tions for the improvement of reading, listening, and giving feedback as these skills may improve group interaction. Though teachers may be tempted to treat such activities mechanically, as skill building exercises only, many of them can serve to sensitize students to the art of communication—how and what we hear, how we present ourselves and how we are perceived. Chapter 9 (“Listening: The Foundation for Sharing”), for example, lists the research findings on good listening, and provides guided activities in which groups can apply those findings to their own behavior. Spear divides listening skills into four dimensions—attending, reflection, drawing out, and connecting—and offers activities for each dimension. In one exercise designed to improve attending, students are given a controversial topic and asked to summarize the previous speaker’s position before explaining their own views. The notes at the end of these chapters (and many other chapters) provide additional resources teachers may wish to use for activities and ideas.

Although Spear concludes her book with a helpful miscellany of suggestions for group work (establishing groups, self-disclosure, movement exercises, modeling, maintaining groups, collaborative problem solving, and recording peer input), she might have provided a more satisfying conclusion by including a student’s work in stages along with commentary and brief transcripts. A first draft, revisions, abbreviated transcripts disclosing peer group discussions of drafts or parts of them, commentary, and a final draft—these might have helped us to envision the actual process of sharing writing, and the fruits of that sharing.

Nevertheless, Karen Spear’s Sharing Writing provides a well-thought-out framework for understanding the role of peer response groups in the writing class. Her transcripts and commentary bring to life the problems and possibilities of collaborative teaching, capturing the sometimes aimless exchanges of response groups as well as the rewarding moments of student discovery and self-reflection. Her delineation of the problems of group work, so fully documented in her transcripts and commentary, lays the groundwork for instituting many of her later ideas and suggestions in a writing class. And, perhaps most importantly, Spear’s book helps us to envision our classes as communities in which it is not what we give, but what we share that enriches each of us, teacher and student alike, and helps us to achieve our fullest potential.

John Maitino teaches English at California State Polytechnic University in Pomona, California, where he also directs the English Education Program.

Chris Anderson

EMBRACING CONTRARIES
by Peter Elbow
Oxford University Press

Peter Elbow’s important new book, Embracing Contraries, consists of twelve essays on cognitive development and pedagogical theory organized under four main headings: “The Learning Process,” “The Teaching Process,” “The Evaluation Process,” and “Contraries and Inquiry.” All but the last essay and an extended excerpt from a peer observation journal have been published previously. Omitted is any work directly about writing or the teaching of writing (on the assumption apparently that this is already widely available in Writing Without Teachers and Writing With Power), though much of the theorizing here has obvious implications for composition practice, forming the theoretical basis for Elbow’s well-known teaching on freewriting, writing groups, and the notion of power or voice in prose.

What compels me about this collection, first, is the “power” and “voice” of Elbow’s own style, his capacity to practice as a writer what he preaches as a writing teacher. Embracing Contraries is a good read in a way that few books about writing ever are. Part of the reason for this is that Elbow is instinctively autobiographical, grounding his observations in who he is as a writer and teacher and dramatizing the processes of his thinking as he works through the implications of his experience. Each essay in the collection is prefaced by a short passage describing the origins of the ideas, the places and scenes and times of the piece in Elbow’s teaching career, so that in the end we have a real sense
of Elbow as a person, a mind in the act of knowing. Within each essay the autobiographical impulse shows as well, particularly in Elbow’s willingness to admit his own biases and enthusiasms and in his use of his own contexts—at MIT or Bard or Evergreen—as representative anecdotes for the larger concerns of the profession. The result is a movie of Elbow’s mind, a narrative with the appeal of any good narrative: concreteness, a developing plot, an engaging ethos.

The other source of the book’s power stylistically is Elbow’s freedom from jargon and his capacity to say things directly and simply that most of us don’t have the courage or brazenness to just come out and say. Of all the people writing in our profession, only Elbow could be the author of sentences like: “I simply tried to imitate the good teachers I’d had—to be Socrates and a good guy at the same time”; “The one sure thing is that teaching is sexual”; “Much teaching behavior really stems from an unwarranted fear of things falling apart.”

And of course, in this way the form of Embracing Contraries acts out Elbow’s emphasis as a theorist on induction, metaphor, and the contemplation of the concrete as the most useful methods of knowing (“Nondisciplinary Courses and the Two Roots of Real Learning”), as well as his belief in the conceptual validity of narrative and descriptive exploratory writing (“Teaching Two Kinds of Thinking by Teaching Writing”).

The second reason that I admire Embracing Contraries is that so much of what Elbow says in it rings true. James Berlin and others have recently criticized Elbow for being politically and epistemologically naive about the notion of the “self,” a notion that in their view has been deconstructed or made problematic by postmodern literary and rhetorical theory (see Berlin’s “Rhetoric and Ideology,” for example, in the September 1988 College English). Elbow has become one of the favorite whipping boys or scapegoats of contemporary theorists. But however valid these deconstructions may be—and I think we should take them seriously, because they have terribly important practical consequences—reading Elbow you find observation after observation that just rings true, that just seems right. I

mean two things here: first, that his observations seem true psychologically, are insightful about what it feels like to be a writer and teacher. I know of nothing more reassuring, therapeutic, more intuitively sound, than Elbow’s famous distinction between the critic and the creator in the writing process and the importance of postponing the critic. That just makes sense to me as a writer myself—it makes my students and my student teachers nod, respond, agree more than any other statement I report from the world of writing theory. In the same way I know of nothing more sound or liberating, more healthy, for teachers than Elbow’s contention that we need to be both coaches and critics with students, embracing both poles of that contrary. Years of frustration and anxiety seem to get clarified in that notion, if only because it “validates that sense of frustration and confusion,” acknowledges it as an “accurate and valid response to the complexities of the task at hand.” There is that shock of recognition when you come across this notion, the gestalt-switch sensation of the stairs that seemed to go down suddenly going up, the old woman becoming the duck.

When I say that the book “rings true” I also mean that there’s much in it that you can actually go out and do—practical, workable techniques for students, teachers, administrators to apply right now: freewriting itself, but also a number of approaches to the problems of evaluating papers, classes, faculty, and whole programs (“Trying to Teach While Thinking About the End,” “Evaluating Students More Accurately,” “Collaborative Peer Evaluation by Faculty,” “Trustworthiness in Dialectic”). Many of us already know that freewriting actually works, however the “self” it seems to liberate is constructed, wherever it comes from, whether it exists at all. Embracing Contraries is full of such practical ideas, described step by step, illustrated, made accessible.

My third reason for liking this book so much is its complexity. I’ve been partly going along with the implication that Elbow is naive in his explanation for why his techniques work, but I think that in the end that isn’t true. Elbow is too concerned with contraries to be

continued on next page
naive. He is too self-aware. The organizing goal of the
collection, in fact, is to acknowledge the “rich messi-
ness of learning and teaching—to avoid the limitations
of neat thinking and pat positions,” a goal that Elbow
accomplishes by continually complicating his own
position, describing its limitations, arguing the other
side. A typical Elbow statement: “The full fair answer
is both yes and no.” While the idea of contraries can be
too easy itself, a having and eating of cake—while
Elbow’s application of it can be a little too convenient,
too all-encompassing—in the end I think you have to
be impressed by Elbow’s intellectual integrity, his
capacity for genuine self-criticism, self-questioning,
self-correction. You can’t pigeon-hole him as a “mere”
“expressionistic” or “romantic” rhetorician, because
he argues too rigorously for the values of “methodo-
logical doubt” and “disciplinary thinking.” It’s the
creator and the critic, he is saying, the concrete and the
disciplinary, the exploratory and the systematized.
And there are many things that can’t be accounted for
by his theories, he admits, beliefs that he can’t demon-
strate fully, hunches he must resign to the messiness or
the mysteriousness of the process.

That’s finally the crucial point in Embracing Contrar-
ies: that Elbow acknowledges complexities and doubts
and problems, and still “believes,” to use the word he
develops in the final essay in the book, “Methodologi-
cal Doubting and Believing: Contraries in Inquiry.”
The book is important as an example, one of our few,
of a “systematic, disciplined and conscious attempt to
believe.”

That is: Elbow is continually acknowledging his own
beliefs, as beliefs—his motives for maintaining what
he can’t always prove, the reasons behind it. He is up
front, “laying his weapons on the table,” as he puts it.
Which is to say that unlike many of the “bourgeois
realists” that Berlin and others take to task, Elbow
doesn’t mystify his own positions or pretend that they
are self-evident, beyond point of view. “I cannot
escape an ad hominem critical reading of this book,”
Elbow admits, “for in the end I am really engaged in
trying to work out a definition of good learning that
doesn’t exclude me.” Elbow’s autobiographical self-
consciousness, in other words, is not just an effective
rhetorical strategy but a way of acknowledging what
the contemporary theorists are calling “ideology”
(resurrecting and rehabilitating that word). I would
like Elbow at some point to respond directly to those in
the “social-epistemic” school, those who argue, with
Berlin, that there is no “transcendent self,” no voice,
and that all meaning is the product of convention and
institution. I would like to see him build their terms into
his set of governing contraries. But even without that
direct confrontation, what makes Elbow important in
the contemporary debate is that in a sense he already
demystifies, unmaskes himself. He argues his ideology
directly.

The crucial difference between Elbow and Berlin (Berlin
seen as representative of the social-epistemic rhetori-
cians) is that Berlin argues principally as a critic of
other positions, employing the doubting game almost
exclusively, while Elbow spends most of his time
arguing for belief, for what he believes and what others
can believe, even though he at the same time acknow-
ledges doubt and problems. He demystifies and still
believes. He risks belief. He risks being naive. Far
from being just a refreshing rhetorical gesture, this kind
of openness argues a profound insight about the need
for enabling assumptions, about the need to begin and
end in the concrete, the experiential. (“I think I see
compulsive doubters as more dominated by unaware
beliefs than other people are,” Elbow says at one point.)
Maybe, Elbow is saying, implicitly and explicitly,
maybe we need to postpone the critic to get the real
work, the best work, out—as writers, as teachers of
writing, as theorists about writing and the teaching of
writing.

Chris Anderson is an assistant professor of English at
Oregon State University in Corvallis, Oregon, where
he is also Coordinator of Composition.