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Coming to See Myself as a Vernacular Intellectual

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Coming to See Myself as a Vernacular Intellectual!

Remarks at the 2007 CCCC General Session on Receiving the Exemplar Award

Peter Elbow

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I'm honored and grateful to get this award. I thank the committee, the organization, and some loyal friends who didn't give up proposing me. I can assure everyone that this award is not wasted on me: it gives me enormous pleasure. The award and the invitation to speak for five minutes has led me to look for some perspective on my career and my relationship to CCCC.

I remember my first 4Cs convention. It was in 1980 in Seattle and I was teaching nearby at Evergreen State College in Olympia. I'd already been teaching full time for almost twenty years--for two stretches at M.I.T. and during the founding years at two experimental colleges, Franconia College and Evergreen .

I hadn't thought to come to 4Cs earlier because in all the previous years, I'd never thought of composition as my field. It's true that I'd published *Writing Without Teachers* seven years before, and I'd read some Ken Macrorie in the 60s when I was teaching at Franconia, but I didn't really have a "field." Almost all my teaching had been interdisciplinary and I'd virtually never taught something labeled as a "writing course." I had a PhD in English and I'd written a book on Chaucer, but I'd never been in an English department. (I'd once gone to an MLA conference in the 60s while teaching at MIT, but it scared me and I never went back till after I had found a home in composition in 1980.)

What I remember about that first convention was my fear. I'd completed the manuscript of *Writing With Power* and it was in production. I knew by this time that composition was bubbling along as a field, but my nine years at Evergreen were focused on teaching and starting a family and I had scarcely read anything in the field. But now I figured I better drive up the I-90 to Seattle. I was terrified I'd hear the professionals say that everything I'd written in my emerging book was wrong. Happily, by the end of the conference I felt relieved on this score. (In fact, composition professionals gave me almost ten good years before they finally told me that everything I'd written was wrong.)

So right from this first visit, I came to think of 4Cs as a place where I wanted to be. Coming to each conference has always felt like coming home. Thus I'm all the more touched by the award because it's rare when the folks at home actually tell you they appreciate you.

What Have I Been Doing All This Time?

Throughout my career, it turns out that I've been trying to give ownership of writing to everyone--that is, to democratize or vernacularize writing. In my 1973 *Writing Without Teachers*, I was bothered by the gateway power that teachers have in institutional classrooms to determine a student's experience of writing and to judge whether writing is good or bad. I'd had too many intimations that school settings sometimes actually harm writers, and that teacher verdicts were often untrustworthy.

It's not that I am against teachers. I'd already been an institutional teacher for thirteen years when I published *Writing Without Teachers*, and I never stopped till retirement. It was a

wonderful high school English teacher who led me to my career. And I notice now how deeply moved I feel when I have a good teacher--as I do for the viola and a Pilates class. I feel it almost like a miracle when someone can help me “get” something I need--can open a door I’ve been banging my head against. So I don’t want to wipe out even institutional teachers or classrooms. But I want to wipe out any gateway monopoly they have over people’s learning.

When I suggested what I called “teacherless classes” in 1973, I had no inkling that teachers would set them up as peer response groups *inside* conventional classrooms. (Younger people here may not realize how rare it was in 1973 for teachers to ask students to respond to each others’ writing.) My vision was for writers to meet outside of institutions for learning. (Like most of us, I didn’t know the powerful tradition of women’s writing and reading groups that Ann Gere explored.)

I was trying to set up *open rhetorical spaces* where writers and readers could meet. It seemed to me that what we need as writers is not standards and principles and authoritative judgments about what’s good or bad in writing. What we need is a naked empiricism: careful accounts of what written words make happen inside readers’ heads. That’s why I asked writers not to argue with readers, nor readers to argue with each other over differing responses to the same words. I was trying to take attention away from the issue of which responses are *right* or *better*--and clear as big a space as possible for *actual responses*. As I wrote in 1973:

Listen to what they say *as though it were all true*. The way an owl eats a mouse. He takes it all in. He doesn’t try to sort out the good parts from the bad. He trusts his organism to make use of what’s good and get rid of what isn’t. There are various ways in which a reader can be wrong in what he tells you; but still it pays you to accept it all. . . . (102-3)

I knew that it would seem anti-intellectual to suggest a class where there is no arguing and no one has any training or authority or sanction to judge writing. This was exactly the charge that Joe Harris later came to make: "the students in [my teacherless] workshops . . . do not seem to be held answerable to each other as intellectuals" [31].) That’s why I wrote the appendix essay and started off this way:

To academics especially, the idea of listening to everyone else’s reading no matter what it is, refraining from arguing, and in fact trying to *believe* it, seems heretical and self-indulgent.

Many people would dismiss the charge: “Intellectual schmintelletual! Who cares?” The trouble is I care. I think of myself as an intellectual! (147).

In that appendix on the believing game, I was trying to show how deeply intellectual it is to harness both intellect and will in the task of trying to believe multiple and conflicting views. I was arguing (as I still am) that the notion of “intellectual” work is far too permeated by a hunger for right answers and therefore toward premature judging and arguing. I tried to show that conventional assumptions about “good thinking” tends to preclude a kind of smartness and perceptivity that we can only get from maximum responsiveness and the willful withholding of judgment.

So much for my first book on writing. 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 such as me. Why should it be that everyone's mother tongue is considered wrong for writing?

For most of my book in progress, I work toward a short term pragmatic goal: to show that even for "correct" edited written English, speaking and spoken language are full of virtues that are badly needed. I'm trying to work out concrete ways that writers can enlist vernacular virtues to make writing not only easier but better.

But a crucial final part of this project works toward a long term goal--visionary, but pragmatic too: to change our very conception of literacy so that all vernacular dialects and languages are deemed appropriate for serious writing. (I have summarized both trains of thought into two draft essays that can be downloaded from my website: <http://scholarworks.umass.edu/peter_elbow>.)

Who Am I as an Academic?

If I'm an "Exemplar," what example have I been setting? As an academic, it's never been clear to me who I am. I've taught very different things from different disciplines at very different kinds of institutions. And I've written about very different topics: not just freewriting, but Chaucer, assessment, believing and doubting, and the discipline of English as a whole. (I don't recognize the "expressivist Peter Elbow" who people so often think they know. And I hate the word *expressivist*.)

But on the train from Amherst down to this conference in New York, I found an answer that clicks for me. I was reading a remarkable and useful essay in the latest *College English* by Carmen Kynard where she speaks of a *vernacular intellectual*. She applies the term to Miguel Melendez. He started out as a member of the Young Lords Party in New York City and "after that summer in El Barrio . . . became politically aware of my pride in being Boricua" (381). It was *after* this growth of political awareness that he used his college studies to try to increase his political effectiveness.

This is far from my story, so it felt presumptuous to trust the personal resonance I felt in the term *vernacular intellectual*. Melendez started out in political work and afterwards worked at higher education and the privileged discourse. I started with *lots* of education and privileged discourse. What I had to do was get out from under it--and the ideology that pervaded it.

But I had worked with Carmen in a project not so long ago, so I went to her session this weekend and asked her if she could see me as a vernacular intellectual. She gave me her blessing and put me on to Grant Farred who coined the term in his book, *What's my Name? Black Vernacular Intellectuals*. He applies it to four interestingly different figures: Mohammed Ali, Bob Marley, C. L. R. 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" (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. (7)

They have taken a

circuitous trajectory . . . by which the conventionally trained--and institutionalized--intellectuals become vernacular thinkers Vernacularity signals the discursive turning away from the accepted, dominant intellectual modality and vocabulary and the adoption of a new positioning and idiomatic language. (11)

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. So in 1980, I found a disciplinary home here in the overpriced hotels that 4Cs lives in--and now in 2007 I have found a hat that I like to wear. With Farred's term, I've finally been able to bring my variegated teaching and writing into a single focus.

Works Cited

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