Response

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My sense is that our papers pretty much staked out the terms of our different positions. There is a good bit of common ground. This is inevitable. We are about the same age, both products of a similar moment in English (my teachers were also shaped by the New Criticism), both working inside the same profession. If our conversation is useful, it seems to me it will be for the degree to which it shows where people like Peter and I are nervous, not quite so certain about what we are doing (or not certain that we are, in fact, doing the same things). I am not trying to be contrary in my response; I think the following points of difference are both illustrative and important.

I agree with Peter that there is a conflict between what he has called "the role of the writer and that of the academic." The academic, for him, is a person with an eye to the past (or to books and articles) and with a skeptical, critical attitude towards language. The writer is the person who works with pleasure and authority on his or her own and without being skeptical or distrustful, at least of his or her own language project. As Peter phrases the issue, the question he faces as a teacher is "whether I should invite my first year students to be self-absorbed and see themselves at the center of the discourse—in a sense, credulous; or whether I should invite them to be personally modest and intellectually scrupulous and to see themselves as at the periphery—in a sense, skeptical and distrustful." This comes very close to the way I would define the issues. Peter comes down on the side of credulity as the governing idea in the undergraduate writing course; I come down on the side of skepticism. Peter wants his students to "trust" language and implies, rightly, that I would teach from mistrust. The word I would use for mistrust is criticism, and in my article I called
academic writing a form of critical writing. Peter argues that he too has tried to unmask the "subtle and sometimes insidious powers of teachers." I think of the problem of the teacher as only a minor version of the larger problem of the forms of knowledge that are presented to students as naturally or inevitably or unquestionably "there" in the academy.

The pedagogical questions in this conversation are both practical and fundamental: Are freshmen ready to think first and primarily about the problems of writing when they write? Is criticism an appropriate point of entry into the college curriculum (and is the freshman course appropriately conceived of as a point of entry into the college curriculum)? Is it the job of college English to teach students to learn to resist and be suspicious of writing and the text? I would say yes to all three. I would say that Peter's answer is "no," although his position is, of course, more complex than I can make it in summary. You can see Peter working out his position in relation to these questions in What is English?—where he both reports on and places himself within a larger version of the debate we represent in our papers. As I said in my article, I think the argument that Peter makes is part of a larger attempt within the culture to preserve the idea of an independent, self-determining subjectivity, what I labeled the writer on the frontier. My article is part of the attack on that figure. At the center of our arguments are two different versions of "the writer."

Let me move quickly, then, to what is as close to a "real" example as we have—the writer of the divorce paper whom I allude to in my opening essay. Peter says, "I agree with you in wanting to understand and acknowledge the cultural forces and voices that enter into her paper; but I wouldn't be so dismissive of her role: I'd still grant her what we grant to the literary figures we study, namely that her writing is hers—even if it is over-determined by countless cultural and psychological forces." In the course that I teach, I begin by not granting the writer her "own" presence in that paper, by denying the paper's status as a record of or a route to her own thoughts and feelings. I begin instead by asking her to read her paper as a text already written by the culture, representing a certain predictable version of the family, the daughter, and the writer. I ask her to look at who speaks in the essay and who doesn't. I ask her to look at the organization of the essay to see what it excludes. And I ask her to revise in such a way that the order of the essay is broken—to write against the grain of the discourse that has determined her account of her family. I begin by being dismissive.

The course that I am arguing against (and I will not say that it is Peter's, although I think it is often offered in his name) would begin by not being dismissive. It would begin by encouraging a student to work that opening essay to its perfection: adding detail, adding voice and color, improving it
as narrative or essay or both. The work of revision, in other words, would be directed at preserving and perfecting rather than calling into question (or dismissing) the discourse. Perhaps later, as a point of reflection, the student may read or think about alternative version of "the family" or even alternative version of the "essay" she has written.

These two courses I have been imagining thus provide a different version of what it means to say that the writing "is" the writer’s. The course I teach make the moment of possession not the opening moment but a later one, where if the writer is present that presence can be seen in the work of revision, where the evidence lies in the work directed against writing (that is, against the culture’s desire to tell a certain story about the family and girlhood; or against the discourse’s desire to hide its origins, its argument, and its seams).

Peter rightly suggests that we probably differ on how much time students should spend reading in a writing course. I would agree, and think that the differences are more fundamental than peripheral. A series of required texts are central to my teaching, usually essays or chapters from books or journals that are said to be "beyond" students' interests or abilities. My goal is to show students how to work with difficult material. There is a practical payoff here, since students, I believe, will at some point be expected to do so and no one else is taking the time to show them how and why they might do the work.

I also want students to be able to negotiate the ways they are figured in relationship to the official forms of knowledge valued in the academy—that is, I want them to be prepared to write themselves out of a rhetorical situation in which their roles are already prepared, where they are figured as simple-minded or not-yet-ready-for serious discussion. I want my students to have a way to begin, to establish their power over the text (and the author); I want them to write essays that do more than summarize or reproduce the words of "authorities." Like Peter, I want students to take pride in their work and to take themselves and their work seriously, to be arrogant, self-absorbed. (Ways of Reading is the product of the courses I and my colleagues have been teaching for years.)

My route to this is by teaching students to be able to work closely with the ways their writing constructs a relationship with tradition, power and authority—with other people’s words. It is here, in the sentences and paragraphs, that I think we can work on cultural politics (where “ownership” becomes a term that works in a writing class). I think it is very important to be able to work with how a student represents or makes use of or revises or intervenes with or takes possession of (say) Adrienne Rich’s argument in “When We Dead Awaken.” My experience tells me that
without instruction, students will feel they have no way of working with
that text, nothing to say beyond what Rich has already said.

I want to teach a student to work on the essay she is writing in parallel
with Rich's text, with what she chooses to cite (and what she ignores), with
what she does with the passage she quotes. Here, in these places on the
page, talking about the choice and positioning of a block quotation (for
example), I can help students negotiate the ways in which they are figured
in the reading and writing that goes on in the academy. This too, I think,
is a way of teaching a student writer to say, "Listen to me; I have something
to tell you."

Finally, I would say that it is the idea of "criticism" that most marks our
different positions on the role of the teacher. It is important to Peter to
appeal to what students can learn "in the absence of instruction." I would
never argue that school is the only place one learns or that teachers are the
only ones to make learning possible. I would argue, however, that since
the point of criticism is to ask questions of the things that seem beyond
question, to ask students to see the natural as artificial, it cannot come from
within. It will not happen on its own, but only when prompted. That is
how I imagine the writing teacher. The writing teacher is the person who
not only prompts students to write but who prompts students to revise, to
work on their writing in ways that they would not if left to (not their own)
but the culture's devices.

Response

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Common Ground

You seem to imply through allusions to my titles and my work that I am
more wholly opposed to your work than I am. I wonder if you are prey
here to an assumption in academic discourse (and rhetoric too), that
discourse means argument and that difference means opposition. So let me
start by pointing out significant places where we agree. You argue for
"academic writing as a major part of an undergraduate's training." I agree.
My only reservation is to say that this training isn't feasible or desirable in
a one semester first year introductory writing courses, but that it should
indeed go on in later courses in the major and in other upper level courses.
Nothing I've said here is an argument against academic writing—only for
something in addition. You say we must make the classroom itself available
for critical inquiry; "to hide the teacher is to hide the traces of power." I
agree. We mustn’t pretend we have less power or authority than we do, and I’ve tried to write about this so as to help students and teachers see this power and deal better with it. You say it’s crucial and necessary to study the past, to be aware of our place in history. Ditto for culture, gender, class, race, sexual orientation. I think I’m an ally on these matters. You insist that individuals are socially constructed. I agree to a significant extent—especially insofar as you make positive arguments about all the voices and forces that help make us who we are and that color what we think and write. But notice that your arguments are mostly negative. That is, you assume without argument that if I celebrate “independent, self-creative, self-expressive subjectivity,” I must be against the notion of people as socially constructed. But I am not.

There is a crucial matter of theory here. You say in passing that I can’t have it both ways, that I can’t stick up for both perspectives on the human condition. But you never give any reason for this theoretical position. I insist I can have it both ways. My Chaucer book argues that human life is both free and determined. Embracing Contraries is entirely devoted to arguing for “both/and” thinking and trying to show the problems with “either/or” thinking—showing how we can validly maintain opposites in various realms of theory and practice. You argue against “academic bashing,” whether from the left or right. I agree. Sure, I struggle to make the academic world less pompous and more able to exploit the cognitive power of the believing game and the intelligence of feelings. But this is no attack, it’s an attempt to reform. I am proud to be an academic. You say that colleges and universities (and schools, too) have tended to deny students a sense of being an author—“making students only summarizers or term paper writers.” I agree. You go on to say that we should try to show them that they can be “elegant, smart, independent.” However, you feel this would be lying to them, whereas I insist that they can in truth be elegant, smart, and independent.

Differences: Utopias and Freewriting

You say that the classroom is “real space, not an idealized utopian space.” You seem to be insisting on two things here: that a classroom cannot be utopian, and that utopian spaces are not real spaces. This highlights what may be our most important difference. Let’s look at a micro-utopian space that I love: freewriting. This is an activity that permits a classroom space to be at once utopian and real. (Were not Fruitlands and Summerhill real spaces?) Note that freewriting does not involve trying to hide the teacher or her authority. Indeed using it tends to make our authority more naked. Why else would students do something so odd and unnatural as
to write for ten minutes—without stopping, no matter what—trying not to worry about the conventions of writing and also assuming that the teacher who orders it won’t see it and is urging them not to show it to anyone else?

Nor does freewriting pretend magically to reveal one’s pure natural essential self or to escape the effects of culture and the past. Far from it. People who use freewriting tend to notice immediately that it shows more nakedly than other kinds of writing all the junk that culture and the past have stuffed into our heads. Nothing is better than freewriting at showing us how we are constructed and situated. Another way of saying this is that freewriting is the opposite of an attempt to preserve the idea of a self-generated autonomous author. Rather it is an invitation to take a ride on language itself, and (insofar as the phrase has any meaning at all) to “get out of the self”: to relinquish volition and planning and see what words and phrases come out of the head when you just kick it and give language and culture a start.

So does freewriting pretend to be free? Yes and no. It is not free from the teacher’s authority (until a person takes it over by choice), nor from the forces of culture and language. But it does create freedom in certain crucial ways. It frees the writer from planning, from meeting the needs of readers, and from any requirements as to what she should write about or how her writing should end up—for instance, as to topic, meaningfulness, significance, or correctness of convention. Freewriting then is a paradigm of the real and the utopian: an example of how we can use our authority as teachers in our institutional settings to create artificial spaces that can heighten discovery and learning. It is a way to take ten minutes of a classroom and make certain things happen that don’t usually happen given the institutional and cultural forces at work. Students discover that they can write words and thoughts and not worry about what good writing is or what the teacher wants, they discover that their heads are full of language and ideas (sometimes language and ideas they had no idea were there), and they discover they can get pleasure from writing.

Admittedly, my utopianism often takes a different direction from yours—a direction that troubles you, towards non-instruction. You say there is no writing without teachers, not only in school but even out of school. I would acknowledge that there is no schooling without teachers, no assigned writing without teachers, no teaching without authority, and indeed little human interaction anywhere without unequal power or authority. But surely there is plenty of writing without teachers not only outside the academy but even inside. I’m thinking about all the writing that students do unrelated to their school work: diaries, letters, notes, stories, poems, newspaper writing.
But isn't language, above all, the realm where people most blatantly do learn without teachers? Children learn more grammar by age five than linguists can yet fully articulate, and get very fluent in its deployment—all without teachers. (If you say that all children have “teachers” in the person of their parents and playmates, you are just aggrandizing a term to destroy it since there would be no way then to distinguish between teaching and non-teaching.) The most striking fact about language acquisition is the absence of teaching. What people need for acquiring language is not teaching but to be around others who speak, to be listened to, and to be spoken to. It may be utopian to carry this principle of learning without teaching from speech to writing, but that is just what I and many other teachers and students have found useful. (An odd, minimal kind of utopianism: simply trying to stop teaching now and then—trying to cultivate in the classroom some tufts of what grows wild outside. But there is plenty of research about how small children learn not just to speak but to write before school—simply by being around writing.) Above all, it is empowering for students to discover that they can learn so much without instruction.

Approaches to Student Writing

You are eloquent about noticing when we and our students are being manipulated by the culture. But couldn’t it be said that in making this case you are pursuing the same myth I am? That is, like me, you seem to want to give your student writer more control over her writing, more ability to make her writing her own. But of course you see me as preaching independence and control while actually leading her down the primrose path to being unconsciously or unawarely written, while you are insisting that the way to help her get more control is to help her see how she is being written by the culture and get her to “write against” it or resist it—not to be ruled, not to be taken over. Thus your premise seems to be not that we are always written by language and culture, but that we must engage in the critique of language and culture and recognize their power over us so that we can step somewhat out of the path of the bulldozer.

But there is a crucial difference in our concrete approaches to students. That is, even though I agree with your goal of helping students be less manipulated by the culture, I would hold back much more in my critique of this student’s writing. I simply want to critique or intervene much less than you do. You may well answer, “That just gives culture more free play over their minds.” But here I make something of an act of faith or commitment. I feel I must leave students more control, let them make as many decisions as they can about their writing—despite the power of the
culture. I must call on some faith in the ability of students to make important choices, decisions and perceptions of their own when I can clear a good space.

Of course, this doesn’t always work and I’m often disappointed at how they replay the culture. But my holding back is not just an act of faith; it’s also an act of methodological commitment—an insistence on keeping means and ends in harmony with each other. What the culture does—as you point out so powerfully—is to do their thinking for them. Therefore it seems to me that the most precious thing I can do is provide spaces where I don’t also do their thinking for them (despite the attendant risks of giving more room for the culture). In contrast, your response to her paper seems to do her thinking for her—that is, you are telling her that she thought she meant X, but really she didn’t; she thought she told what she saw and experienced, but really her perceptions and experience were a script written out for her by the culture. It feels important to me not to do that. If my end or goal is to get students to think for themselves and not be dupes of others thinking for them, I don’t want to try to seek that end by thinking for them—even if that means I must sometimes look on helplessly while they believe something I wish they would abandon.

Let me try to be more specific about teaching practice—about how I would respond to that student’s paper. I would not “begin by encouraging the student to work that opening essay to its perfection.” (I appreciate how you acknowledge that my own practice might differ from what is sometimes done in my name.) I would try to help her make up her own mind where to take it. So if she wanted to make her paper “perfect” in the problematic genre you describe, I would try to help her. But (and this is crucial for me) I try to remove all pressure to make papers perfect in that way. I’m always trying hard to show students that progress for a paper often means listening for a perplexity or scruple—which often means letting the paper fall radically apart. That’s why I have to take out the grading pressure: I’m often trying to encourage students to let their writing get worse.

So if this paper were the first one in a semester, I would give no response at all. For the first third of a semester or so, my goal is for students to write a great deal, to hear their own writing and even see some of it published, hear each others’ writing (and some of mine)—but to get little or no feedback. This is no solipsistic, nonsocial vacuum: They are constantly hearing the writing of others and putting their own writing out to others. It’s just a vacuum from explicit feedback. I put a lot of faith in the long range benefits of helping students achieve their goals—helping them gradually relinquish their conditioned assumption that their job is to accomplish our goals.
But I’m not saying that I want to leave students completely alone for the culture to play on—with no feedback from me or from other students in the class. For the last two-thirds of the semester I try to set things up so that they hear plenty of feedback from peers and from me. So let me try to describe the kinds of feedback I might give that paper. I might say, in effect, “I don’t see your own experience reflected in the main assertions of your paper,” or even (gingerly), “I wonder if your own experience might have been partly caused by X.” But I want to avoid saying, “I don’t believe these/your experiences are really yours.” I have faith that if students attend more and more closely to their experience, they will gradually be led to sounder questioning and thinking. Perhaps you would say that your comment to her is also an attempt to get her to pay better attention to her experience. But students easily distrust their experience, and we do harm if we try to “correct” them about their own experience. In short, I want students to hear my comments but still be able to resist or deny them. (Needless to say, I’m describing what I try to do. What I actually do at 11:30 pm when I’m tired and grouchy is another story.)

Really, I’ve come back to my original theme of trying to help students see themselves as writers. That is, my goal is that students should keep writing by choice after the course is over—because of my faith that the process itself of engaging in writing, of trying to find words for one’s thinking and experience and trying them out on others—will ultimately lead to the kind of questing and self-contradiction that we both seek. But I want them to get there by a path where the student is steering, not me.

**Romantic Resonances**

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This debate is getting old. It’s not just that its occasion was more than five years ago, or that Elbow and Bartholomae had by then already been saying some of the same things for years, or that some of us have already responded to some version of their positions. It’s not even that the debate goes back, as Bartholomae suggests, to issues from the 1970s or, as he and Elbow agree, to the New Criticism of the 1950s. Elbow alludes to a two-century-old voice that has shaped his “own” voice in the debate when he concedes, “I suppose the obvious problem is that I define the writer in too ‘romantic’ a fashion”; Bartholomae doesn’t call Elbow’s position “romantic” (his term is “sentimental realist”), though he attributes to it all the commonplaces of the “expressive” romantic orientation as it has been defined by M. H. Abrams. It is interesting that Bartholomae doesn’t name the historical antecedents of his own position, romantic or otherwise, but