Editor’s note: When Peter Elbow’s Vernacular Eloquence: What Speech Can Bring to Writing appeared, I sensed an opportunity for TETYC to engage in some meaningful discussion not only of Professor Elbow’s latest book but of the importance of Elbow’s career to us in the two-year college English profession. With something like a Cross-Talk feature in mind, I approached Professor Elbow at the CCCC Convention in St. Louis and asked if he’d be interested in responding to what a couple of our reviewers might have to say. He graciously accepted. I was pleased when Annie Del Principe, Holly Hassel, and Patrick Sullivan, recent Mark Reynolds TETYC Best Article Award winners, agreed to offer their views on the book in the context of Elbow’s career and theirs. What follows are their responses and Professor Elbow’s reply.
—Jeffrey Klausman, Book Review Editor

Vernacular Eloquence from a Vernacular Intellectual
Patrick Sullivan
Manchester Community College

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“The argument of this book is simple: that we can enlist the language activity most people find easiest, speaking, for the language activity most people find hardest, writing.” (139)

“In truth, this whole book is a celebration of hybridity and impurity.” (195)

We encounter in this new book, Vernacular Eloquence: What Speech Can Bring to Writing by Peter Elbow, a very skilled professional at work, thinking about his craft, demonstrating a deep engagement with important conversations in and outside of the discipline and, perhaps most importantly and appealingly, continuing to look for new ways to help students write better. Professor Elbow’s goal here is essentially what it has always been throughout his long and distinguished career—to make writing more enjoyable, more meaningful, and more accessible for students.

The best summary of the book is probably Elbow’s own, from his remarks upon accepting CCCC’s Exemplar Award in 2007:

Now I find myself still working to vernacularize writing. I’m caught up in a large and ambitious project of trying to bring more of the advantages of speaking and spoken language to writing. My premise is this: Virtually every human child masters the essential elements of a rich, intricate, and complex language by age four; but somehow it turns out (in our culture at least), that this language is not considered acceptable...
for serious important writing. And this is true even for the vernacular spoken language of mainstream privileged persons. Why should it be that everyone’s mother tongue is considered wrong for writing? (522)

As we might expect, Elbow has some important things to say here about our profession and the way writing is currently being taught. Perhaps most significantly, he suggests that our discipline has come to define “proper literacy” and “correct writing” (3) in certain punitive, restrictive, and perhaps ultimately self-defeating ways. Elbow instead argues for a definition of language as a living, organic, and vital thing—not something fixed and static—and he is inviting our profession to embrace the vibrant vernacular language that we find everywhere around us. He would like us to welcome many elements of this language into our “serious writing” (3–5).

In *Vernacular Eloquence*, Elbow ranges over an imposing variety of subjects as he develops his argument: speech as a linguistic product, culture, “magic,” the development of alphabetic writing in the Middle East, speaking as a process, audience, literacy, the “general prejudice against spoken language in our literate culture” (77), parataxis and hypotaxis, intonation, voice, idealism/realism/realistic idealism, freewriting, the virtues of “unplanned speech,” care and noncare, chaos, standard English, reading aloud, “good enough punctuation,” outlines and signposts, stigmatized vernaculars, training the voice and the ear, “propriety anxiety,” the “allure of wrongness,” American English, “English only,” world Englishes, divergence and standardization, blogs, text messaging, and the “naked rhetorical open space” of the Web (380), a space that Elbow suggests has been liberating for writers. He has drawn the title of the book from Dante’s *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. As Elbow notes in his opening pages, Dante argued famously that “the vernacular language of children and nursemaids in his native Florence was in fact nobler than Latin” (7). Elbow is making a similar claim for contemporary spoken language, especially in relation to “academic English” or “correct English.”

As has been the case throughout his career, Elbow is also interested in creating spaces for students to write that are free from the often debilitating pressures and judgments of the classroom. Furthermore, Elbow is especially interested in having us move beyond “the present culture of proper literacy” (3). Current thinking about writing, Elbow suggests, tells us that we are not supposed to do our serious writing in the mother tongue we know best and possess in our bones—but rather only in the prestige, correct, edited version of standardized English of what I will sometimes call “correct writing.” This helps explain a lot that we see about serious writing in the world. Many people have learned to manage or handle adequately “correct English,” but in doing so, they muffle or clog their thoughts into language that’s far less clear and interesting than they could have used in the language of their talking. Many other people don’t even feel that writing is an option for them and feel excluded—yet they speak smart, eloquent, interesting things. (3)

These points are crucial for our discipline, and they are examined clearly and effectively throughout the book. Elbow
proposes two practical ways to bring speech and spoken word into the writing classroom: “talking onto the page at the early stages of writing” and “reading aloud to revise at the end stages” (5).

Elbow makes a persuasive case for his pedagogical recommendations. He builds his argument with great care, caution, and attention to scholarship and opposing viewpoints. Sensitized no doubt by critical responses to some of his earlier work, he makes every effort here to anticipate counter-arguments and to spell out exactly what he does and does not mean, how he is and is not using particular terms, and how he would respond to objections to various parts of his argument. He does this skillfully, respectfully, and cheerfully throughout this volume, and this is a great strength of the book.

For those who have not read Elbow in a while, this book provides an excellent opportunity to re-engage with this important scholar. This is an especially important book for teachers at two-year colleges, where vernacular language is very much alive and well. English teachers at two-year colleges will likely find this book fascinating—and perhaps challenging as well (in all the best ways).

For me personally as a teacher and a writer, Professor Elbow has been a great source of inspiration. When I was just beginning my career, I drew on many of his ideas without even knowing they were his, as I developed my syllabi, conducted my classes, and made my first tentative steps toward becoming a teacher of English. Now, many years later, my admiration has only deepened. I have come to greatly admire the way Professor Elbow has often worked against the “dominant paradigm” during his career, seeking new and innovative ways to help us see and listen and learn. The best articulation of his current position within our discipline is, again, probably his own, from his Exemplar Award acceptance speech. I love what he says here about his journey and the way he positions himself as a “vernacular intellectual.”

He draws this phrase from Grant Farred and his book *What’s My Name? Black Vernacular Intellectuals:*

[Farred] applies [the term *vernacular intellectual*] to four interestingly different figures: Mohammed Ali, Bob Marley, CLR James, and Stuart Hall. He seeks to show how a vernacular intellectual can function at the intersection of the intellectual and the popular. He is interested in figures who “grasp the popular as the most efficacious language and mode of resistance” [Farred 3].

Of his four figures, James and Hall start out as more-or-less conventional intellectuals. I cannot help seeing myself when Farred writes that

Hall and James have to transgress intellectually (they have to work against the dominant traditions in which they have operated and are committed to), they have to act “improperly” in relation to their disciplines by questioning its efficacy, they have to move outside, alongside, disjunctively in relation to their various disciplines in order to conduct their inquiries. [Farred 7] . . .

I don’t fit everything he says (and he can be pretty hard even on his four heroes), but the term *vernacular intellectual* and much of his description fit my experience of who I’ve been and
what I’ve been up to ever since my second job as one of five founding faculty members at Franconia College in 1963. (523)

Thank you, Professor Elbow, for your indefatigable spirit, for your keen interest in finding new ways to engage students, and for all that you have done to help us become better writers, thinkers, and teachers. It was a pleasure to read this book, and it is an honor to review it here in these pages.

Work Cited


Vernacular Eloquence in the Two-Year College

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Peter Elbow’s latest book, Vernacular Eloquence: What Speech Can Bring to Writing, clearly emerges from his many productive years advocating for access to the joys of writing for all writers. In his February 2008 remarks after receiving the CCCC Exemplar award, Elbow was thinking about this book, calling it “large and ambitious,” and articulating as his purpose “to change our very conception of literacy so that all vernacular dialects and languages are deemed appropriate for serious writing” (3). In making this case, Vernacular Eloquence advances the work that we have come to experience as woven into the very fabric of our discipline—process pedagogy, freewriting, the value of peer readers, writing as discovery. Though Elbow himself rejects the characterization of his work as expressivist (“I don’t recognize the ‘expressivist Peter Elbow’ who people so often think they know. And I hate the word expressivist”), Elbow’s name has become nearly synonymous with a sort of “relaxing” of internal and external strictures that keep writers from writing—fear of criticism, lack of confidence, or simply lack of experience.

Elbow’s achievement in Vernacular Eloquence is to contribute to his influential body of work by asking readers to fundamentally rethink their assumptions about writing and reading. Like Writing without Teachers, which encouraged readers to suspend disbelief as they encounter a text in order to fully experience it before judging it, in Vernacular Eloquence Elbow asks both readers and writers to suspend their usual frameworks for interacting with and producing text. As Elbow states, he wants readers to agree that “there are many virtues in unplanned careless spontaneous spoken language” (9). As teachers of college writing at institutions of access, most two-year college faculty employ the sorts of pedagogical strategies usually credited to Peter Elbow. As readers of this latest work and two-year college English faculty, we were interested in some key aspects that we think will reflect the needs and interests of many instructors who teach in two-year colleges. First, what
benefit can Elbow’s thesis have to the classrooms in which we teach every day? Second, how will our theoretical and professional understanding of what it means to be a writing teacher benefit from Elbow’s discussion of the relationship between written and spoken language?

It’s worth noting that Vernacular Eloquence is more expansive in scope than Elbow’s best-known works—Writing with Power, Writing without Teachers—in that Elbow employs nontraditional structural aspects to contextualize his argument. As Elbow explains, he doesn’t use footnotes, but he puts “bits of scholarly reference or discussion” into shaded boxes, adding a visual dimension to the reading experience that enhances the lines of his argument with relevant historical, literary, or linguistic observations. These additional, related meditations—comments on the history of language and the role of culture in language, accounts of related moments in linguistic history, comments from well-known writers ranging from classical rhetoricians to contemporary novelists, or simply notes about grammar or current events—add density to the text in a way that grounds the points he makes. We should note that this approach also might make it challenging for readers with practical interests to parse out the answers to the two questions above on relevance to teaching. In this way, Elbow’s book may be less practical for two-year college faculty readers who are accustomed to his other works that have offered specific and applicable advice for the classroom and with students.

That said, in Vernacular Eloquence, Elbow offers readers two phases in the writing process when unplanned speech could be beneficial for writers: the early stages of invention and the late stages of revision. His argument for using speech during early stages of writing is that it helps us tap into a more comfortable, casual mental speech that allows us to discover what we think as we simply utter words onto the page. His advocacy for speech in the invention stages of writing resonates with his argument for freewriting: both speech and freewriting have a better chance of helping thinkers access the seeds of what they’re really thinking and what they want to say; both typically escape the vigilant editor portion of writers’ minds that often punches in when they begin and often stifles creative thought. For this reason, Elbow asserts that the comfortable informality—what he refers to throughout the book as “careless” or “spontaneous” speech—helps writers figure out what they’re thinking and what they might want to actually write about before they sit down to “write.” Elbow stresses that this “thinking onto the page” that a writer can use to get rolling can be done with our mouths (literally speaking aloud to others) or our fingers (freewriting). Of course, two-year college teachers will be quite familiar with freewriting as a pedagogical technique; but in this volume Elbow renews his commitment to freewriting as a method of invention, documenting through examples from his own writing and that of others how writing while the internal editor is “turned off” can ultimately get writers closer to what they really mean to say.

In the latest stages of revision—once a full piece of writing has been crafted, written up, and carefully re-
vised—Elbow argues for another equally useful role for the spoken word: helping writers and readers make writing clearer and stronger by reading their work aloud. This technique can be used in many different ways: students reading their work to a single partner, students reading their work aloud to a small group of listeners who also have printed copies of the writing, or students reading their work aloud to themselves—or to a friend—outside of class. Elbow explains that this rather simple technique of reading aloud can help writers, with or without the help of their live audience members, identify “places that feel wrong or tangled or dead” in their writing (239). He goes on to explain, in a series of chapters, how reading aloud helps improve the use of intonation units, “good enough” punctuation, and organization.

Elbow’s pedagogical suggestions for making use of spontaneous speech in writing offer both benefits and challenges for two-year college teachers. Community college students often come from academic backgrounds where they have had limited experience with formal academic writing; as a result, students (particularly those who start in nondegree credit courses) can lack confidence in their abilities to make judgments about their own and others’ writing. Even run-of-the-mill peer reviewing sessions, a staple of first-year writing instruction, can be a hard sell for these students at first because they can feel as if they have nothing to contribute. Teachers have to model the value of honest, spontaneous, inexpert and reader-based responses to writing in order to convince them that they can both offer and gain something valuable through the process, that their abilities as readers provide valuable feedback to all writers.

Further, the techniques Elbow introduces for what he calls “harnessing vernacular speech” (317) may place demands on two-year college writers that might stretch them to the point of discomfort.” For example, two-year colleges serve many students whose academic backgrounds did not invite them or expect them to be active learners—to develop independent learning and literacy skills that are required for success in higher education. Here again, teachers have to convince and teach their students to trust themselves and their voices, and also must inspire students to take on more “work” (responsibility) than they may be used to or interested in. Elbow’s techniques ask a lot of students, and this is a good thing; but not all students will easily and readily speak onto the page, nor will they trust their voices and phrasing enough to critique their own or others’ writing.

This is especially true for students whose home language is not English, or who arrive at first-year writing courses after taking nondegree credit courses for multilingual students. These students in particular may be reticent to trust their own sense of the music and intonation of English enough to participate productively in any of the read-aloud techniques Elbow suggests. Elbow acknowledges here that “people who come to English after adolescence […] will probably be slow to develop the intonational habits of native English speakers, and so they cannot put so much trust in their mouths and ears” (253). Beyond the students’ reticence, one can genuinely question the use-
fulness of having students who are just trying to develop an “ear” for English intonation make judgments about their own or others’ writing in English by reading and listening aloud, and Elbow himself only writes that he has “a hunch the process may be of some use even for students of this sort” (253).

In addition to ESL students, students with speech and language disorders, psychological problems (including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, schizophrenia, and other disorders), and dyslexia might find it difficult to use Elbow’s techniques because of language-based difficulties. While students with dyslexia sometimes benefit from having their written work read to them by someone else or by a computer program, their difficulties are sometimes compounded by the anxiety they feel in anticipating their difficulties and the reaction of their peers or teachers. Further, some deaf students may well be able to read their work aloud, but they would not be able to accurately lip-read students’ responses to them, and they would have to rely on a sign language interpreter’s interpretation as opposed to translation of what had been said, which could potentially diminish the benefits of the conversational techniques that Elbow emphasizes. Other students, such as those on the autism spectrum, could potentially feel uncomfortable with group work in general. Finally, students with visual problems, ranging from low vision to blindness, would also struggle with the read-aloud protocols described in *Vernacular Eloquence*.

Probably the most provocative idea from Elbow’s book, one that two-year college faculty will find challenging, is his claim that as new technologies enable more and different kinds of writing, and as more and more vernacular dialects appear in new and old genres, “writing will no longer be judged against two standards as it is now: correctness and quality. The only standard for both writers and readers will be the primal one: Is the writing any good?” (7). Calling into question the assumptions about correctness and rigid rules that have shaped teacherly readings of academic writing, Elbow predicts that attempts to control and standardize language (efforts he documents in historical sidebars) will ultimately unravel into what he calls a “new vernacular culture” (376), one where the informalities of speech will inform all sorts of communication, even formal academic writing. As Elbow writes, “our culture of literacy has been moving for some time now toward a very different culture of literacy—a culture that will accept and even welcome spoken language for writing. And not just mainstream spoken English: all versions of spoken English will be considered acceptable for serious public writing before too very long. This means we’ll no longer have a single language for what’s valid in public writing” (363).

Many two-year college faculty readers could find validity in this claim while simultaneously resisting this conclusion’s resonance for the material realities of our teaching. For example, standardized testing weighs heavily on many community college teachers as they design their courses and curricula, which may seem a challenge both to implementing Elbow’s approach and to accepting the foundations of his argument. At many two-year colleges,
most if not all students are required to take a standardized grammar and usage test, either to place into degree-credit writing or to progress from remedial to credit-bearing writing courses. More and more we’re seeing the implementation of rising junior-year standardized written examinations in community colleges. Basic and degree-credit writing instruction in college is increasingly exposed to externally imposed student learning outcomes, assessed through timed examinations, and high-stakes grammar and usage tests like Accuplacer or COMPASS.

Teachers—good, progressive teachers—who find themselves in these situations may struggle to find a way of implementing many of Elbow’s suggestions in their own classrooms, particularly at the expense of time dedicated to ensuring students have mastered the conventions of what Elbow calls Edited Written English. They probably agree that freewriting is a wonderful way of helping writers to loosen up, trust themselves, and produce strong and clear first drafts; but these teachers also know that those who assess standardized, timed writing essays implement rubrics that look closely at students’ fluency in Edited Written English. Additionally, students may be excluded from higher education based on their performance on standardized, timed usage tests. While these teachers do not want to teach to the tests and turn their courses into mindless test preparation, they are sensitive to the very real, high-stakes testing hurdles their students face at the end of their courses and may struggle to find the space for freewriting in the vernacular and read-aloud revising strategies. And they may also recognize that the future Elbow describes where all sorts of vernacular speech—even stigmatized or nonstandard varieties of English—is not now.

Despite these material challenges to implementing Elbow’s pedagogical suggestions and stance in two-year college teaching, there are many ways these ideas could benefit our teaching practice. As we all know, community college teachers simply teach more courses per year than our four-year and university peers, which means that we spend a lot of time reading and responding to student writing. Integrating some of Elbow’s suggested read-aloud techniques in the classroom serves the important pedagogical purpose of cultivating a classroom environment where we are all valuable readers and writers and where reading and writing are social transactions. In those transactions, writers gather feedback that helps them develop the independent ability to evaluate its relevance to their purpose, goals, and audience needs. More reader feedback shifts some of the burden from the instructor of being the “sole voice” of authoritative feedback, and it may lighten the paper load just a bit.

Another profound benefit we see to freewriting and reading aloud to revise is that both techniques—if implemented strategically in the classroom—could help our students develop greater trust and confidence in their own language competence. As noted, our students often come to us with very little confidence in their writing ability, largely because of their prior educational and sociocultural experiences. This is, of course, one of Elbow’s primary goals in suggesting this new way of thinking.
about literacy, to empower those writers who are currently disenfranchised by the emphasis on propriety and compliance in Edited Written English. Elbow’s claim that “everyone with a native language has what it takes to write well and punctuation adequately” (6) could be a particularly heartening message for inexperienced or anxious writers. Within community colleges, the achievement of this goal might just take a bit more modeling, effort, and time than it would in a four-year college or university, but we think our students can benefit from achieving it, perhaps even more profoundly than those in other institutions of higher learning.

Teaching in the two-year college is characterized by the labor-intensive and often rewarding work of teaching in the lower division, particularly to a wide range of students and largely in first-year writing and basic writing courses. We all look for ways to empower our students to develop confidence and skill that will provide them with both academic success and greater sense of authority, and Elbow’s book gives us another important way to engage students in the writing process using readily available and comfortable tools.

Work Cited


Two Cents’ Worth: In Gratitude to Patrick Sullivan, Annie Del Principe, and Holly Hassel

Peter Elbow
University of Massachusetts Amherst

I appreciate how Patrick related my book to what I had written about feeling myself as a vernacular intellectual. I’d forgotten those words, and I feel them getting to the heart of my efforts in this book. However, I’d like to use this space to speak to the good questions raised by Annie and Holly in their generous review.

1. Is the book too long and complicated to be useful to lots of overworked teachers in two-year colleges?

With chagrin, I must answer “Yes.” There was so much that excited me about what I found out in writing the book that I couldn’t hold myself back from putting too much in there. But let me suggest some “Cliffs Notes” commentary to make the book more useable. I’m eager to be heard by these central teachers in higher education. I’d argue that their students need most the help in learning to believe in the virtues of unplanned spoken language.

Let me underline the two simple and concrete techniques on which Annie and Holly focus: First, speaking onto the page. This means inviting students to use unplanned and even careless spoken language to get lots of words onto the page—finding lots of words and ideas they otherwise miss when they are being careful about “good writing.” In effect, this is an invitation to make a mess for the first draft. Second (for help in making a good final version), revising by reading aloud. My mantra here is very concrete: take every sentence and read it aloud—respectfully and even lovingly—but ready to improve it. Then keep fiddling with the words till they feel right in the mouth and sound right in the ear. This means using only the mouth and the ear as criteria; this means
calling on the body!

If I should gather myself up to write a tiny short book after the ordeal of this long one, I would sum up everything under this title: *The Wisdom of the Tongue.*

The important news here is intonation: the secret core of language—both spoken and written language. Happily, this news can be found by reading chapters 5, 11, and 12 of *Vernacular Eloquence.* And in chapters 13 and 14, I show what many teachers will find hard to believe: that students can use reading aloud even for punctuation. Not perfectly correct punctuation that follows every rule, but good-enough punctuation.

Also, between all the chapters are micro essays that I call “literacy stories”: they tell intriguing moments in the history of how humans have used writing. They are wonderfully short. (The first three are more informational and less “story” than the rest.) All these literacy stories manage, in a way, to tell the story of the book.

2. *Can ESL and EFL students use the technique I suggest of revising by reading aloud?*

There are good reasons for being skeptical, yet I’ve tried it a bit with such students and found it helpful for them; and quite a few other teachers have told me of their similar experience with such students. So my advice is to experiment. You might be surprised.

The mouth and the ear are smarter than most people think.

3. *Will the techniques in the book help students with timed essay exams—help them master the conventions of standard written English?*

These two questions need to be separated. The techniques certainly won’t help students on exams that focus explicitly and exclusively on the rules of correct written grammar. But most timed essay exams are a different matter. They are looking for understanding of content, ideas, reasoning, and language that is clear rather than tangled. Scoring rubrics for such exams—because students write under pressure and have no time to revise and copyedit—tend to put correct grammar fairly low on the list of criteria. The techniques in the book will definitely help here. They will help students think better on paper, find more ideas, and use language that is more fluent and clear. One of the biggest causes of bad exam writing is this: students are too preoccupied with trying to write “correct grammar” and can’t focus on their ideas and can’t use language that is most available to them—even if sometimes unidiomatic.

Again, my thanks to the reviewers for careful, generous reading and to the editors for the chance to try to reach teachers who do the most important work in higher education.
From Form to Meaning: Freshman Composition and the Long Sixties, 1957–1974

From Form to Meaning, a history of the abolition (and rebirth) of freshman composition at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, brings much needed historical perspective to recent conversations concerning the sustainability or abolition of first-year composition. By offering a carefully researched case study of what happens when a first-year writing requirement is ended, Fleming provides teachers and program administrators with ideas that can help them respond to calls for reducing or eliminating general education writing requirements. Specifically, Fleming’s book identifies the factors that make first-year composition a frequent target for general education reform, presents a previous case where abolishing first-year writing set back an established campus writing culture for well over two decades, and offers a clear message for why general education writing requirements are central to the mission of American higher education.

The introduction focuses on what Fleming calls “the idea of freshman composition,” the enduring features of the course, both at the UW and elsewhere, that make it intellectually rich and, at the same time, exposed to attacks from critics. Specifically, Fleming examines freshman composition’s generality (its perceived lack of content and focus on practical skills), its universality (the idea that it can address writing issues faced by all students), and its liminality (the course’s location both in and outside the academy; its identification with first-year students) (3–4). Chapters 2 and 3 outline curricular and cultural developments that shaped the UW’s program between 1848 and 1968. Fleming finds that during this period the curriculum became less progressive, with the period between 1948 and 1968 being “almost frighteningly stable” (51) despite significant changes on the UW campus and nationwide.

The next three chapters chronicle the dilution and eventual dismantling of freshman composition at the UW. Chapter 4 analyzes the department’s decision in 1968 to reduce the writing requirement from two semesters to one, with English 102 becoming the required course and English 101 being remedialized. Examining departmental reports and proposals alongside findings from SAT scores and early composition research, most notably Janet Emig’s The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders, Fleming contests the department’s claim that incoming students were better prepared and contends that the real reason department faculty decided to
cut the requirement is “because they no longer saw it as an important part of the department’s mission” (82), turning their attention instead to graduate studies. In chapter 5, Fleming draws on interviews with former TAs, including Ira Shor and Susan McLeod, to examine more closely graduate students’ increasing interest in freshman composition and their contributions to the development of the curriculum between 1966 and 1969. Of particular interest in this chapter is Fleming’s analysis of how TAs sought to make English 101 resemble what we would today call a writing studio (113–16). Chapter 6 describes the growing tension between TAs and faculty that eventually led to the department’s proposal to stop offering English 102. Although the official reasons for canceling the program were that students’ writing had improved and that writing instruction was best done in students’ majors, Fleming finds from interviews that “perhaps the main reason . . . for the elimination of English 102 at UW in 1969 . . . was the English faculty’s lack of confidence in their own teaching assistants” (153), who they viewed as increasingly radicalized, a claim Fleming rebuts.

The final two chapters examine both the local and broader implications of the abolition of freshman composition at the UW. Chapter 7 examines how stakeholders across campus, in various committee reports, contested the department’s conclusion that incoming students’ literacy skills had improved and outlines the events that led to the creation of a new two-course communication requirement in 1996. In chapter 8, Fleming returns to the “idea of freshman composition” that he discusses in the opening chapter, this time examining how these values that put the course at risk also made it intellectually and politically valuable. Fleming suggests that because freshman composition is “a space that resists the fragmentation, segregation, and privatism of our society and imagines that we can learn from each other, no matter how different we are” (205), it is uniquely positioned to help institutions of higher learning achieve their civic missions.

Fleming’s history of the UW is important to read now because of the current budgetary and political pressures on first-year composition, with many programs, including my own, reducing their writing requirements. If Fleming’s book had been available when my institution reduced its writing requirement from two semesters to one, I could have used it to argue more persuasively for the value of first-year writing and how our reduction of the writing requirement was shortsighted and put the one remaining course at risk. However, I am glad Fleming’s book will be there when our program takes on the curricular struggles we will inevitably face in the years to come.

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Agency in the Age of Peer Production

Agency in the Age of Peer Production is part of the CCCC Studies in Writing and Rhetoric Series, which aims in part “to influence . . . how writing gets...
taught at the college level” (i). The passive “gets taught” implies a certain lack of control: while scholars, department chairs, writing program administrators (WPAs), and other interested faculty may seek to “influence” what goes on in writing classrooms, ultimately many factors affect how writing “gets taught” across a given program.

This book presents a qualitative study of that tension between normalizing influence and individual teachers’ agency, with a focus on “peer production tools,” such as online databases of teaching materials, digital grading rubrics, and a mentoring program for new instructors—tools that “allow for massive acts of collaborative creation by asking for just a little effort from each contributor” (8). As the authors investigate how such tools both promote and constrain individual instructors’ contributions to the writing program, they focus on how peer production tools can democratize the work of writing program administration. That focus should make the book of special interest to readers in two-year colleges and teaching-focused universities without WPAs, where work such as designing curricula and promoting faculty development may already be accomplished collaboratively by committees of writing faculty.

Chapter 1 begins by noting the increasing presence of peer production in writing programs, drawing attention to ways that it can, in theory, promote individual agency and contribute to the development of a “gift culture” in which instructors collaborate, freely and generously, to shape curricula and develop pedagogical and assessment materials. The qualifier “in theory” is key, of course, due to the familiar 80–20 rule, which predicts that only about 20 percent of the members of a group will do nearly all the work on a given project. Chapter 2 describes the study’s institutional context and methodology; for readers in other contexts, the most useful parts of this chapter may be the descriptions of several digital peer production tools (26–33), such as a password-protected site where instructors can share assignments and lesson plans or discuss pedagogy, and a wiki-glossary where instructors can identify and define rhetorical vocabulary used in first-year writing classes (and continually refine those definitions as needed). Such tools might prove especially helpful in writing programs where many writing instructors are not trained as compositionists.

Chapter 3 describes the authors’ efforts at “creating a culture of assessment” within their writing program. In 2008, after the roll-out of My Reviewers, a required, online grading rubric, instructors voiced several concerns, including a lack of privacy, a preference for grading by hand, and technical problems with the online interface. Introducing My Reviewers also highlighted a situation likely common in many institutions where writing instructors have vastly different levels of training, experience, and institutional investment: while a common rubric had already been part of the program’s official policy for five years, many teachers’ classroom practices were not actually aligned to the program’s expectations. In response to
instructors’ concerns and to encourage instructors to use the rubric, the WPA sought ways to involve instructors in evaluating and revising both the rubric and how it was presented to instructors in future semesters.

Chapters 4 and 5 discuss what the authors have learned from instructors about the various levels, means, and motivations for participating in the writing program’s peer production efforts. Chapter 4 focuses on instructors’ views of digital peer production tools, especially the reasons instructors give for not using those tools, from feeling overwhelmed by too many options to feeling that they have little of value to contribute. Importantly, many instructors who are reluctant to engage with the program’s digital peer production efforts are found to be active peer producers offline, sharing assignments and other materials with colleagues. This sort of face-to-face peer production is the focus of chapter 5, which describes the writing program’s system of mentoring new instructors. As with digital peer production tools, however, participation in this program is mixed.

The final chapter begins with an appeal to ecological metaphors to explain these findings and their relationship with the idea of agency: some flowers grow best in carefully controlled gardens, while other thrive in the wild. With that metaphor in mind, the authors offer a heuristic for assessing and exercising agency within “a large writing program with a diverse student body and a faculty that regularly rotates in and out of university programs” (148). WPAs and teachers, they argue, need to consider issues such as how the program is situated within the university, how technology is used within the program (both officially and unofficially), and how instructors understand professional development within the program. These considerations can help teachers think about how to “implement standardization without strangling academic freedom” (167).

As a how-to, the book may be of limited use: It is (appropriately) thin on technical details and is focused on the writing program of a single research university, both of which restrict how easily teachers and WPAs in other contexts might be able to adopt some of the specific peer production tools the authors describe. The book’s value, instead, lies in the way it may help writing teachers think about how they use peer production technologies in their own programs. For example, the authors conclude that “The 80–20 rule under-represents sharing and collaboration” because it ignores the dynamic ways in which teachers collaborate outside of officially sanctioned channels (151). Similarly, the authors suggest that for peer production technologies to be effective, “simplicity, not content, is king” (156). In other words, online databases of instructor-created teaching materials are only effective if teachers can easily and intuitively find what they’re looking for. While not earth-shattering, these sorts of insights offer a needed corrective to perennial claims that new technologies will magically solve all of our educational problems (witness, for instance, the recent and sudden popularity of MOOCs). Certainly they will not. But neither are they likely to go away, and Agency in the Age of Peer Production offers readers ways of thinking about how they can most effectively
use these tools as they wrestle with the conflicting demands of structure and freedom in their programs.

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Agents of Integration: Understanding Transfer as a Rhetorical Act

In Agents of Integration: Understanding Transfer as a Rhetorical Act, Rebecca S. Nowacek addresses one of the greatest challenges facing education: how and why and when students connect and apply learning from one context to another. The issue is especially important to faculty teaching writing within the early semesters of college as helping students negotiate the difference between writing in high school and college, as well as writing within different contexts and disciplines, is an ongoing challenge. Transfer is important to those teaching in two-year colleges as we strive to prepare our students for writing in college and in professional life. The author begins by examining the current scholarship concerning the issue of transfer as well as recent debates surrounding transfer. Nowacek then narrows her focus to her research and theory about transfer and the roles that students, instructors, and institutions play in its success and failure. Her introduction provides a useful and well-framed overview of the primary scholarship addressing the issue of transfer.

Contending that previous scholarship on transfer takes too limited a view and that transfer is both more common and more complex than previously thought, Nowacek argues that students’ efforts to make connections, to transfer knowledge from one context to another, are not always recognized, as current theories of transfer inhibit this recognition. The author creates the theoretical foundation for her argument by positing that transfer is best understood as an act of recontextualization and draws from cognitive psychology, activity theory, and rhetorical genre theory to support her position. Arguing that transfer is a complex rhetorical act, she uses the metaphor “agents of integration” to describe the rhetorical moves that students make to connect between individual acts of cognition and social contexts. Preferring the term integration to transfer, as it makes the act more intentional and successful, Nowacek describes agents of integration as those who actively work to perceive and convey connections. In this theory, the student is an agent, able to act and make change on his or her own behalf, while making his or her own meaning. The author contends that helping students work toward understanding rhetorical situations as agents can facilitate transfer, or integration. Her theories of integration are based on her study of a rich cross-section of data collected from her study of the instructors and students participating in an interdisciplinary humanities seminar that included three linked courses.

Nowacek acknowledges that in-
stitutions inhibit integration, as most college courses are disconnected from each other, which places the burden for integration on students, and argues that institutions and instructors must play a more active role. While the instructors in the study were able to teach for integration by working to make deliberate and visible connections among the content of three disciplines, Nowacek’s critique of institutional blocks to integration include structures that make it difficult for instructors to foster integration as well as to recognize the connections that students make. She argues that instructors can help their students become agents of integration by deliberately designing assignments that challenge their preexisting conceptions and probe the relationship between conventions and purposes.

Arguing that institutions support this integration by relocating composition classes within interdisciplinary writing communities, the author proposes that writing instruction be instead situated in an interdisciplinary learning community to support genre and metacognitive awareness. She also suggests metareflective assignments embedded within more traditional writing classes in which students work to create a framework and make links and connections in their writing. While the idea of providing more direct instruction and support for genre and metacognitive awareness has been proposed by others arguing for composition reform (Beaufort, Smit, and Wardle, to name a few), Nowacek’s study is able to provide rich, thick descriptions of student thought processes, which is reminiscent of Beaufort’s longitudinal study and is equally illuminating. In terms of the current literature, Nowacek’s work fits within the spectrum of current thinking on teaching for integration that Snead describes as focused on helping students articulate and make the connections between writing situations.

While providing many important insights into the ways that students can and do integrate knowledge from one discipline into the work of another, a major weakness of this study is its site. Many public institutions will not be able to re-create the kind of interdisciplinary community that Nowacek describes and will have to work with a very different student population within existing curricular structures. However, curricular reform continues to sweep across campuses, and so as more and more writing programs move out of their traditional home in English departments and become integrated into disciplinary work, Nowacek’s ideas become even more relevant. In either case, this book is a useful addition to the reading list of any instructor seeking to understand the issue of transfer because it offers a means for instructors to create assignments and courses that foster integration. There are definite lessons that can be drawn from the experiences of the students Nowacek follows that could benefit instructors at any institution. In addition, Nowacek challenges the status quo of many traditional composition programs and offers two-year college faculty and writing program directors an alternative approach to teaching writing.

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In 1985, writing as the fervor for sentence combining dwindled away, Elizabeth Rankin claimed “style is out of style” (239). She offered two reasons for the decline. First, style was not being taught because of the “competing concerns” of process pedagogy (which privileges invention) and product pedagogy (which privileges style). Second, Rankin claimed composition lacked a “sound, complete, and adequate theory” for teaching, analyzing, and talking about style (240). Robert Connors, in 2000, offered another take on style’s erasure from the classroom, suggesting that composition’s efforts to define itself as a field drove sentence-level instruction from our pedagogies (121). And in 2013—nearly thirty years after Rankin and fifteen after Connors—I would wager that style is still out of style, but for different reasons than Rankin and Connors posit. Look to either the subject matter of scholarship published in composition’s leading journals or to the bulk of curricula for first-year writing courses, and it is apparent our pedagogical concerns are not at the sentence level. I do not mean this as a critique of where composition focuses its energies currently—we are making remarkable strides in the digital humanities, historiography, literacy studies, disability studies, and service-learning, for instance—but I would suggest our field’s interests are spread thin, with the sentence garnishing little, if any, close attention.

But the tide is changing. Numerous scholars (many of whom appear in Paul Butler’s 2010 Style in Rhetoric and Composition: A Critical Sourcebook) have been calling over the past several decades for a return to style, and it would seem we are now finally hearing, and heeding, them. Today’s stylistics, though, is a different stylistics than the legalistic pedagogy of Strunk and White. It is a stylistics that returns to the rhetoric-ity of the sentence. It is a stylistics that teaches the sentence not just in terms of conventions, but also in terms of how it locates the writer within the world.
It is the stylistics of Laura Micciche, who argues, “The examinations of language made possible through rhetorical grammar pedagogy encourage students to view writing as a material social practice in which meaning is actively made, rather than passively related or effortlessly produced” (252). It is the stylistics of Virginia Tufte, whose *Artful Sentences: Style as Syntax* showcases a catalogue of brilliantly crafted sentences accompanied by analyses that move the sentence beyond mere convention. It is the stylistics of Martha Kolln and Loretta Gray, whose textbook *Rhetorical Grammar: Grammatical Choices* makes the work of the sentence central to the work of the composition classroom. It is a stylistics evidencing a resurrection of the art and craft and rhetoric of syntax, and it is within this stylistics, within this moment in composition’s changing attitude toward sentence-level instruction, that Stanley Fish and Verlyn Klinkenburg write.

Fish opens *How to Write a Sentence* and *How to Read One* with a confession: “Some people are bird watchers, others are celebrity watchers; still others are flora and fauna watchers. I belong to the tribe of sentence watchers. Some appreciate fine art; others appreciate fine wines. I appreciate fine sentences” (3). Fish, “always on the lookout for sentences that take your breath away” (3), then offers up his collection of sentences, which he likens to sports highlight reels—“the five greatest dunks, or the ten greatest catches, or the fifteen greatest touchdown runbacks”—feats accompanied by the “rueful recognition that you couldn’t do it yourself even though you also have two hands and feet” (3). Here is where Fish makes his pedagogical intervention. *How to Write a Sentence* is not merely a museum of sentences. It is a pedagogical treatise founded upon the virtues of imitation.

At its core, *How to Write a Sentence* extrapolates the method Fish put forth in his 1970 “Literature and the Reader: Affective Stylistics.” (Published, I note, at the height of sentence-level instruction in composition.) There, Fish lays out how he reads sentences, arguing for “substituting” the traditional question we ask of literature—“what does this sentence mean?”—for “another, more operational question—what does this sentence do?” (125). That way of reading sentences, a method founded upon the movements of syntax, is the foundation for *How to Write a Sentence*. Because Fish reads sentences so well, I quote him here at length on John Updike’s description of Ted Williams’s final homerun in Fenway Park, “It was in the books while it was still in the sky”:

The fulcrum of the sentence is “while”; on either side of it are two apparently very different kinds of observations. “It was in the books” is metaphorical. Updike imagines, correctly, that this moment will be memorialized in stories and at the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York, and he confers that mythical status on the moment before it is completed, before the ball actually goes out of the park. Indeed, in this sentence, the ball never does get out of the park. It is “still in the sky,” a phrase that has multiple meanings; the ball is still in the sky in the sense that it has not yet landed; it is still in the sky in the sense that its motion is arrested; and it is still in the sky in the sense that it is, and will remain forever, in the sky of the
books, in the record of the game’s highest, most soaring achievements. On the surface “in the books” and “in the sky” are in distinct registers, one referring to the monumentality the homerun will acquire in history, the other describing the ball’s actual physical arc; but the registers are finally, and indeed immediately (this sentence goes fast), the same: the physical act and its transformation into myth occur simultaneously; or rather, that is what Updike makes us feel as we glide through this deceptively simple sentence composed entirely of monosyllables. (9–10)

Fish performs similar analyses throughout How to Write a Sentence, and accompanying each are Fish’s own attempts at imitation. Riffing off Updike’s sentence, Fish offers “It was in my stomach before it was off the shelf,” “She was enrolled at Harvard before she was conceived,” “He won the match before the first serve,” and “They were celebrating while the other team was still at bat” (10). These imitations, Fish admits, are lackluster compared to Updike’s original, but that is beside the point. Fish makes a compelling case for imitation as a pedagogy, his imitations grounded in keen analysis stemming from a rhetorical interrogation at the sentence-level of prose.

Whereas Fish follows sentence description immediately with analysis, Klinkenborg’s Several Short Sentences about Writing keeps the two apart, the first three-quarters of the book offering a philosophical treatment of sentence-level aesthetics and the final quarter offering sample sentences and analysis. Klinkenborg believes the sentence—and the short sentence, at that—to be the pinnacle of composition. “The only link between you and the reader,” he tells us, “is the sentence you’re making” (4). And the most effective sentence, according to Klinkenborg, is the short sentence, for it works by implication:

The longer the sentence, the less it’s able to imply.

And writing by implication should be one of your goals.

Implication is almost nonexistent in the prose that surrounds you,

The prose of law, science, business, journalism, and most academic fields.

It was nonexistent in the way you were taught to write.

That means you don’t know how to use one of a writer’s most important tools:

The ability to suggest more than the words seem to allow,

The ability to speak to the reader in silence. (12–13)

Immediately striking about Klinkenborg’s book are not only the claims he makes but also their presentation on the page, his prose laid out like a poem. Klinkenborg explains his rationale later in the book: composing in such a manner allows a writer to compare sentence length and sentence construction. Because variety is the key to good prose, Klinkenborg advocates putting words on the page with each sentence beginning its own paragraph. That way, the prose “look[s] less familiar” (55), and the writer can see its variations—or lack thereof. Granted, some of his own
sentences are long (as in the above quotation), but I read that as intentional, for early in the book he offers solace to writers uneasy with the short sentence:

You’ll make long sentences again, but they’ll be short sentences at heart.

Sentences listening for the silence around them.

Listening for their own pulse. (5)

These books, however, do have their flaws. Fish, in amassing his collection of sentences, pulls each out of context. He does not allow us to see the sentences surrounding the ones he analyzes. But, as we know, a sentence never occurs in isolation. It is always placed within a paragraph, a chapter, an essay. So, too, a sentence always occurs within a political and cultural context as well. A reading of a beautiful sentence is a social aesthetic, and I would have liked to see Fish interrogate the basis for his judgments as to what constitutes well-crafted prose while offering more contextualization—both social and textual—for reading his selected sentences. And for Klinkenborg, my only complaint is how he presents student writing. The last fifty pages of Several Short Sentences about Writing offers select passages from published authors and from students. Several thoughtful questions from Klinkenborg accompany a full paragraph from each published author. It is a great model of how to read prose with an eye for sentence craft. But when Klinkenborg turns to student writing, he only quotes single sentences (decontextualizing them somewhat like Fish does), and each is accompanied by an oft snarky comment. Although Klinkenborg’s sarcasm does highlight flaws in the students’ writing (the tone perhaps lingering from his work on the New York Times editorial board), its dismissiveness toward student writing is disconcerting. If only Klinkenborg read student writing with the same generosity he did his published authors.

But these objections do not negate all that Fish and Klinkenborg have to offer the composition classroom. First, neither are traditional textbooks, in any sense of the word. Their publication shows that the sentence has currency with the general public, that these ideas matter outside of the composition classroom. In writing books that are decidedly not textbooks, Fish and Klinkenborg are free from the bounds of the conventional handbook, which leads to a second offering from the pair: both, for the most part, eschew grammar terminology. Fish bases his analyses solely on describing the movements of a sentence in layman’s terms, and Klinkenborg’s sentence philosophy and sentence analyses are both written in everyday language. Neither book is intimidating, but rather an accessible approach to the seemingly inaccessible world of syntax. Fish and Klinkenborg put forth a pedagogy that works despite its reliance on ordinary language, rather than technical language, to teach syntax. (Though both do note that a writer ought to know the terms, neither makes them central to instruction.) Together, they provoke a discussion of what place grammar terms can and ought to play within sentence-level instruction.

Third, Fish and Klinkenborg, in drawing us into sentence craft, also draw us back into reading practices. Just as sentence-combining champion Fran-
cis Christensen claimed, in the early 1960s, that attention to syntax would make students better readers (152), so, too, does Fish, alluding to the link via the title of his book and arguing inside it that “the practice of analyzing and imitating sentences is also the practice of learning how to read them with an informed appreciation” (9). Klinkenborg echoes them both: “You can only become a better writer by becoming a better reader” (17). If we are to heed Fish’s and Klinkenborg’s call to write better sentences, we too must heed their call to be better readers. The work of syntax extends from and informs the work of reading. And lastly, taken together, Fish and Klinkenborg reframe sentence-level pedagogies, building instruction not upon convention and error but rather upon a consideration of the rhetorical affordances of syntax. If sentence-level instruction used to be associated with formalism, behaviorism, and empiricism, as Connors claimed it was (121–22), and those associations contributed to its demise, then today, I would suggest, it has new allies: flexibility, possibility, and rhetoricity.

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