Working Through Academic Barriers in Writing and Thinking:

Peter Elbow's Grounding Writing in Voice, Experience, and Time

Tenzing Briggs

23 October 2022

Compositional studies has benefited much from the process movement, an educational effort to teach students how to write not as a product but as a process honed for self-expression and methods. In particular, Peter Elbow had great influence over the movement as it was developing alongside the field. His three articles of "The Democratization of Writing and the Role of Cheating," "The Music of Form: Rethinking Organization in Writing," and "The Uses of Binary Thinking" contribute to the process movement in both explicit and implicit ways, and his work contains within it potent ideas for how to reconstitute writing as more than outlines or sets of dogmatic absolutes; these essays, while not at first appearing to be about the same issues, all play off of important ideas in writing, such as voice, experience, and time. At the same time, Elbow's writing evidences his own theory, incorporating his methods of approach in the language, style, and consistent focuses behind it. Specifically, these three essays emphasize composition as writing sequential action, entertaining possibilities, and expressing voice; Elbow thus reflects on how writing ultimately is rooted in human experience and thus requires critique in the ways in which the academia status quo can ignore certain experiences or perspectives.

Elbow's common language first hints at the shared approach and ideas across his work, with the most notable examples of the phrase "50 percent of the bed" and the word "itch." Namely, in "Music" he writes, "But when I say to my wife, 'All I want is 50 percent of the bed,' she laughs" (650), mirrored in "Uses" where he writes "I'm simply jostling for fifty percent of the bed" (66). While Elbow uses these sentences in slightly different contexts, they point towards a central idea across the two essays; both reference his desire to fight for contested ideals in writing, that is, against bias and imbalance, with the former quote against spatial bias in writing and the latter against deduction in thinking. Each instance, then, shows him resisting the theory

status quo, described as either “a monopoly of vision and space in our conception of organization” (“Music” 650) or “an assumption of privilege” (“Use” 66).

Alternatively, Elbow uses “itch” repeatedly for a cross-topic element of writing, but in contexts which differ greatly from each other. In “Music” he describes good music as having “degrees of yearning and relief—itch and scratch” (623), applicable to writing as an example of how “creating an itch for readers with a perplexity” (638) interests readers. In “Uses” itch also describes emotional investment with written ideas, but instead shows how a pluralistic view defies theory that offers flawed syntheses; instead, his binary thinking (following dialectical tradition) seeks “the nonresolution of the two terms: not feeling that the opposites must be somehow reconciled, not feeling that the itch must be scratched” (52). In either case, Elbow discusses emotional investment in writing and its ideas, but offers different ways of viewing the binary that defines the investment (e.g. “good” versus “bad” itch). Specifically, “Music” emphasizes an often ignored formal investment—an written hook created by musical forms like crescendo and decrescendo—while “Uses” emphasizes an investment ignoring other possibilities—ignoring the plurality of ideas, or of two things existing at the same time. On another level, the two essays connect in that musical form complements spatial organization, just as binary thinking seeks to hold two extremes as complements at once.

Two more subfocuses appear through Elbow’s language, namely that on “voice” and on the “mystery” of linguistic complexity behind it. “Democratization” almost completely focuses on voice, as it describes how “when we use our mouths and write by speaking onto the page, those words on the page are experienced by readers as alive, and *voiced*” (Elbow 69; emphasis added); similarly, “Music” focuses on voice as a function of music, where cohesion improves because the writing either makes “them hear a voice as they read” (Elbow 643) or imparts a

sense of the writer, in both cases imbuing a sense of narrative, which importantly Elbow outlines as a key way of incorporating musical form or time in writing. Elbow also uses the word "mystery" to discuss how writing improves when it uses subconscious methods to generate voice. Namely, Elbow writes, "We can understand how this *mysterious* improvement [from freewriting] happens by peering under the hood…if we speak normally or unselfconsciously, our words come out in spurts that linguists call intonation units" ("Democratization" 69; emphasis added). Importantly, he follows this by outlining how this takes advantage of our subconscious ability to use pauses to indicate concise grammar units. Similarly, in "Music" he writes "I use the metaphor 'music of form' not because it clears things up but because it makes space for some of the *mystery* that I sense in this topic" (655; emphasis added). Again, he importantly connects the idea to practical application, emphasizing how musical form can be vetted by reading drafts aloud. In other words, Elbow implies that the mystery behind what constitutes voice has practical use as both an investigation and a goal in of itself; voice can be achieved by certain practices, even as those practices generate the very complexity that creates meaningful mystery in writing.

Clearly, Elbow works through a lot of the same ideas in his writing, and shared ideas are part of his consistent approach in the field, usually linked by consistent language. In particular, voice appears as a first idea shared between essays. In "Democratization" voice results from freewriting; in "Music" it forms a "lens [which] highlights time and hearing rather than space and seeing" (644). "Uses" discusses voice more subtly, where Elbow (critiquing the idea that language is either social or private) writes, "from an ultimate point of view, everything we say or write comes from outside—we don't make up words; but from a proximate point of view, all the language that comes to our lips or our pens comes from the inside" (60); here Elbow implies voice in the focus on "our lips" and "the inside." In other words, Elbow's writing on voice

combines multiple perspectives; voice can be rooted in process, organization, and origination, respectively, and he references it both explicitly and implicitly.

Elbow also imbues more subtly across his work the importance of binary ideas and processes. While "Uses" focuses explicitly on this, much of its discussion connects implicitly to his other two pieces. "Uses" makes the main point that binary thinking should recognize opposites even as it celebrates both possibilities, or many, as it may be the case, "Just so long as there's more than one!" (53). "Democratization" connects superficially, by means of discussing freewriting as both an alternative when Elbow "couldn't write clear organized prose" (69) as well as a complement to finished, organized prose, improving clarity. "Music" on the other hand echoes "Uses" logic and uses much of the same evidence. "Uses" references "the Platonic dialogues: on the one hand a strong desire to let the battle produce a single answer or winner, but on the other hand a recognition that sometimes we have to leave things unreconciled" (52); Elbow mirrors this in "Music" when he writes, "we can point to Platonic dialogues….They are messy and digressive and often *switch registers* and even genres in midcourse…" (646; emphasis added). Here Elbow deepens his focus on binaries via a different perspective, wherein the binary implicitly exists as what allows the switching between logical modalities. These two essays also mirror each other in that they both discuss flaws that occur in superficial binary thinking, such as "…X and Not-X cannot coexist in the same space or both be true in the timeless realm of logic" ("Music" 651) or where "radical theorists often…fall into assuming that if anyone says anything in favor of X…, they must by definition be against the opposite of X" ("Uses" 70). Thus, even though only "Uses" explicitly mentions binary thinking, it remains a constant theme underlying ideas in his other literature.

However, Elbow's deepest levels of theory inform how writing functions, beyond single constituents or the overarching logic surrounding multiple components: how writing embodies experience and time, a sequence of human perception. In "Democratization" this appears through recognition that "[w]hat comes out of peoples' mouths is what ends up in dictionaries….[They] can do nothing but record decisions made by speakers" (71); that is, writing reflects dynamic history. When discussing Platonic dialogues in "Music," Elbow comments, "...the most effective ones bind time with perplexity, thinking in *action* and the *drama* of voices" (646; emphasis added); they benefit from not just different viewpoints of a binary, but ones which reflect experiences, oriented by action and participation. Similarly, "Uses" describes the Platonic dialogues with active imagery and grammar, like how they incorporate "the battle" (52), the possibility of a "winner" (52), and the recognition that we "leave things unreconciled" (52). Moreover, Elbow writes a few pages later about the writing process as aided by physical actions: "taking walks,…, paying homage to the muses, relinquishing some agency and control, meditating—even drinking" (56). Supporting the focus on action, "Music" outlines its temporal dimension, how "all discourse moves through time and involves someone speaking to someone in a particular context" (644) and how words "function as actions or events in time rather than just as things in space…[and] Burke's theory of dramatism is built on this…" (656). In discussing binaries, "Uses" can only solve the issue of X and not-X by means of time, which Elbow describes by saying, "Notice that I am introducing the dimension of time. What is paradoxical in logic—being both generative and critical, occupying two spots on a single continuum—is ordinary in time" (56). If there were any doubt, Elbow explicitly connects writing to time and experience of sounds in "Music," and in "Uses" he emphasizes how "an approach

that tries to heighten dichotomies and affirm both sides equally, involves a special link or even commitment to experience" (65).

Moreover, Elbow not only outlines unified theory but embodies it in his writing. In some cases, he writes this explicitly, but his style also implicitly establishes much of his theory. For example, in "Music" he writes, "And so, in this essay (and I hope it's not so very far from 'regular'), I've tried to demonstrate the possibilities for using both modes of organization [of space and time]…" (649); he even goes into detail, explaining:

> I've obviously tried for dynamic time-oriented modes. I lead off with perplexity and create a kind of overall story of thinking. (Readers will have to judge whether I've sufficiently neatened this story.) I've used a certain amount of thought-in-action at the local level. I've allowed myself to be somewhat present with a noticeable voice—though mostly avoided what might be called "personal writing." (I allow a bit of it in the later parts of the essay, following a general principle that I think students need to know: if you can demonstrate to readers that you can meet their conservative demands in the early pages of an essay, they often don't mind later features they would have objected to at the start.) (649).

In "Democratization" and "Uses," he implies that his theory comes from personal experiences and practices. He describes how, "It took me a long time to learn to shift into a completely different mental and linguistic gear and use speech for writing" ("Democratization" 69), and he writes, "Of course reading and writing *can* serve or reinforce each other. Input can serve output, and vice-versa" ("Uses" 64). In other words, he supplements theory with practices and draws attention to how reading can impart good writing methods. In particular, though, his writing does this implicitly through his style. "Music" establishes the importance of "dynamic" writing, varying action with spatial organization by following trains of thought sequentially. "Democratization" expresses how important the vernacular is for clarity, namely in the historical significance of how "Dante argued that eloquence could just as well be found in 'the vulgar,' that is, the language of the street, of women and nursemaids" (69). In all of his writing, this shows in

the allusions and trains of thought he pairs with more academic evidence. For example, he embodies dynamic, clear, and engaging prose with vernacular in sentences like, “I learned to freewrite—and that's what I needed in order to learn to write *garbage*” (“Democratization” 69; emphasis added), “But a neat, *freeze-dried, bird's-eye* outline like this has two big problems” (“Music” 636; emphasis added), or “...it just means that the *underdog* is defined as *overdog*, and we are still left with thinking in terms of dominance or hierarchy” (“Uses” 51; emphasis added). He also uses widespread culture to enhance his ideas, such as examples like the “Happy Birthday” melody in “Music,” Biblical verses from the New King James Bible in “Democratization,” or a binary like “sheep/goats” in “Uses.”

As a final context, Elbow’s focus on binaries and on vernacular prose pushes up against the status quo behind traditional academic writing. As he puts it, “My whole career has been a battle against literacy as an exclusionary force” (“Democratization” 69). Throughout, his “mind has been on the professional essays we write as academics and the essays we ask students to write in high school and college” (“Music 648). And he admits, “I have been partisan. For of course I've always written more excitedly about generating than revising, and I've been preoccupied if not obsessed with freewriting” (69). At one point in “Uses,” he describes how he helped develop what now commonly is termed the “process approach,” along with others he names, like Macrorie, Britton, and Murray; meaningfully to this essay, he further specifies that “‘Process’ connates experience” (“Uses” 66).

In short, Elbow not only helped form the process movement, but did so in the context of battling against standards which discriminate against emerging academics—those in high school or college who are struggling to enter academia—when academia can be so specialized and formalistic. His theory comes directly from experience within a system that still struggles to

properly initiate new writers. This influence impacts to a great extent the style of writing he's developed, in addition to how his theory focuses on ignored subjects within writing theory academia or on flaws within traditional modes of thinking. What he most contributes to compositional study and teaching, then, is prose which simultaneously demonstrates both modern modes of writing for the student and teacher and ways of working through compositional issues that mar key components of writing like clarity or cohesion. In doing so, his writing helps contribute to breaking down exclusionary barriers that form a harmful status quo in academia, and his theory remains grounded in lived experiences even as it navigates complex concepts.

Works Cited

Elbow, Peter. “The Democratization of Writing and the Role of Cheating.” *Composition Studies*, vol. 50, no. 1, 2022, pp. 67-72.

Elbow, Peter. “The Music of Form: Rethinking Organization in Writing.” *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 57, no. 4, 2006, pp. 620-666.

Elbow, Peter. “The Uses of Binary Thinking.” *Journal of Advanced Composition*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1993, pp. 51-78.