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COMMENT & RESPONSE

FIVE COMMENTS ON PETER ELBOW'S "RANKING, EVALUATING, AND LIKING"

Peter Elbow's article "Ranking, Evaluating, and Liking: Sorting Out Three Forms of Judgment" (February 1993) raises many questions for me. Why does Elbow conceive the practice of ranking texts on a single continuum as so separate from evaluating such texts? What kind of ranking would it be that is done without putting into language for either the student or even initially for the teacher, the character and value of the texts; without, that is, what Elbow terms evaluation? Elbow assumes that ranking is a practice that is done headlong and immediately as the teacher reads a set of papers; done instinctively, inarticulately, and mean-spiritedly to satisfy a teacher's drive to make hierarchies for hierarchies' sake. Such a practice, he claims, is nearly worthless, and in some cases damaging. Most of us would agree.

But why does the author assume that his teaching audience would rank in such a manner? How could teachers in good conscience assign grades that rank papers without knowing why each paper was given the grade it was given and what the difference between one paper and another was? Wouldn't teachers need to formulate for themselves an evaluative description of each text and of that text's difference from other student texts, in the process of placing it on that "single scale" from which the whole set of papers will be "hung"? And having framed the judgments behind each grade, what teachers would not feel both a responsibility and a desire to share that information with students?

Moreover, why is ranking not seen as the most difficult practice of the three forms of judging—ranking, evaluating, and liking—indeed as encompassing all three when done responsibly? And why can't the anxiety and distress associated with grading promote the best rather than the least clear thinking?

Let me return to the initial question of why Elbow has written as if ranking is at odds with evaluation, and, indeed, with liking student texts. To separate them is good for the sake of analysis, but to imagine that ranking actually functions independently seems to me an unhelpful distortion of reality. It does allow the author to manufacture a caricature of a ranker—lazy (took the easy way out), eager to pigeonhole students (lusting for hierarchy), non-communicative, and uninterested in students' growth as writers. If Elbow's readers buy this stereotype, then they will not want to be identified with such a practice. Is this a good reason to avoid ranking?

In addition, Elbow's more logical argument that ranking is unreliable strikes me as shortsighted. He seems to confuse variability with unreliability. If ranking is variable from context to context—teacher to teacher, writing program to writing program, assignment to assignment—why is it then of no use? That it is reasonably consistent within the same or comparable contexts seems sufficiently useful to me. Knowledge is always constructed, always context-dependent. That is the only way we can operate. Elbow's imagined alternative to the artificial evaluator, who finds consistency with others in the same situations interested in the same things, is to be one of those evaluators who operate naturally. These natural evaluators are not consistent one with another, but they are, Elbow seems to suggest, more true to themselves. However, in this case I

would argue this evaluator is not without "artifices and imposed agreements"; they are just so "natural" that they do not seem to exist and thus do not have to be considered. This kind of ranking encompasses not only variability, but a dangerous naïveté as well.

The variability of the value of a written text is an essential premise of what we understand writing to be and what students also need to understand writing to be. In my experience they can be taught to negotiate as writers the difference in contexts and to profit greatly in consciously understanding that they are doing so and how they are doing so.

Why can ranking not be seen for what it is, one more piece of information in evaluative commentary? Why not use ranking, evaluation, and liking together at least some of the time? And when considering ranking, why take a skewed vision of the practice to represent the phenomenon? Would it not be more worthwhile to inquire into the difference between useful and worthless ranking?

Elbow's skittishness about ranking seems confused and unnecessary. The authority that teachers take on as they rank must be assumed carefully and with an attitude of responsiveness, flexibility, and good will toward students. This is difficult to do, and is an ability we develop over time. But do we do students a service when we just drop the practice of ranking as impossible to handle with integrity? And are we then in the position of telling them that they cannot rank the value of writing either, that it is all a matter of opinion, arbi-

trary, an epistemological impossibility? Do we believe that this is true? If so, how can we teach writing?

Amanda Brown

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Peter Elbow's "believing game," which asks that teachers respect what students have to say, continues to influence my teaching and evaluating practices, and I welcome his newest version of it in "the liking game." Although on one hand I'm appalled that liking students' writing (and liking students) is a new enough idea that such a well-respected teacher/researcher would find it novel enough to write about, I know on the other hand that for some teachers, Elbow's article presents a breakthrough. Now in my sixth year of teaching, I am saddened to concede that there really are teachers out there saying, "Gosh. Like my students? Why I've never even considered that!" For them and for their students, Peter Elbow's "Ranking, Evaluating, and Liking" provides a much needed perspective on the teaching of writing.

That student writing is likable is laughable to some writing instructors, and I've heard them laugh. Such romantic notions of teaching are considered, as Peter Elbow points out, "soft," or as others have charged, "anti-intellectual." Critics of "liking" prefer what they consider the real work of grading and ranking to liking. But, as Elbow describes, to respond to student writing in a meaningful fashion, a fashion that does not simply refer to those ar-

bitrary fictions we like to call "standards," is actually hard work. Meaningful response requires teachers to use their intellect, understanding, and communication skills; this is work that those teachers who refuse to like students' writing are unwilling, or unable, to do. Constantly bombarded as we are by students and their writing, I imagine teaching students without liking them must be the most miserable job on earth. Those teachers have my sympathy. And so do their students.

While Peter Elbow's article effectively points to some of the harmful effects of ranking and over-evaluation, I believe it may be useful to examine one reason why teachers feel pressured to grade and rank. Conventional wisdom holds that teachers must be *experts* with complete mastery of the fields in which they teach. This is one reason why teachers are often uneasy about or even unwilling to expose their own, imperfect writing to their students. To have expertise or mastery of writing implies that one is privy to some accurately and fairly established set of rules for good writing. However, once one questions the validity of those rules, realizing that most, if not all, of the rules we've been taught about good writing are debatable or negotiable, then we've undermined our own expertise, and if expertise is the measure for our authority, we've undermined our authority as well. Without a firm sense of authority, we might go around saying things like "I'm not sure I know exactly how to define good writing" or "I'm uncomfortable assigning specific

grades to students' writing." We then risk getting responses like "Well, then we'll have to hire someone who can define good writing and someone who does know how to assign specific grades to students' writing without discomfort." And those comfortable teachers are out there, with their standards raised and their red pens poised. For a while, I was one of them.

When I first became a teacher, I was enamored with the power of the red pen, the spoils for having earned a teaching certificate. I enjoyed grading student work, not unlike how I enjoyed playing "store" as a child, using an old shoe box as a cash register from which I collected and distributed the money my pretend customers paid me. With my red pen I handed out grades, like so many nickels and dimes, to those students who had purchased my merchandise or "bought into" my ideas of good writing. The more the students bought from me, the more change they got back, the higher their grades. I actually relished the act of putting my students' grades into the tiny squares of my grade ledger, acting like a real teacher, a real adult. And I took a special, selfish pleasure in writing low grades (perhaps simply enjoying that I could, or perhaps because giving low grades made me mistakenly think I had high standards—I'm certain both were true at different times). I suspect my brief, romantic affair with the powerful red pen was not unique to this new teacher. And had that affair not ended, I might never have known it was happening.

Within a few months I became bored and distracted by grading. Then I began to note its harmful effects on the teaching and learning of writing. I got rid of the red pen as a symbolic gesture (a common and trite gesture at best if not followed up with real change in grading practice), and soon I began to grade less and less. I searched for some middle ground for several years, giving priority to peer response and to journals specifically because they need not be graded, or ranked, but instead written, read, responded to, and even, shocking as it is, enjoyed. I resisted grading and ranking for several years, but then finally gave up the fight. My choice was either to teach to the state tests that ranked my students on arbitrary standards I couldn't respect or to risk my students' futures by not preparing them for those unfortunately influential exams. I have since retreated to full-time graduate school, to reload (with the more theoretical knowledge and increased respect of the PhD), and I plan to return to the fray, perhaps by teaching future teachers.

Articles like Elbow's most recent piece in *College English* are important to remind us that no matter how unfashionable, it's okay to like student writing and not hold it hostage to unquestioned standards. Perhaps one day through the continued efforts of composition scholars like Peter Elbow and many others, liking students' writing will be taken for granted, and arbitrary standards will be suspect.

Kenneth J. Lindblom

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As a veteran composition instructor at a major midwestern university, I am surprised by the view of writing instructors and the state of writing instruction in general that Elbow seems to have, as expressed in his essay “Ranking, Evaluating, and Liking.” Elbow seems to believe that the distinction between ranking and evaluating has escaped the majority of us, and that many of us would argue with his assertion that more evaluation is better because it provides more feedback to the student, and hence, more possibility for the student’s writing to improve. When Elbow presents his view of what we ought to be doing more of—“we should give some kind of written or spoken evaluation that discriminates among criteria and dimensions of the writing—and if possible that takes account of the complex context for writing: who the writer is, what the writer’s audience and goals are” (192)—I cannot help wondering what he thinks we rank-and-file writing instructors are doing out here!

What audience is Elbow targeting when he informs us that “liking is not the same as ranking or evaluating” although “Naturally, people get them mixed up: when they like something, they assume it’s good; when they hate it, they assume it’s bad” (201)? As a composition instructor with ten years of teaching (*and* evaluating, ranking, and liking) experience, of course I know that discrimination doesn’t necessarily mean criticizing (202) and that it isn’t helpful to my students to make comments like “It’s disorganized. Or-

ganize it! It’s unclear. Make it clear!” (202). I also know there aren’t many students who would let me get away with comments like that!

Does Elbow really think we need to be reminded of the value of getting to know our students individually and that conferences are a good way to do this (203)? Of the value of pointing out to them the successful parts of their writing so that they know what to do more of on future assignments (202–203)? I am especially concerned about Elbow’s apparent view of writing instructors in his assertion that “academics . . . [would] rather give a cursory reading and turn up their nose and give a low grade and complain about falling standards” (203). This simply isn’t true of writing instructors I know.

Elbow insists that grades and evaluation are inimical, that by putting a grade on a student’s paper, we seriously compromise the pedagogical value of the comments we provide. (Yes, many of us do provide comments about our students’ work, spending many, many hours at it. And my university has also used an analytic grid very similar to Elbow’s for longer than I’ve been on the faculty.) I believe most good instructors know how to help the students get un-obsessed with the grade, at least for a bit, and see how the evaluation *encourages better writing*, not simply justifies a grade, as Elbow describes it (190). If our students are overly concerned with grades, perhaps we need to question not so much the ranking system—although I may “have a deep

hunger to rank, to create pecking orders” (190)—but how we can more effectively show our students how this piece of writing is better than that. And not because I “like it,” but because it works better than this one or that one in accomplishing its purpose with a given audience in a given context.

I agree with Elbow that we live and work in a grade-oriented world and this sometimes has its disadvantages; his “evaluation-free zones” certainly sound worthwhile, particularly in the early part of the semester; some students do come to class paralyzingly concerned about what they need to do to get that coveted A or B. But as instructors, I hope most of us have learned to deal productively with this—to allay students’ preoccupation with grades while they learn something in the meantime. This, it seems to me, is part of what being an effective instructor is about.

Barbara J. Duffelmeyer
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Peter Elbow serves readers well in his humane, well-written essay by speaking as a teacher, not an assessment professional. But precisely because Elbow speaks as a teacher, I was disappointed that his essay fails to connect assessment to the types of writing we assign. Through its examples, the essay hints at personal, autobiographical writing. “Intellectual pushing,” as Elbow calls it, is itself pushed off to the margins. Yet personal, autobiographical writing

cannot untangle the knotty assessment issues that Elbow wishes to sort out.

The essential intellectual task of college writing lies in making and justifying inferences, often based on a close reading of texts. Those inferences ask writers and readers alike to inquire and—dare I say—assess. But shared inquiry into ideas seems strangely absent from the classroom that Elbow’s essay implies. We hear very little about texts, questions at issue shared by a community of readers, or assertions justified by something more than the author’s sincerity. Personal experience and autobiographical reference can enrich and support shared inquiry. But writing that focuses exclusively on personal or autobiographical concerns may tend to narrow, even foreclose inquiry and evaluation, at least as they are understood in other areas of the academy.

In the name of fairness, Elbow questions whether we should even consent to ranking if our judgments are “situated,” “interested,” partial to the values of a particular community. Make no mistake, I share Elbow’s distrust of ranking. A single grade or score communicates little that can help students learn and improve. Yet values are always in play, always situated—even as our writing is situated by an audience, even as the writing course is situated in the college curriculum. Assessment is essentially a rhetorical and communal enterprise. Like writing itself, assessment is socially constructed, a matter of negotiated judgments and values. We confound the already difficult task

of assessment if the writing we teach does not invite shared judgments that we can explain, justify, or debate.

Peter Elbow seems to welcome such debate when he speaks of evaluation, for evaluation invites us to articulate our criteria. I applaud his interest in the sort of close attention to student writing that can permit us not merely to assess what's on the page but also to tease out its potential. But doesn't evaluation also rest on values—the very situated, interested judgments that he warns us of when ranking? Don't we meet, albeit at a different level, the same demon he wishes to exorcise? Nuanced evaluation is far better than one grade or score. But let's not fool ourselves that evaluation gets us off the hook.

To get us off that hook, Elbow proposes that we make more use of “evaluation-free zones.” Yet these zones give teachers and students the illusion that we can escape reasoned judgment, implicit messages about value, or the larger context of college writing. If we are to help students exercise their judgment, we can best meet that goal by exercising—and explaining—our own, and by focusing on writing that permits us to share and support judgments. In the end, we only demean student writing by not evaluating it thoughtfully, with an eye to its potential. I find it ironic that Elbow calls for evaluation-free zones when, in course after course, discipline after discipline, student writing already receives little close scrutiny and substantive feedback. When so much of what students write in college

is dismissed lightly, writing classes can ill afford to do the same.

Given Elbow's interest in personal, autobiographical writing, it's hardly surprising that he locates the foundation for judgment in “liking”—liking student writing and liking students. It's telling that he rarely mentions one without the other. The college essay and an eighteen-year-old's personality become one and the same. Yet how are we to assess such writing? Can we tell a student that her experiences or family life weren't terribly original or striking? Or that, yes, her “turning point in life” was appropriately dramatic? Perhaps personal, autobiographical writing can promote a more graceful style, a certain fluency of expression. But to what end? If we use writing to teach students to understand their psyches, not a shared world of issues and ideas, we leave ourselves little room for anything but tangles about assessment. When students write in a social and intellectual vacuum, evaluation becomes, beyond the matter of style, an evaluation of their lives, their personalities, their souls. No wonder writing teachers are so desperate to like—and to be liked themselves.

In the end it's not enough to sort out three forms of judgment; we must also debate the intellectual assumptions and values by which we judge. Otherwise, judgment occurs in a vacuum that only contributes to our struggle with assessment. Perhaps the assessment angst so many writing teachers experience reflects on the uncertain place of our profession in the academy, and on un-

certainties about what the composition class should teach. All the more reason, then, that we should clarify the rationale for what we teach, lest we encounter the hidden issues of our teaching in the writing that we assess. We do a disservice to our students if, by stressing the autobiographical and personal, we neglect to teach students how to engage in precisely that kind of shared inquiry.

Rolf Norgaard

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While I sincerely liked what Peter Elbow had to say in his essay, I find that my liking enables me to criticize a portion of his text: in particular, the distinction he makes between ranking and evaluating. Ranking is not, I believe, a separate entity from evaluation, as Elbow implies, but is better understood as a subset or type of evaluation. Ranking, “the act of summing up,” is one way to evaluate—however limited and limiting. I agree that ranking can be rank; it is shorthand, an abbreviation, unexpressed, inarticulate, tacit; it often represents much more than what it is, a representation, yet it is often difficult to know what such a representation means. Attaching a numerical grade to a student’s writing, though, is not unlike the movie critics who apply their ☆ ☆ to the latest film. Of course, students and movie review-readers alike need the explanations that accompany the ranking. That is just good policy and practice.

Furthermore, the “main fact about evaluation” that Elbow presents to distinguish ranking from evaluating is “that different readers have different priorities, values, and standards.” This fact can just as easily be said about ranking. Rankers rank with different priorities, values, and standards. The problem, though, is that ranking seems to (or perhaps would like to) obliterate the differences, ignore them, pretend to a kind of pseudo-scientism in attaching a symbol which carries evaluative weight and the pretense of a fixed, universal standard.

I can see no real difference, though, between the acts of evaluating and ranking—both are judgments. The grid of “strong-OK-weak” is essentially a more elaborate ranking device, a translated “yea to boo” minus the “OK” category of “hohum.” Thus, a “strong” in the grid scheme (analytic scale) that Elbow proposes and an “A” in the ranking scheme (holistic scale) that Elbow disparages yield similar data, or a rough translation at least. To tease out the meaning of the ranking would conceivably lead to something like a grid, but I’m not willing to admit that these analytic scales are any more “fair” than the holistic scale (the ranking), as Elbow argues. The analytic grid is simply more articulate, more detailed and descriptive of what it is valuing. Indeed both scales are based on judgments about worth.

The more important issue about evaluating that Elbow did not address directly is where the values come from.

What or whose priorities are prioritized? What or whose values are valued? What or whose standards are standardized? If the values come from a context of desires, needs, and performance, then Elbow's concept of "liking," a complicated theoretical term, implies and follows from various combinations of those conditions. When students or their performances are labeled as "liked," this label can have an essentializing quality. What happens after liking? I suspect a liking in return.

Carol E. Dietrich
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PETER ELBOW RESPONDS

Dear Amanda Brown,

You say that I imply an unkind portrait or even caricature of teachers who grade: "lazy . . . anxious to pigeonhole students . . . noncommunicative, and uninterested in students' growth as writers." I apologize if I did this, for I certainly didn't mean to. My point was not to complain about teachers; not to assert that teachers want to pigeonhole students or even do pigeonhole students in their own minds and therefore turn to grading; rather, my point was that the system or institutional practice of grading leads to pigeonholing or has a pigeonholing effect. That is, when I give a student a grade—even if I do it in the most responsible way that you say most fair teachers use—my student and the other readers of my grade will

tend to pigeonhole that student. I agree that most teachers *are* interested in student growth, but the system of grading gets in the way by making A students too complacent and D students too likely to give up on themselves.

And though I am not bashing teachers at all, I'm not as optimistic as you are that most teachers carefully articulate to themselves and to their students the criterion-based evaluations that determine their grades. Teachers aren't lazy, but the institution of grading combined with the heavy work load for most writing teachers inevitably tempts them to do what they "must" (put down the grade) and skimp what is difficult and can be skimmed on (explain exactly what they mean by that grade). Look at the ambitious survey by Connors and Lunsford of more than three thousand student papers: they found that only 77 percent of the papers had *any* global or rhetorical comment—and they counted comments as short as *ten words!* ("Teachers' Rhetorical Comments on Student Papers," *CCC* 44.2 [May 1993]: 200–223.) I think that the institutional practice of grading can tempt even a conscientious teacher into sometimes pigeonholing a student's ability into a one-dimensional entity, more than that teacher would do if she were not having to sum up her judgments into one point on a single continuum.

Here is the crux. You ask, "Why can't ranking be seen for what it is, one more piece of information in evaluative