University of Massachusetts Amherst

From the Selected Works of Peter Elbow

1995

Being a Writer vs. Being an Academic: A Conflict in Goals

Peter Elbow

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/peter_elbow/50/

Peter Elbow

Being a Writer vs.
Being an Academic:
A Conflict in Goals

Perhaps David and others can persuade me that I am wrong, but I fear that there is a conflict between the role of writer and that of academic. I wish there were not. In this essay I will explore how this conflict plays out in a first year writing class. But it will be obvious that I see the issue lurking in a larger dimension—even autobiographically. I am an academic and I am a writer. I've struggled to be able to make those claims, and I am proud of both identities—but I sometimes feel them in conflict. Thus I'm talking here about the relationship between two roles—two ways of being in the world of texts. It is my wish that students should be able to inhabit both roles comfortably.

Note that I'm talking here about roles, not professions. That is, I'm not trying to get first year students to commit to making their living by writing—nor to get a Ph.D. and join the academy. But I would insist that it's a reasonable goal for my students to end up saying, "I feel like I *am* a writer: I get deep satisfaction from discovering meanings by writing—figuring out what I think and feel through putting down words; I naturally turn to writing when I am perplexed—even when I am just sad or happy; I love to explore and communicate with others through writing; writing is an important part of my life." Similarly, I would insist that it's a reasonable goal for my students to end up saying, "I feel like I *am* an academic: reading knowledgeable books, wrestling my way through important issues with fellows, figuring out hard questions—these activities give me deep satisfaction and they are central to my sense of who I am." In short, I want my

Peter Elbow teaches at UMass Amherst, and has taught at MIT, Franconia College, Evergreen State College, and SUNY Stony Brook—where he directed the writing program. He has just edited a volume in the Hermagoras Press Landmark Essays Series whose title sums up a current and longstanding interest, *Writing and Voice*. And he continues to work on assessment and writing.

first year students to feel themselves as writers and feel themselves as academics.

Of course these are idealistic goals; many students will not attain them. But I insist on them as reasonable goals for my teaching, because if I taught well and if all the conditions for learning were good, I believe all my students *could* achieve them. I don't mind high or distant goals. But I'm troubled by a sense that they conflict with each other—that progress toward one could undermine progress toward the other. A distant mountain is a good guide for walking—even if I know I won't get to the top. But I feel as though I am trying to walk toward two different mountains.

In this dilemma, my first and strongest impulse is to be adversarial and fight for the role of the writer against the role of the academic. And I can't pretend I am doing otherwise here. But I'm also trying to resist that adversarial impulse. I'd like to celebrate academics—the other half of my own identity. If *we* don't celebrate academics, no one else will. Therefore I'll try to hold myself open so David or others of you can persuade me that I am misguided in my sense of conflict. Perhaps you can persuade me that if I would only make certain changes I could serve both goals well. Or better yet, perhaps you can assure me that I'm already serving both goals now and my only problem is my feeling of conflict. For I wish I didn't see things this way. Everyone says, "Don't give in to binary thinking. Take a cold shower, take a walk around the block." But I see specific conflicts in how to design and teach my first year writing course. And since I feel forced to choose—I choose the goal of writer over that of academic.

* * * * *

Let me now explore specific points of conflict in my designing and teaching of a first year writing course—conflicts between my attempts to help students see themselves as academics and see themselves as writers. But my first two points will be false alarms: places where I and others have sometimes been *tempted* to see a conflict but where careful examination shows me there is none. Perhaps some of the other conflicts can be similarly diffused.

(1) Sometimes I've felt a conflict about *what we should read* in the first year writing course. It would seem as though in order to help students see themselves as academics I should get them to read "key texts": good published writing, important works of cultural or literary significance; strong and important works. However if I want them to see themselves as writers, we should primarily publish and read their own writing.

In my first year writing class I take the latter path. I publish a class magazine about four times a semester, each one containing a finished piece by all the students. (I'm indebted to Charlie Moran for showing me how

to do this—supporting the practice with a lab fee for the course.) We often discuss and write about these magazines. 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.

But on reflection, I don't think there is any conflict here. It's not an either/or issue. To read both strong important published texts and the writing of fellow students serves both my goals. Academics read key texts and the writing of colleagues; so do writers. In short, I think I could and probably should read some strong important published works in my first year course. I would never give up using the magazines of students' own writing, but that needn't stop me from also reading at least some of the other kind of texts.

(2) Just as I see no conflict about what to read in my first year course, so too about *how to read* these texts. That is, whether I want my students to be academics or writers, it seems crucial to avoid coming at key texts (or at student texts) as models. That is, I must fight the tradition of treating these readings as monuments in a museum, pieces under glass. We must try to come at these strong important texts:—no matter how good or hallowed they may be—as much as possible as fellow writers—as fully eligible members of the conversation: not treat them as sacred; not worry about “doing justice” to them or getting them dirty. To be blunt, I must be sure not to “teach” these texts (in the common sense of that term), but rather to “have them around” to wrestle with, to bounce off of, to talk about and talk from, to write about and write from. Again: not feel we must be polite or do them justice. In taking this approach I think we would be treating texts the way academics and writers treat them: *using* them rather than *serving* them. (I take this as one of the lessons of David's *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts*.)

(3) But even if there is no conflict about what to read and how to read, I do see a problem when it comes to the question of *how much to read*. If my goal is to help my students experience themselves as academics, surely I should spend at least as much time reading as writing. Academics are readers. But I don't. I always spend much more of our time writing than reading. I even spend a significant amount of class time writing. Writing in class helps me not just sanction, dignify, and celebrate writing; it helps me frankly *coach* students in various concrete practices and techniques and approaches toward getting words on paper. I could weasel and say that writing *is* reading—what with all that crucial reading over what you write—and so I'm really serving both goals by emphasizing writing. But academics don't just read over what they write. This is a blunt issue of emphasis: In my course there is a clear emphasis on writing over reading.

It's not that I care absolutely more about writing than reading. I'm simply saying that virtually every other course privileges reading over writing—treats input as central and output as serving input. My only hope, it seems to me, of making students experience themselves as writers while they are in the academy—and a slim hope at that—means hanging on to at least one course where writing is at the center. When other courses in the university make writing as important as reading, I'll respond with a comparable adjustment and give reading equal spotlight in my first year course. I might even make that adjustment if only English department courses made writing as important as reading, but of course they don't. Isn't it odd that most English courses study and honor writing (literature), but seldom treat the act of writing as central? The only course that tends to make writing central is the one course that most English faculty don't want to teach.

(4) But let me tighten the screw a bit. I've been talking as though everything would be dandy if only we had more time, or at least divided up the time equally—as though the interests of reading and writing do not inherently conflict. But I can't help sensing that they do. And I would contend that academics have come to identify with the interests of reading—often identifying themselves against writing.

Let me spell out some of the conflicts I see between the interests of writers and the interests of academics-as-readers.¹ To put it bluntly, readers and writers have competing interests over who gets to control the text. It's in the interests of readers to say that the writer's intention doesn't matter or is unfindable, to say that meaning is never determinate, always fluid and sliding, to say that there is no presence or voice behind a text; and finally to kill off the author! This leaves the reader in complete control of the text.

It's in the interests of writers, on the other hand, to have readers actually interested in what was on their mind, what they intended to say, reading for intention. As writers we often fail to be clear, but it helps us if readers will just have some faith that our authorial meanings and intentions can be found. It helps to listen caringly. If we are lost in the woods, we have a better chance of being found if the searchers think we exist, care deeply about us, and feel there is hope of finding us. And it goes without saying, writers are interested in staying alive. Writers also have interest in *ownership* of the text—and, as with “killing,” I want to take this metaphor seriously: Writers have a concrete interest in monetary payment for their labor. But of course the metaphorical meaning is important too. Writers usually want some “ownership,” some say, some control over what a text means. Almost all writers are frustrated when readers completely misread what they have written. It doesn't usually help if the readers say, “But the

latest theory says that we get to construct our own meaning." Of course there are exceptions here: Some writers say, "I don't care what meaning readers see in my words," but more often it is writers who celebrate presence and readers absence.

Let me be more concrete by using this very text as illustration. I get to decide what I *intended* with my words; you get to decide what you *heard*. But the question of what I "said," what meanings are "in" my text—that is a site of contention between us. And we see this fight everywhere, from the law courts to the bedrooms: "But I said . . ." / "No you didn't, you said . . ." Academics in English are the only people I know who seem to think that the speaker/writer has no party in such discussions.

We see this contest between readers and writers played out poignantly in the case of student texts. The academic is reader and grader and always gets to decide what the student text means. No wonder students withdraw ownership and commitment. I can reinforce my point by looking at what happens when the tables are turned and academics produce text for a student audience—that is, lecturing extensively in class. Here the academic also turns the ownership rules upside down and declares that in this case the writer-lecturer gets to decide what the text means.

Is this just a story of readers being mean and disrespectful to writers? No, it goes both ways. Among writers, there is perhaps even a longer tradition of disdain for readers. (And also, of course, of disdain for academics.) Writers often say, "Readers are not my main audience. Sometimes the audience that I write for is me. For some pieces I don't even *care* whether readers always understand or appreciate everything I write. Sometimes I even write privately. What do readers know!" In response, readers often say, "What do writers know? We're in a much better position than they are to read the text. Let's not be put off by writers' wishful thinking. Intention is a will o' the wisp. Never trust the teller, trust the tale."

In short, where writers are tempted to think they are most important, readers and academics are tempted to think they are the most important party. Readers and academics like to insist that there is no such thing as private writing or writing only for the self. (See, for example, Jeanette Harris, *Expressive Writing*, SMU Press, 1990, 66.) Readers like to imagine that writers are always thinking about them; they are like children who naturally think their parents always have them in mind. Some readers even want to *see* everything that writers write. But writers, like parents, need some time away from the imperious demands of readers—need some time when they can just forget about readers and think about themselves. Yes, writers must acknowledge that in the end readers get to decide whether their words will be read or bought—just as parents know that in

the end the child's interests must come first. But smart writers and parents know that they do a better job of serving these demanding creatures if they take some time for themselves.

(5) Another collision of interests between writers and readers. Writers testify all the time to the experience of knowing more than they can say, of knowing things that they haven't yet been able to get into words. Paying attention to such intuitions and feelings often leads them to articulations they couldn't otherwise find. Readers (and teachers and academics), on the other hand, being on the receiving end of texts, are more tempted to say, "If you can't say it, you don't know it"—and to celebrate the doctrine that all knowledge is linguistic. (Painters, musicians and dancers also have the temerity to question academics who proclaim that if you can't say it in language you don't know it and it doesn't count as knowledge.)

In my first year writing course I feel this conflict between the interests of readers and writers. Yes, my larger self wants them to feel themselves as readers and academics, but this goal seems to conflict with my more pressing hunger to help them feel themselves as writers. That is, I can't help wanting my students to have some of that uppitness of writers toward readers. I want them to be able to say, "I'm not just writing for teachers or readers, I'm writing as much for me—sometimes even *more* for me." I want them to fight back a bit against readers. I want them to care about their intentions and to insist that readers respect them. I try to respect those intentions and see them—and assume I often can. Yes, I'll point out where these intentions are badly realized, but if my goal is to make students feel like writers, my highest priority is to show that I've *understood* what they're saying. It's only my second priority to show them where I had to struggle.

I want to call attention to this central pedagogical point that writers often understand and readers and academics and teachers often don't: The main thing that helps writers is to be understood; pointing out misunderstandings is only the second need. Thus—and this is a crucial consequence—I assume that students *know* more than they are getting into words. Most of my own progress in learning to write has come from my gradually learning to listen more carefully to what I haven't yet managed to get into words—and respecting the idea that I know more than I can say. This stance helps me be willing to find time and energy to wrestle it into words. The most unhelpful thing I've had said to me as a student and writer is, "If you can't say it, you don't know it."

Imagine, then, how different our classrooms would be if all academics and teachers felt themselves to be writers as much as readers.

(6) Here is a related point of conflict between the role of academic and writer. What kind of attitude about language shall I try to instill in first year students in a writing course? If my goal is to get them to take on the role of academic, I should get them to distrust language. It is a central tenet of academic thinking in this century that language is not a clear and neutral medium through which we can see undistorted nonlinguistic entities.

But in my desire to help my students experience themselves as writers I find myself in fact trying to help them *trust* language—not to question it—or at least not to question it for long stretches of the writing process: to hold off distrust till they revise. Some people say this is good advice only for inexperienced and blocked writers, but I think I see it enormously helpful to myself and to other adult, skilled, and professional writers. Striking benefits usually result when people learn that decidedly unacademic capacity to turn off distrust or worry about language and learn instead to forget about it, not see it, look through it as through a clear window, and focus all attention on one's experience of what one is trying to say. Let me quote a writer, William Stafford, about the need to *trust* language and one's experience:

My main plea is for the value of an unafraid, face-down, flailing, and speedy process in using the language.

Just as any reasonable person who looks at water, and passes a hand through it, can see that it would not hold a person up; so it is the judgment of common sense people that reliance on the weak material of students' experiences cannot possibly sustain a work of literature. But swimmers know that if they relax on the water it will prove to be miraculously buoyant; and writers know that a succession of little strokes on the material nearest them—without any prejudgments about the specific gravity of the topic or the reasonableness of their expectations—will result in creative progress. Writers are persons who write; swimmers are (and from teaching a child I know how hard it is to persuade a reasonable person of this)—swimmers are persons who relax in the water, let their heads go down, and reach out with ease and confidence. (*Writing the Australian Crawl: Views on the Writer's Vocation*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1978, 22–23.)

(7) A large area of conflict: How shall I teach my students to *place themselves* in the universe of other writers? Insofar as I want them to internalize the role of academic, I should teach my students always to situate themselves and what they have to say in the context of important writers who have written on the subject: to see the act of writing as an act of finding and acknowledging one's place in an ongoing intellectual conversation with a much larger and longer history than what goes on in this

classroom during these ten or fourteen weeks. In short, I should try to enact and live out in my classroom the Burkean metaphor of intellectual life as an unending conversation. This is what we academics do: carry on an unending conversation not just with colleagues but with the dead and unborn.

But the truth is (should I hang my head?) I don't give this dimension to my first year writing classroom. I don't push my first year students to think about what academics have written about their subject; indeed much of my behavior is a kind of invitation for them to *pretend* that no authorities have ever written about their subject before.

It might sound as though I invite only *monologic* discourse and discourage *dialogic* discourse. That's not quite right. I do invite monologic discourse (in spite of the current fashion of using "monologic" as the worst moral slur we can throw at someone), but I invite and defend dialogic discourse just as much. That is, I encourage students to situate what they write into the conversation of other members of the classroom community to whom they are writing and whom they are reading. Let me mention that the regular publication of the class magazine does more for this dialogic dimension than any amount of theoretical talk. I often assign papers *about* the class publication. In short, I find it helpful to invite students to see their papers as dialogic—parts of a conversation or dialogue; and I also find it crucial to assign dialogues and collaborative papers. But I also find it helpful to invite them to see their papers as monologues or soliloquies. My point here is that both academics and writers seem to me to engage in both monologic and dialogic discourse. (By the way, the classroom publication of student writing also helps me with another kind of "situating"—that is, I try quietly to find moments where I can invite students to be more aware of the positions from which they write—as men or women—as members of a race or class, or as having a sexual orientation.)²

In short, the real question or point of conflict here, then, is not so much about whether I should get my first year students to feel their writing as monologue or dialogue, whether to get them to speak to other voices or not, or to recognize their own positions or not. I'm working for both sides in each case. Rather it's a larger more general question: 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. I recently read an academic critique of a writer for being too self-absorbed, of reading his subjectivity too much into the object he was allegedly examining, of being imperial, arrogant—practicing analysis by means of

autobiography. I have to admit that I *want* first year students in my writing class to do that. I think autobiography is often the best mode of analysis. I'm afraid that I invite first year students to fall into the following sins: to take their own ideas too seriously; to think that they are the first person to think of their idea and be all wrapped up and possessive about it—even though others might have already written better about it—I invite them to write as though they are a central speaker at the center of the universe—rather than feeling, as they often do, that they must summarize what others have said and only make modest rejoinders from the edge of the conversation to all the smart thoughts that have already been written. (By the way, I was trained by good New Critics in the 1950s who often tried to get me to write as though no one else had ever written about the work I was treating. Therefore we cannot call this intellectual stance “nonacademic.” New Critics may be out of fashion but no one could call them anything but full fledged academics—indeed their distinguishing mark in comparison to their predecessors was heightened professionalism in literary studies.)

Perhaps this sounds condescending—as though I am not treating my students seriously enough as smart adults. I hope not. When I come across a really strong and competent first year writer who is being too arrogant and full of himself or herself and unwilling to listen to other voices—then in my feedback I instinctively lean a bit on that student: “Wait a minute. You’re talking as though yours are the only feelings and thoughts on this matter; have you ever considered looking to see what X and Y have said? You will have no credibility till you do.” And obviously, when students start to work in their disciplinary major, of course I am happy to force them to situate their writing among all the key positions in the conversation of that discipline. But grandstanding, taking themselves too seriously, and seeing themselves as the center of everything—I don’t see these as the characteristic sins of first year students.

Admittedly, first year students often suffer from a closely related sin: naiveté. For being naive and taking oneself too seriously can look alike and can take the same propositional form: implying simultaneously, “Everyone else is just like me” and “No one else in the universe has ever thought my thoughts or felt my feelings.” But when we see a paper with these problematic assumptions, we should ask ourselves: Is this really a problem of the writer taking herself too seriously and being too committed and self-invested in her writing? or is it a problem of the writer, though perhaps glib, being essentially timid and tapping only a small part of her thinking and feeling? When I get a strongly felt, fully committed, arrogant paper I am happy to wrestle and try to get tough with the writer. But so often with

first year students it is the latter: timidity and lack of deep entwinement in what they are writing.

Am I just being naive? Maybe. In any case let me openly acknowledge an arguable assumption underneath all this. I sense it is the distinguishing feature of writers to take themselves too seriously. Writing is a struggle and a risk. Why go to the bother unless what we say feels important? None of us who has a full awareness of all the trouble we can get into by writing would ever write by choice unless we also had a correspondingly full sense of pride, self-absorption, even arrogance. Most first year students have a strong sense of the trouble they can get into with writing, but they tend to lack that writer's correspondingly gift for taking themselves too seriously—*pride* in the importance of what they have to say. Look at our experience parenting: Most parents know instinctively that their job is to help their children take themselves more seriously, not less seriously. Once a student can really begin to own and care about her ideas, that will lead naturally to the necessary combat—which will lead to some cultural sophistication in itself.

(8) Here is my last brief point of conflict between the role of writer and academic. We all know that when students write to teachers they have to write “up” to an audience with greater knowledge and authority than the writer has about her own topic. The student is analyzing “To His Coy Mistress” for a reader who understands it better than she does. (Worse yet, the teacher/reader is often looking for a specific conclusion and form in the paper.) Even if the student happens to have a better insight or understanding than the teacher has, the teacher gets to define her own understanding as right and the student's as wrong. Thus the basic subtext in a piece of student writing is likely to be, “Is this okay?”

In contrast to students, the basic subtext in a writer's text is likely to be, “Listen to me, I have something to tell you,” for writers can usually write with more authority than their readers. Therefore, unless we can set things up so that our first year students are often telling us about things that they know better than we do, we are sabotaging the essential dynamic of writers. We are transforming the process of “writing” into the process of “being tested.” Many of the odd writing behaviors of students make perfect sense once we see that they are behaving as test-takers rather than writers.

How about academics on this score? It would seem as though they would have at least as strong an authority stance as writers do. After all, the academic in her writing has done a piece of research or reflection as a professional and is usually saying things that her readers do not know. But look again. I think you'll notice a curious resemblance between how students write to their teacher-readers and how academics write to their

colleague-readers—even if the academic is a tenured professor. Yes, the academic may have data, findings, or thoughts that are news; yet the paradigm transaction in academic writing is one where the writer is conveying those data, findings, or thoughts to authorities in the field whose job is to decide whether they are acceptable. These authorities get to decide whether the writing counts as important or true—whether it is valid—and ultimately whether it counts as knowledge. Have you ever noticed that when we write articles or books as academics, we often have the same feeling that students have when they turn in papers: “Is this okay? Will you accept this?” But damn it, I want my first year students to be saying in their writing, “Listen to me, I have something to tell you” not “Is this okay? Will you accept this?”

Of course some academics manage to send the strong perky message, “Listen to me, I have something to tell you.” But the structure of the academy tends to militate against that stance. And of course the structure of the classroom and the grading situation militate even more heavily against it. Therefore I feel I have a better chance of getting my students to take that forthright stance toward readers and their material if I do what I can to make them feel like writers, and avoid setting things up to make them feel like academics.

* * * * *

Conclusion. Behind this paper, then, I’m really asking a larger cultural question: Is there a conflict in general—apart from first year students or students in general—between the role of writer and the role of academic? Perhaps my categories are oversimple, but I confess I’m talking also about my own experience. I’m proud of being both an academic and a writer, partly because I’ve had to struggle on both counts. I’d like to inhabit both roles in an unconflicted way, but I feel a tug of war between them.

I suspect that if we could be more sensible about how we create and define the roles of academic and writer in our culture, the conflict might not be necessary. I have the feeling that the role of academic as we see it suffers narrowness for not containing more of what I have linked to the role of writer. Frankly, I think there are problems with what it means to be an academic. If academics were more like writers—wrote more, turned to writing more, enjoyed writing more—I think the academic world would be better. David, on the other hand, probably believes that the role of writer suffers narrowness for not containing more of what I have associated with the role of academic. So the conflict plays itself out. I am ready to try to be more wise about these roles. I suppose the obvious problem is that I define writer in too “romantic” a fashion. I stand by—nervously—trying to hold myself open to correction on this point. But are you going

to make me give up all the features of the role of writer that seem helpful and supportive? I hope you won't make the role of writer more astringent and trying than it already is.³

Notes

1. I am indebted here to a valuable unpublished paper about Polanyi by Elizabeth Wallace at Oregon State University.

2. It might sound as though my emphasis on student writing means that I'm keeping *authoritative* voices out of the classroom, but I'm not. It's only *academic* voices I don't particularly invite in. For I bring in a *bit* of outside reading. My point is that even timid students find it relatively easy to speak back with conviction to President Bush, to the Pope, to Adrienne Rich, the *The New York Times*; but not to academic or scholarly writers. It's interesting to ask why this should be. It's not because academics and scholars

have more authority—especially in the eyes of most students. It must be something about academic discourse. Of course it may be that I should spend more time teaching my students to talk back with authority to academics, and David gives good direction here in his *Facts, Counterfacts, and Artifacts*, but so far I haven't felt it as a high enough priority to give it the time it requires.

3. Not knowing that David and I were going to publish these talks till fairly recently, I used points numbered 4–6 in my essay, "The War Between Reading and Writing—and How to End It." *Rhetoric Review* 12.1 (Fall 1993).