

Textbook Review for *inReview*
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Elbow, Peter and Pat Belanoff *A Community of Writers: A Workshop Course in Writing*, 3rd edition New York: McGraw Hill, 2000 608 pages

Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff are well-known and well-respected in the field of composition studies. Collectively, they stand in front of a large body of work: much of it groundbreaking. Their theories are taught in graduate programs across the country. They are now on the third edition of their high-profile text, *A Community of Writers* (hereafter *ACoW*). I have taught from this book for two years. The composition program at my school makes *ACoW* a required text for every freshman composition course. Instructors are given a standard or common syllabus from which to teach—this common syllabus dictates papers written, pages read, and has entries that look like this:

Week 9

Focus: Analyzing the elements of argument

Reading: Workshop 11: "Argument" (p. 277)

Writing: Analysis of published piece of writing (p. 285); process journal (p. 286)

I am here to comment on how this text functions in the context of a university classroom. I can do so only by beginning (and ending) with what I know: my university, my students, my classroom.

ACoW bills itself as “A Workshop Course in Writing.” Elbow and Belanoff have made their careers teaching students to write and teaching teachers to teach writing through revision-based workshops. There is little doubt that their pedagogy has been successful. The question I need to raise here is whether their pedagogy is sufficient for all students of writing. I’ll begin with a general overview of the text.

ACoW is a very user-friendly text (perhaps too much so—more on that later). It is organized according to the workshop model and is designed to move students through a variety of kinds and ways of writing in order to, as the authors say, “help [students] write better” (xxiii). The text introduces strategies for generating writing (from freewriting to invisible writing to process writing) and then, in workshops, offers students a number of different kinds of assignments which build upon these strategies. The workshops are not meant to be covered in a single course, rather, the idea is that a teacher chooses from among them in order to customize her own course. The workshops cover drafting and revising, the essay, persuasion, argument, research, interpretation, text analysis, working in specific disciplines, and portfolios. In addition, there are twelve mini-workshops that offer “More on Writing and Research” and help with “Editing.” Finally, the authors include a version of “Sharing and Responding.”

Most readers are likely to be familiar with “Sharing and Responding” (S&R). It is a germinal text and cannot be underestimated for the way it has made using peer groups both more common but especially more effective. While others have developed on the themes and trends begun by “S&R” the original still remains a landmark work. Any teachers of composition still reluctant to use peer groups are generally brought about after a semester of “S&R.” It operates on two simple yet crucial principles: one, that in order for peer groups to work effectively they must have good direction and two, that different kinds of writing require different kinds of responses. The genius of “S&R” is how it combines these two principles with plenty of flexibility to offer students a way into running their own effective and positive peer groups.

The mini-workshops are another distinctive feature of this text. The first six are aimed at covering miscellaneous aspects of theory and practice and offer some important opportunities for teachers and students to connect (such as in the midterm and end-term responses to a writing

course). The second six are some of the clearest explanations of commonly problematic points (sentence fragments, comma usage, apostrophes) I've ever seen in a text.

The workshops are what one might expect to see from Elbow and Belanoff. There is an emphasis on expression, on trusting one's own instincts, on prewriting and freewriting, and on the importance of revision. The workshops are designed to be *done*—the student is given explicit instruction in each. Generally the workshop needs to be guided by the instructor but that usually amounts to simply identifying which assignment to do or which questions to answer. The workshops are sprinkled with process journal questions showing the authors' concern that students not only do the work but understand the work they are doing. The process journal aspect is an important one to this text as it helps students to become more aware of their writing and writing processes.

ACoW is a remarkable book in its willingness—even eagerness—to treat students with respect and to offer them agency and authority. The book uses approachable language and includes examples of both student and “professional” writing. Despite my respect for and appreciate of this book and the advances in composition theory it represents, I have struggled with this text for two years and am no closer to an “answer” about it than I was when I first picked it up. Five semesters of teaching from it have led me to some difficult questions.

One of the challenges faced by textbook authors is how to deal with an audience about whom they know little, who come from widely divergent backgrounds, and who bring to the course varying levels of knowledge, experience, and enthusiasm. I'm speaking, of course, of the teacher.

ACoW is a didactic text in that a student could, conceivably, make her way through the course without the benefit of classroom instruction. By the same token, a teacher could,

conceivably, make her way through the course without feeling as though she was providing classroom instruction. *ACoW* comes with, as the authors proudly say, an “extensive instructor’s manual” which provides “plenty of direction for teachers who want to follow [their] lead” (xvii). The authors also explain that they have allowed room for individual teachers to customize the text by choosing which workshops to present and in which order. Clearly, though, such customization is limited. Instructors looking for assignments/text covering paragraphing, for example, will be out of luck—the word is not even in the index.

Many composition programs, including mine, ask all teachers to use a common syllabus in the classroom. The pluses and minuses of such a set-up are well known: teachers can feel like automatons or resent teaching materials not of their own design (or not designed specifically for one class of students) but it saves inexperienced or overworked teachers from having to reinvent the wheel. While it is surely impossible for every freshman to have the same experience or to be treated exactly the same as every other student in his or her composition classroom, using a common syllabus is a good way for composition programs to try to achieve that goal. *ACoW* represents the idea of a common syllabus writ large and thus also its strengths and weaknesses.

It is extremely hard to define the “average” college freshman. Commonalties change from university to university; year to year. I write as a teacher at a large, urban university with what might be described as a very friendly admissions policy. We have traditional students from urban high schools, rural high schools, and in-between high schools; non-traditional students returning to school from years away spent in the military, with families, or in the work place; international students with varying academic backgrounds and degrees of familiarity with their native language and of English; and immigrant or refugee students with varying academic backgrounds and degrees of familiarity with their native language and of English. To imagine a

textbook that would recognize the strengths and weaknesses of each student and suffice to help each student develop those weakness into strengths, well—such a thing seems a lot to ask.

But Elbow and Belanoff subscribe to the theory that different students should not be treated differently. The first sentence of their “To the Instructor” introduction identifies the audience of the text as “first-year college students in a one-semester writing course.” In the case that this audience might seem awfully broad, that sentence is followed by an asterisk which leads to a footnote which explains that “unskilled or reluctant students” get the same treatment “very skilled and experienced students” do. They go on to claim that “the core of [their] book is a series of writing activities that [they] have found appropriate . . . [for] young children or college faculty” (xvii).

After two years of pondering this blithe declaration, I have come to the conclusion that my concern is not so much with the declaration itself but with the desired results of those writing activities. It’s true that students who are afraid of or bitter towards writing often become more comfortable with or even a fan of that activity. The text is friendly, generally accessible, and organized around clear writing assignments. The emphasis on revision gives even the strugglingist writer a chance to wring out good work. Elbow and Belanoff’s “Sharing and Responding” cannot be underestimated in how it helps students to think about revision and writing and to make good use of peer groups. But if a teacher wants students to engage in these writing activities in order to produce ordered, coherent, logical writing with few grammatical or syntactical errors and lots of specific examples then that teacher had better hope her students came into the course with the background knowledge and experience they need to do so: this text will not bridge that gap. Elbow and Belanoff’s protestations aside, *ACoW* is designed to help medium to good student writers become better and more confident student writers.

Much has been made lately of the studies suggesting that high school and college teachers differ about what is “good” writing. High school teachers are said to put more emphasis on grammatical correctness and college teachers on quality of content. Elbow and Belanoff clearly fall into the quality of content camp and *ACoW* reflects that concern. I am not here to settle the debate about when or how or even if grammar should be addressed in the classroom. But I can say, from experience, that both teachers and administrators want students to write “correct” English. One major flaw with *ACoW* is the author’s explicit assumption—no, conviction—that students can write “correctly” if they will only *think* hard about it.

In a section entitled “Reasoning and Grammar” the authors examine this whole thing they refer to as “correct grammar.” The authors offer students the happy notion that “we can do well [at writing “correctly”] without studying and memorizing rules” since, luckily for us, “we already have an enormous amount of tacit or unconscious knowledge of grammar and reasoning” (290). Anyone who has taught basic or developing writers might wince, as I do, at the passage in Mini-Workshop C (“The Difference between Grammatical Correctness and a Formal, Impersonal Voice”) which advises: “Go through your passage and make whatever changes are necessary to get it clear; get rid of all the mistakes in grammar and usage” (454). Even advanced students of writing might falter at this command. Non-native speaking students are told they “will have a harder time” revising for correctness, as will students who “don’t read a fair amount.” However, those students are reassured that their experience hearing “a lot of radio and television” will make up the difference: they’ve “heard plenty of Standard English and developed a keen sense of the differences between levels of formality” (291).

It is unclear how differentiating between “levels of formality” will help with major language problems, but it is also possible that the authors do not expect to encounter such a

student in a first-year college course. After all, in an effort to convince students that they are “sophisticated user[s] of [their] native language” the authors make the claim that “Unless you are scared, subjects and verbs usually agree, sentence structures work, vocabulary is appropriate. . . . Therefore when you concentrate on your meaning as you write, all these natural language abilities will function in the same way to produce mostly correct language. . . . You may need to put more trust in these natural abilities” (xxv). Woe unto the poor student who, though not initially scared, might become so upon finding that his writing—reviled by English teachers, historically marked up with red, a source of frustration and sadness to him throughout his schooling—is considered here abnormal. Indeed, one might begin to read “scared” as a more politically charged word than the authors intended.

This theme of trusting one’s self and of looking within for knowledge, rather than without, offers another challenge for some students. The authors offer instructors six possible combinations of the workshops and the “Persuasion” workshop is featured in five of those (“Argument” makes all six). One “Essential Premise” of the Persuasion workshop is that “Persuasion relies less on formal rational argument than on reaching out to an audience and getting their interest by appealing particularly to experience and feelings” (255). While this is not a radical claim in itself the workshop does lead students to the conclusion that experience can serve as evidence. Certainly we see this happen in advertising but the authors never make a clear case for why we might want to encourage bad logic in an academic environment.

Similarly, the “Argument” workshop asks students to chose an issue and write about it. It has been my experience that many students simply do not have enough experience with other perspectives to be able to imagine objections to their own beliefs. Those students need help getting access to those other possible perspectives and this text does not provide it. I understand

that a lot of the gaps between what the text offers and the student needs should be filled in by the teacher but it is my contention that a) a text this prescriptive does not leave adequate room for the teacher and b) the common adoption of texts for entire writing programs means it must offer something for every kind of student.

In the end, it is my hope that *ACoW* represents not the culmination of composition scholarship but the beginning of it. To make “better writers” of all of our students might take more than one textbook. Elbow and Belanoff offer one tried and true way—a way that once represented a new way of thinking about writing and the teaching of writing. And that new way of thinking has given us the rest of us ways to become better thinkers: in the end, perhaps *A Community of Writers* can indeed help college faculty as much as, if not more than, it does our students.