PETER ELBOW

EMBRACING CONTRARIES

EXPLORATIONS IN LEARNING AND TEACHING

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For Abby and Benjy,
the most huggable contraries in the world.

May they fall in love with perplexity.

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

I've always been drawn to the question of what *really* happens when we learn or teach: What goes on inside the mind? Behind appearances? What's the process? There is mystery here. I've been gnawing on this bone for a long time as a student and teacher. I've chewed on it especially in my writing—picking it up and tugging on it first one way, then another.

I've gathered here a small selection of essays about learning and teaching that I've written over almost twenty years.* I risk the hubris of collecting them in a book not only because I think they could be of use if they were more readily available, but also because they fit together better than I ever realized when I was writing them. They turn out to be engaged in a single enterprise.

All along in my writing I've been trying to do justice to the rich messiness of learning and teaching—to avoid the limitations of neat theories and pat positions. Yet these essays grow from an opposite impulse as well: a hunger to figure things out, to reach conclusions, to arrive at stateable, portable, and even neat insights. I've always been irritated at the prejudice among so many people in higher education (particularly in institutions of higher repute) that pedagogy doesn't bear thinking about: that there's something useless and *infra-dig* about studying the *processes* of learning and teaching themselves (as opposed to the *contents* of

* In preparing them for this collection I have made only minor changes: frequent small omissions and occasional changes or additions in wording. I have largely omitted any work about writing or the teaching of writing—for which see the "Bibliography of Works on Writing by the Author" at the end of this book.

the disciplines); and that whether someone learns or teaches well is mostly a matter of inborn talent, temperament, and character.

Pulling these essays together, I see more clearly than ever how long I've been squirming on the hooks of the dilemma implied here. That is, on the one hand, of course it's true that attempts to systematize and to devise theories of pedagogy tend to invite simplification or even shallow thinking. Yet on the other hand, people who like to make this complaint and turn up their noses as they talk about the "horrors of educationese" are often dismal teachers and insufferably condescending—all the while refusing to think about what actually happens (and doesn't happen!) in their own classrooms and lecture halls. Many academics like to throw a cloak of alleged intellectuality over their refusal to *think*—in this case, about something that badly needs thought, namely, whether students actually learn.

A hunger for coherence; yet a hunger also to be true to the natural incoherence of experience. This dilemma has led me more often than I realized to work things out in terms of contraries: to gravitate toward oppositions and even to exaggerate differences—while also tending to notice how both sides of the opposition must somehow be right. My instinct has thus made me seek ways to avoid the limitations of the single point of view. And it has led me to a commonsense view that surely there cannot be only *one* right way to learn and teach: looking around us we see too many diverse forms of success. Yet, surely, the issue cannot also be hopelessly relative: there must be *principles* that we must satisfy to produce good learning and teaching—however diverse the ways in which people satisfy them.

With regard to practice, I think these essays can serve teachers, curriculum planners, and administrators not so much by providing specific "things to do" (though I do suggest a few), but by setting up ways of looking at the learning and teaching process that will trigger *in them* specific things to do which they wouldn't otherwise have thought of. I believe these essays can encourage teachers and planners to be more courageous and inventive in experimenting. (Especially at a time when there are calls for greater "results" and even for greater "rigor"—justifiable calls, I would say; but they get mixed up with unjustifiable calls merely *to return*.) I will also call it a "practical outcome" if I succeed

in validating that sense of frustration and confusion which anyone must experience who really tries to teach well and who tries to attend closely to what is happening in students and in herself. When I manage to experience my frustration and confusion not just as problems but rather as accurate and valid responses to the complexities of the task at hand, I am often strengthened—and sometimes led quite naturally to figure out the right next step.

Needless to say these essays about the perplexities of learning and teaching grow out of the perplexities of my own experience. On the one hand, I was characteristically a "good" student: I was earnest and diligent, it mattered enormously to me that I be "successful." Teachers called me smart. (A good student, as my former colleague Nancy Dworsky observed, is a student who makes a teacher feel like a good teacher.) Yet, on the other hand, I never felt really comfortable in school—always a bit of an outsider: as though I didn't quite belong, as though I didn't quite fit the expectations of my teachers or my fellows.

Learning and teaching seemed natural to so many of my colleagues. They always seemed to know what they were doing and why they were doing it that way. But it never felt natural to me and I never felt I understood what was happening—whether I tried to do it their way or not. Too much magic, mystery. I always felt nervous, even afraid. If I got the steps right for the rain dance, rain came, but I never knew till I was wet whether I was close. I never seemed to have any sense of what a good rain dance looked like.

I felt this perplexity whether I was engaged in the supposedly straightforward task of remembering/learning (trying to get words and ideas to go into me), or engaged in the supposedly harder task of figuring out new thoughts and ideas (trying to get words and ideas to come out of me). That is, I could never memorize material or find it when I was asked for it—though I was always discovering later that the stuff had been in there all along. Figuring out new ideas, or "my own ideas," was usually more fun, but the vagaries of success were even greater: when it worked I was genuinely good at it; when it didn't I couldn't seem to

produce *anything* at all—where other students could usually produce something.

Then came the time in graduate school, twenty-six years ago, when my fantasy fears finally materialized: *all* attempts at rain dance brought drought. I couldn't study, couldn't figure things out, couldn't write anything. I gave myself a few months to see if I could fight my way clear but couldn't. I quit early in the next semester. I concluded I had to abandon books and the academy. I had lost any sense of why the enterprise had any importance—indeed I experienced a repulsion for books.

I knocked around with temporary jobs for six months (helping door-to-door on my bicycle with the 1960 census) and then tried to find a "real" job. I tried for jobs as a kindergarten teacher. I hid my motivation as well as I could (I wanted to *play*), but I suspect I looked too crazed to those who interviewed me. Then—through the luck of a kindly former teacher and a departmental purge resulting in a need for bodies in July—I fell into a faculty position at M.I.T. I wasn't sure it was honest to take the job, given my frame of mind, but I soon got caught up in my teaching. I discovered that even though the inability to write barred me from being a *student,* I seemed to be able to *teach* just fine. Before long I even came to like books, to love teaching, to want to be an intellectual. And so, five years later I returned to graduate study, eventually getting my degree.

Thus, a pattern emerges in my life as a student and a teacher—what from a writerly point of view I could now call the "habit of revision." Whether on the smaller scale of writing an essay or the larger scale of getting a Ph.D., I seem incapable of doing things right the first time. It was decades, however—and I had to drift into the field of writing and work out some theories—before I could think of these botches as "drafts." They simply felt like failures. And why not, since I was trying as hard as I could to get them right and not succeeding? Yet I couldn't seem to leave it at failure either—leave bad enough alone. I couldn't just quit (except that once—for I didn't know I'd come back five years later). I always went home again and licked my wounds, regrouped my forces, and came back with another version which in the end succeeded in one way or another.

From my own experience and my reflections upon it, then, one issue emerges as central. What is *natural* in studying, learning, and teaching? And what are our assumptions about how the mind ought to function in learning and teaching?

I had always assumed, as I think most people do, that as students we should be organized, coherent, and know what we're doing. And that as teachers, in addition to being organized and coherent, we should teach only what we know well; and that we should present to students the main principles of what we are teaching—and thus (as a natural consequence) we should stick to one discipline. (The structure of a discipline emphasizes main principles.) I had assumed that input always precedes output: that first we learn things, then we can have ideas; that we should not invite students to give their own ideas till they have proved that they can learn the ideas of others; that accuracy should precede transformation. Not having examined these assumptions, I didn't have enough sense to notice that my experience had tended to be the other way round: that I could get things to *go in* better if I had first been invited to have them come out; and that I could be more accurate if I had first been invited to transform. I simply felt my experience as perplexing.

I couldn't work my way free of these assumptions till I had done a lot of exploring of the writing process and worked out quite a few conclusions on my own. For a long time it had seemed as though my own experience with writing was peculiar—the nature of my difficulties and the nature of the solutions to them seemed aberrational. But when I wrote about my difficulties and my solutions, I discovered that they applied widely—not just to many students and unskilled writers but also to many adults and skilled writers. Gradually I have concluded that we must *adjust* our picture of what is natural in learning and teaching—of what goes on in the mind: our picture needs to be messier, more complicated, more paradoxical. I conclude that my experience of perplexity in learning, teaching, and writing—and the solutions I've devised—can be of use.

For I've discovered in recent years that there are many other

students and teachers whose minds are like mine—disorganized, jumping around, bad at remembering things, always sucked down the unknown path while gazing wistfully toward the known one, vacillating and unable to decide. When we support and respect these seemingly recalcitrant and aberrational cognitive impulses (and thereby learn somewhat to *harness* them)—when we see them as *intelligent* instead of naughty—they lead to coherence not mess. Things are remembered not forgotten. Good new insights come. The process leads eventually to genuine decisions (where we feared we would stay becalmed forever in indecision)—decisions which are usually richer and better than the options we originally vacillated among.

There are many such students and teachers walking around who are smart but not *recognized* as smart. They don't "do things right," they don't fit well into the existing models of thinking and intelligence in schools and colleges. For example, they cannot remember well till they think, but are asked not to think till they can remember well. Many English teachers have come up to me and said, "You know, I've always written in the way you describe, but I've never dared admit it to students: I've always thought I had to force them to write *'right.'* "

Even if all these students and teachers were as perversely blessed as I seem to have been with an unrelenting hunger to be accepted in the academy, that would not be enough. For none of us can function at our best unless we are *seen* as smart by ourselves and others. One of the main reasons why smart students function well is that they are *seen* as smart. We cannot take advantage of complicated patterns of intelligence unless we experience them working for us, not against us.

Thus, these essays have a kind of subtheme which often I was not fully conscious of as I wrote—a kind of table-turning or underdogism—namely, that people who experience themselves as dumb, and are seen that way, are really smart. (I have also been tempted by the vindictive corollary, but I think I now see that *everyone* is smart—even, grudgingly, those who think they are.) Thus I cannot escape an *ad hominem* critical reading of this book, for in the end I am really engaged in trying to work out a definition of good learning and teaching that doesn't exclude me.

I want to thank many friends and colleagues for help with these essays over the years. The essays all went through many drafts, and I often gave early versions (sometimes even successive versions) to friends for responses—which I was fortunate to receive in abundance. Often I had a chance to read a version to some group or conference, and again my requests for responses were generously answered. In particular, I've been pestering people for more than ten years with versions of my doubting/believing essay in an effort to think my way through it, and more than a couple of dozen people have sent me long and thoughtful letters in response—for which I'm enormously grateful.

Because so many people helped me, I cannot name them here, but I would particularly mention how thankful I am to colleagues and students at M.I.T., Franconia College, The Evergreen State College, Wesleyan University, The Bard Institute for Writing and Thinking, The Bread Loaf School of English, and SUNY at Stony Brook. Special thanks to Joan Bossert and Curtis Church, my editors at Oxford. I am most grateful of all to my family, Cami, Abby, and Benjy, for giving me the most precious richness and support of all.

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PART I

THE LEARNING PROCESS

You might say that the three essays in this section are more about thinking than about learning. But I am interested in learning *as thinking*—learning even *as expression*. I want to resist our tendency to picture learning as merely "taking things in"—separate from thinking as "stirring things around in there" and expression as "pouring things out."

The three essays in this section approach the learning process from very different angles, but each one emphasizes the role of contraries in the mind's task of restructuring itself. All three are arguments for seeing coherence and fruitfulness in processes we often see as messy or useless. (For example, making intuitive or playful metaphors, guessing and free associating, inviting our writing to be messy and contradictory, moving back and forth between different modes of writing within the same piece, and telling stories and describing scenes in order to "think carefully.") Learning is slower this way, but deeper and more long-lasting. Disorientation is not so disorienting when we feel it as useful.

The first essay was the earliest written. It explores the two basic cognitive processes involved in the very ability to learn—the two contrary ways in which the mind manages to categorize or make sense of the information it encounters. Its context is cognitive psychology.

The second essay was written about ten years later. It's context is writing (it was part of a book about writing), but its subject is "cooking": how we can coax the mind to transform

itself or restructure its own contents through various kinds of interaction between contraries. Where the first essay is highly theoretical, this one emphasizes the practical question of how to increase productivity in thinking.

The third essay is a recent one arguing for a larger and more inclusive *model* of thinking that includes contrary processes: structured, logical thinking that involves control or steering; and intuitive, unstructured thinking that involves the ability to relinquish control or take one's hands off the steering wheel.