher's resources while sympathizing with the difficulties of the tasks that students writing for teachers and teachers as critics face.

Elbow's guidelines give us insights into creativity. His techniques stimulate associations and trigger thoughts in a way helpful to any writer, novice or sophisticate. Elbow answers the questions of students who are frustrated with writer's block and who ask, "What should I do when I write?" or "How should I begin?" Elbow relies heavily on the intuitive associations of freewriting to direct the composing process. He also believes we learn to write and revise well by trusting our intuition to select the strong passages. He insists on the value of sharing writing "out loud" because he feels we learn what is good partly "by ear," especially when dealing with tone and voice. The approaches in WWP are derived from Elbow's personal experience and constitute a case study of how he composes. Elbow writes, as most of us do, with some struggle, and his guidelines provide helpful advice about how to proceed with the struggle.

Writing for Elbow is a social act and the notion of writing with power implies communications: finding the right words and the right voice for the writer, material, and audience. His minimizing of the distinction between creative and expository writing is healthy because it asserts that expository prose can also be beautiful and powerful. His perception of writing as an act of giving is natural and reasonable and leads logically to using feedback groups to help with revision.
His great respect for his readers as potential writers and successful authors permeates the text.

Elbow’s value to those of us in Writing Project work is that he articulates a vocabulary and defines an approach for the teaching of process, largely by using his work in writing and teaching as a case study. His new book gives us even more help than his first one and redefines the current disciplinary matrix of the teaching of writing to give at least equal emphasis to process and product. Elbow adopts a voyage metaphor which is particularly apt, for he has recognized, as Writing Project people have, why students often dislike writing. Too often in the past teachers have insisted on helping them, sometimes too vigorously, with the voyage home and left them totally at sea with the voyage out. Elbow shows us that the voyage out, the composing process we call invention, is susceptible to conscious control by formal procedures.

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