Expressivists: Self-Discovery and Internal Dialogue

> The purpose . . . is to help you achieve, through writing, a new level of self–discovery. And the best evidence of this self–discovery will be the emergence in your writing of an authentic voice.
>
> —Stewart, *The Authentic Voice*

This chapter discusses the dialogic pedagogies of three composition theorists classed together, rather uneasily, as expressivists (sometimes called expressionists).[1] These three theorists—Ken Macrorie, Peter Elbow, and Donald Murray—have devised pedagogies that are explicitly dialogic. William Coles, Jr., and Donald Stewart, the other theorists most often mentioned as expressivists, do not employ or advocate dialogic teaching methods to a significant degree.[2]

Although Donald Stewart's pedagogy is not dialogic, the epigraph above states rather clearly a basic assumption of expressivist rhetoric: that the student comes to know himself or herself through language. As James Berlin writes:

This type of expressionistic rhetoric focuses on a dialectic between the individual and language as a means of getting in touch with the self. Indeed, even the dialectic between

the writer and the editorial group is designed to enable the writer to understand the manifestation of her identity in language through considering the reactions of others. (*Rhetoric and Reality* 153)

Another common assumption is that writing cannot be taught, though it can be learned. For example, Elbow writes:

In proposing the teacherless writing class I am trying to deny something—something that is often assumed: *the necessary connection between learning and teaching.* The teacherless writing class is a place where there is learning but no teaching. (*Writing Without Teachers* ix)

This assumption is common to many of the theorists who have devised or advocate dialogic pedagogies (as will be demonstrated in later chapters). According to these compositionists, the role of the instructor is to provide an environment where the student can gain experience with writing, acting not as instructor so much as experienced coach or master craftsperson whom one consults as needed. In these classroom situations, students engage in dialogue with each other and with the instructor in order to provide one another with feedback about their writing processes and the work in progress. Each theorist's concept of the nature of the dialogue is different, leading to differing goals and outcomes for the students, though the theoretical assumptions underlying the work of all the expressivists unifies them and their work.

Dialogic "Helping Circles" and the Search for Truth

One day late in 1963, a student stopped Ken Macrorie in the hall and asked him to respond to a comment she had written about another teacher. The now famous passage reads like this:

He finks it humorous to act like the Grape God Almighty, only the stridents in his glass lisdyke him immersely. Day each that we tumble into the glass he sez to mee. "Eets too badly that you someday fright preach Engfish." (*Uptaught* 18)

From this passage (a parody of James Joyce's prose), Macrorie borrowed the term "Engfish" to name the kind of dead prose that he deplored and found everywhere. He describes this kind of prose as "bloated, pretentious language" and a "feel–nothing, say–nothing language, dead like Latin, devoid of the rhythms of contemporary speech" (*Uptaught* 18). He blames traditional teaching methods as the cause of "say–nothing" student papers:

Traditionally, unwittingly, over the centuries school has become a place where you and I were handed things— usually statements or combinations of numbers belonging to school or "the authorities." We were to hand them back to teacher in the form of answers to tests or papers (collages of excerpted statements by authorities or summaries of what they had said). . . . This handing back and forth of ideas and experience belonging to school left no room for students' experience, which must enter the transaction somewhere or there can be no relevance to learning.[3] (*Telling Writing* 289)

To counteract such ineffective teaching methods, at least in his own specialty, Macrorie searched for more effective ways to teach writing; his quest was to devise ways to teach students to produce lively prose rather than the Engfish found every- where in schools. He derived two major pedagogical tools from his experimentation: "writing freely" and the "helping circle."

The now universally familiar technique of freewriting arose from Macrorie's frustration. By 1964, he had become so exasperated with the stilted Engfish of student papers that he told his students to "go home and write anything that comes to your mind. Don't stop. Write for ten minutes or till you've filled a whole page" (*Uptaught* 20). He began experimenting with the method he called "writing freely."[4] Gradually, the students' papers began to improve and flashes of life started to appear in their prose. He believed he had found a teaching method that helped students bypass Engfish and find their authentic voices.

In the "helping circle," students read each other's writing and help one another recognize when they have found their authentic voice. Macrorie reproduces a student's writing for the group members; then a student reads it aloud and the classmates respond. The students, having been exposed to numerous examples of Engfish early in the term, can eventually distinguish living from dead prose. The antidote Macrorie advocates for Engfish is "truthtelling." Through writing freely and the honest response of their peers, students break through their proclivity for Engfish and can discover their authentic voice—the source of truthtelling. The authentic voice objectifies the writer's experience, allowing a reader to "live it vicariously and a writer [to] re-experience it" (*Telling Writing* 286).

In *Telling Writing*, Macrorie's college-level composition textbook, he provides sample student papers and a narrative with dialogue from a fictional helping circle rather than describing what the dialogue should be like. He remains general about the nature of the dialogue and what should happen in the circle, providing six guidelines:

1. Avoid beginning comments about a writing with small points. First, let the writer know your large

reaction, especially if it's positive. Then later in the discussion bring up the small suggestion; for example, to cut a word or change a phrase.

2. If you're the leader in the circle, don't let an argument drag on about a point that has been discussed fully. You can say, "Well, John has now been given several alternatives. He can take them home and decide which one he wants to use in rewriting his work, or he can turn down all of them." The circle is not a debating society but a gathering of helpers.

3. If you find yourself talking too much or too little, remember that the most helpful responder presents his best thought—the one most apt to surprise and be useful. He resists the impulse to make obvious comments.

4. If you feel reluctant to talk. think [sic] of your responsibility to others. Responsibility—ability to respond. There's no other you in the world. No other person with the same set of past experiences. Only you can say what you feel and think, what *your* response to a writing was. That's what every serious writer is looking for: the effect of his writing upon individuals. You can't say anything wrong to him if you truthfully report your response to his work. And you may help him a lot.

5. Occasionally close your eyes while listening to a writing being read. But only in a circle whose members already know that listeners are apt to do that on purpose, not because they're bored.

6. As a responder you can sometimes draw out another responder who's reluctant to speak fully his feelings.

> "You said the story was too cute. Can you say more
> about why you felt that way?" (87)

Early in the course, Macrorie disallows any negative comments, believing that students need to build on successes before
they can handle what may be poorly done in what they have
written. Writes Macrorie, "After they've received praise from
the group, writers are usually strong enough to listen to others
tell them that a subsequent work is weak in large ways.
Eventually every writer must learn to use negative comments
to improve her work" (285). Also, he refrains from responding
to students' writing until the helping circle has done so, fearing
that rather than provide their own responses the students
would imitate him in an effort to please him. The helping
circle, according to Macrorie, is the "third best resource" for
feedback a writer can use to improve his or her writing:

> The circle—at times frightening to every writer—is her
> third best resource. First, her own experience (including
> thoughts, feelings, and knowledge she picks up from
> others). Second, her skills as a writer. And third, the help
> the circle gives her to sharpen and hone those skills. (74)

The helping circle's purpose is to increase writers' ability to
judge their own writing. The object of the students' dialogue
in the helping circle is to assist each other in recognizing when
they are "truthtelling"—when what they have written is believable as a reflection of their "authentic" experience.

Another dialogic aspect of Macrorie's work is his recommendation that student writing be "published" in some way—
even mimeographed copies posted on bulletin boards would
do. The promise of publication shifts some of the students'
focus away from the instructor as audience and takes the

students' writing to the realm beyond the classroom. The student has the experience of dialogue, knowing that his or her writing will be read by a wider audience than the instructor; and this promise, Macrorie claims, motivates students to revise and polish their work.

In short, the goal of Macrorie's dialogic pedagogy is to eliminate Engfish from students' writing. The dialogic group acts to reinforce students' efforts at "truthtelling." The expected outcome is clearer, more lively prose that actually reflects the true, honest experience of the writer.

Macrorie accomplishes these goals by employing freewriting techniques, helping circles, and opportunities for students to "publish" their papers. Other expressivists, especially Donald Murray, share Macrorie's desire to promote "authentic self-expression" and employ dialogic group activities to effect this objective. In fact, Murray has gained the reputation among many scholars as the model expressivist because of his thoroughly neo-romantic view of the writing process.

Writing as a Discovery of Self

Donald Murray argues that writers write to understand, not be understood: "For the writer, writing is a process, a way of seeing, of hearing what he has to say to himself, a means of discovering meaning" ("Explorers" 4). According to Murray, writers are not as concerned with communication as they are with exploring their own identity and discovering who they are. For example, here are representative statements from three of Murray's better known essays:

When we discover what we have said we discover who we are. In finding your voice you discover your identity. Style is not a fashionable garment you put on; style is what you are; what you have to say as well as how you say it.

. . . We write to explore the constellations and galaxies which lie unseen within us waiting to be mapped with our own words. . . . The writer goes on writing to discover, explore, and map the evolution of personal world of inner space. ("Explorers" 7)

To communicate effectively the writer may do some final tinkering and make some adjustments in his words, using specialized analogies, for example, to reach a particular audience. But even in the final editing the professional writer doesn't look to the language, but through it to what he has to say. . . . The writer doesn't make adjustments in what he has to say; he doesn't look to the audience first and write down what the reader wants to hear. The good writer communicates by building—through language—a sturdy discovery of thought. ("Interior View" 11)

We are motivated to write when we communicate to ourselves. Others come later or not at all. It is satisfying to share, to entertain, to explain, to persuade, to reach an audience, but it is a great, private joy to hear yourself, to be quiet and to listen to the music of your own meaning wrestling itself free of confusion, to see a page on which your hint of potential meaning stands free of you, rooted in its own understanding. ("What Makes" 111)

Clearly, Murray emphasizes the writer's communication with himself or herself—the writer's personal discovery of his or her identity—over communication with others. The motivating drive to write is not the desire to engage in dialogue with others but to know one's self. Communication—dialogue with others—is almost a by-product of the activity of writing. Nevertheless, Murray is a champion of dialogic pedagogy.

Rather than dialogue with others to advance communication, however, Murray promotes dialogue with the self.

Dialogue with the Other Self

Murray's dialogic pedagogy aims to develop the writer's "other self." The other self, he claims, is the "writer's first reader." In Murray's concept, the other self becomes the monitor for the entire writing process. He likens the other self to an explorer or a mapmaker:

> The other self scans the entire territory, forgetting, for the moment, questions of order or language. The writer/explorer looks for the draft's horizons. Once the writer has scanned the larger vision of the territory, it may be possible to trace a trail that will get the writer from here to there, from meaning identified to meaning clarified. Questions of order are now addressed, but questions of language still delayed. Finally, the writer/explorer studies the map in detail to spot the hazards that lie along the trail, the hidden swamps of syntax, the underbrush of verbiage, the voice found, lost, found again. ("Teaching the Other Self" 166)

This other self not only knows what is actually on the page but also understands the writer's process so far, projects into the future what possible shapes the work might yet take, and, more importantly, follows "thinking that has not yet become thought" (166). It monitors the thinking processes, pursuing "a wisp of thinking until it grows into a completed thought" (165). The other self, in dialogue with the self, performs many functions—many that involve higher order thinking skills.

Murray complains that composition research has not fully documented the role of the other self in the writing process, but

he cites the work of researchers like Sondra Perl and Nancy Sommers as a beginning of this investigation. He predicts that such research will reveal several functions that the other self performs during the writing process:

- The other self tracks the activity that is taking place. Writing, in a sense, does not exist until it is read. The other self records the evolving text.

- The other self gives the self the distance that is essential for craft. This distance, the craftperson's step backwards, is a key element in that writing that is therapeutic for the writer.

- The other self provides an evolving context for the writer. As the writer adds, cuts, or records, the other self keeps track of how each change affects the draft.

- The other self articulates the process of writing, providing that writer with an engineering history of the developing text, a technical resource that records the problems faced and the solutions that were tried and rejected, not yet tried, and the one that is in place.

- The other self is the critic who is continually looking at the writing to see if, in the writer's phrase, "it works."

- The other self also is the supportive colleague to the writer, the chap who commiserates and encourages, listens sympathetically to the writer's complaints and reminds the writer of past success. The deeper we get into the writing process the more we may discover how affective concerns govern the cognitive, for writing is an intellectual activity carried on in an emotional environment, a precisely engineered sailboat trying to hold course in a vast and stormy

Atlantic. The captain has to deal with fears as well as compass readings. (166–67)

It is this other self that inexperienced writers (and writing instructors) are not cognizant of and that Murray's method claims to "make articulate."

Murray's Dialogic Conference Method

Murray claims that frequent, brief, individual conferences are the best technique for helping students develop the other self. In these conferences the instructor must let the student speak first about work in progress; then the instructor responds to the student's response. The instructor can ask such open–ended questions as, "What surprised you? What's working best? What are you going to do next?" However, the instructor cannot give directions or respond to the writing directly, as in Macrorie's or Elbow's model of dialogic pedagogy. Instead, the instructor must respond only to what the student says about the writing process at that particular stage. Murray is not an audience for the writing, as in Macrorie or Elbow (see below); he is a coach for the other self. He gives this example:

With remedial students I am handed a text that I simply cannot understand. I do not know what it is supposed to say. I can not discover a pattern of organization. I can not understand the language. But when the writer tells me what the writer was doing, when the other self is allowed to speak, I find that the text was produced rationally. The writer followed misunderstood instruction, inappropriate principles, or logical processes that did not work. (168)

Rather than informing the student what is wrong with the draft, Murray responds to the student's response to his or her own writing process.

In the short dialogue of the conference, Murray can confirm or correct students' writing or thinking processes. He found that "writers' feelings control the environment in which the mind functions" and noticed that male writers often express a false confidence and women writers a false modesty. In these situations, he must deal with these "false" feelings by supporting "the other self that knows how good the work really is" (169).

One reason that he does not deal directly and primarily with the text the student presents to him in the conference is that he finds that similar looking drafts can be accompanied by different perceptions held by the writer:

> I am constantly astonished when I see drafts of equal accomplishment but with writer evaluations that are miles apart. One student may say, "This is terrible. I can't write. I think I'd better drop the course." And right after that on a similar paper a student says, "I never had so much fun writing before. I think this is a really good paper. Do you think I should become a writer?" (169)

In each case, without knowing how the writer evaluates his or her writing, the instructor runs the risk of continuing the student's faulty self–evaluations and preventing the student from being able to take the appropriate action to improve the draft. The goal of the conference is to allow writers to produce increasingly better drafts, to keep revising until the meaning becomes clear both to the student and the instructor.

This dialogic one-on-one conferencing is reinforced in the classroom in small– and large–group workshops:

The same dynamics take place as have been modeled in the conference. The group leader asks the writer, "How can we help you?" The other self speaks of the process or of the text. The workshop members listen and read the text with the words of the other self in their ears. Then they respond, helping the other self become a more effective reader of the evolving text. (171)

The conference and workshop experiences allow students to focus on what is working well, not on failure and error. Murray claims that successful writers don't "so much correct error as discover what is working and extend that element in the writing" (170). Murray's dialogic conferencing method allows students to focus on and build upon success.

As the semester moves along, Murray no longer needs to ask the opening question; the students come in and tell him where they are in a draft and what they plan to do next. When this happens, he finds that the best learning takes place if he merely makes explicit for the students what they have learned from the process so far, making the other self aware of the successful processes and reinforcing them so that they can become part of the writer's general repertoire of strategies.

The goal of the dialogue in Murray's pedagogy is to provide responses so that students can come to know themselves through an interaction with language and to express what they have found to be "true" through this personal inquiry. The response provided to writers and to their "other selves" assists their look inward. However, Murray does not conceive of the other self solely as an internal audience concept. The other self is also a specific kind of internal, mental manager who, if trained well, keeps the writing process moving. This concept of "internal audience" is not unique to Murray; it is also central to the work of Peter Elbow.

Dialogue and the Teacherless Class

Peter Elbow never uses the terms *dialogic* or *dialogism* to describe his pedagogy; however, his pedagogy is thoroughly dialogic in that much of the classroom activity he describes involves students talking to each other about their writing. Students converse about what each student has written in order to provide immediate feedback to each writer about his or her composition. Two key concepts of Elbow's pedagogy are dialogic: his notion of the "teacherless classroom" and his discussion of how concepts of audience can hinder and enhance one's composing process.

In *Writing Without Teachers*, Elbow argues that the best way to learn to write more effectively is with a "teacherless writing class." This class can be formed by a group of individuals whether or not they are formally enrolled in a writing class. Also, writing teachers can base their classes on this model as well. (If they do, they must also agree to write and share something every week as full, equal participants.) Like the liberatory learning model discussed in chapter three, the teacher's role in Elbow's pedagogy is not that of expert but is closer to the role of fellow student/writer.

Elbow argues that it is difficult, especially for inexperienced writers, to compose without direct and immediate feedback from a variety of readers. Feedback is important to any writer's development: a writer has to know what effects his or her words are having on readers. As Elbow writes, "You need movies of people's minds while they read your words" (*Writing Without Teachers* 77). Thus, the dialogue in the classroom is designed to give the writer a representation of what has gone on in the minds of readers when they have read his or her words. In contrast to Macrorie and Murray, Elbow is more aware of the communicative function of written discourse and is interested in helping writers experience how their writing

affects others, including fellow students and the "real" audience that the writing may be intended for.

Thus, the dialogue in Elbow's pedagogy is among the students and is about their writing. The purpose of the teacherless class is to provide dialogic feedback to writers in advance of a real audience. The dialogue is not explicitly perceived to be between the "real" audience and the writer, as it is in social epistemic theory (discussed in chapter two), but between writers trying to help each other discover through dialogue what to say and the most effective way to say it. The ultimate objective of this pedagogy is for writers to gain enough experience so that they no longer need the group but can depend on their own sense of what is appropriate—that is, to be able to cope successfully with one's writing processes *independent* of others.

According to Elbow, the teacherless class should be formed from a small but diverse group of dedicated writers, and the group must commit to write something every week and to respond to everyone else's work faithfully. Elbow acknowledges that at first members may come and go until rapport develops among the members. Ideally, the group should have seven to twelve regular members who attend every week for a minimum of ten weeks.

Each group member brings to each session something he or she has written, anything from a business letter or report to a poem. The member reads the document aloud twice, and then the other members tell the writer how the writing has affected them (this response can be oral or written). In contrast to Macrorie's pedagogy, the kind of feedback envisioned in *Writing Without Teachers* is *nonevaluative*, one in which readers simply verbalize their reactions *as readers*. The goal is not to judge the writing good or bad or to suggest ways to improve it, although that may happen along the way; the object is simply

to describe one's reactions to the words on the page so that the writer gains an accurate sense of how his or her prose is being received by readers.

After a writer reads the text, he or she listens while the other group members speak or write about the text. According to Elbow's scheme, the writers must not reveal how they feel about the reactions to their writing. If the readers sense that there is defensiveness on the writer's part, they will censor what they say and the writer will not obtain an accurate picture of readers' experiences. The writer must listen and absorb what is said. As Elbow advises writers, "Just take it all in. Assume that when you write something else—or rewrite this piece—your *own* choices about how to write it will organically benefit from hearing what they are now saying" (105).

Elbow has devised several classroom techniques to make this dialogic feedback more efficient and consistent for the reader. For example, he proposes four strategies for getting the dialogue underway: pointing, summarizing, telling, and showing. In *pointing*, the reader underlines words or passages that seem particularly effective:

> Start by simply pointing to the words and phrases which most successfully penetrated your skull: perhaps they seemed loud or full of voice; or they seemed to have a lot of energy; or they somehow rang true; or they carried special conviction. (85)

Elbow recommends a wavy line for any passages that the reader finds "particularly weak or empty" (86). These underlinings not only mark the strong and weak points of the text for the writer, but they also work as mnemonic devices for the "telling" stage when the reader explains what kind of "getting through" actually happened. If a composition is read aloud,

pointing consists of recalling words and phrases and jotting them down after the reading ends.

The second stage, *summarizing*, contains four steps:

a) First tell very quickly what you found to be the main points, main feelings, or centers of gravity. Just sort of say what comes to mind for fifteen seconds, for example., "Let's see, very sad; the death seemed to be the main event; um . . . but the joke she told was very prominent; lots of clothes."

b) Then summarize it into a single sentence.

c) Then choose *one word* from the writing which best summarizes it.

d) Then choose a word that isn't in the writing to summarize it. (86)

Elbow considers pointing and summarizing the most efficient and accurate ways readers use to communicate perceptions to a writer during the dialogue that follows; the other methods can be skipped if time is short, but a class should always point and summarize (87).

In *telling*, the reader provides a narrative of what happened while he or she read: "And I felt this. . . . Then this happened," and so on. The listeners simply provide a short narrative about their reactions, not about how good or bad the writing was perceived to be. According to Elbow, some responses to writing cannot be communicated directly. *Showing* is a process of selecting an appropriate metaphor that "tap[s] knowledge which you have but which is usually unavailable to you" (90). Elbow provides a list of twenty–four possible ways to unearth descriptive metaphors of your reaction to a particular piece of writing. Here are five examples:

a. Talk about the writing as though you were describing *voices*: for example, shouting, whining, whispering, lecturing sternly, droning, speaking abstractly, and so forth. Try to apply such words not only to the whole thing but to different parts.

b. Talk about the writing as though you were talking about *motion* or *locomotion*: for example, as marching, climbing, crawling, rolling along, tiptoeing, strolling, sprinting, and so forth.

c. *Color:* What color is the whole? the parts?

d. The writing is a lump of workable clay. Tell what you would do with that clay.

e. Let your whole body make the movements inspired by the writing or different parts of it. Perhaps combine sounds and movements. (90–92)

Elbow claims that successful use of showing is often a function of the individual classes: some classes have simply been too shy to use them; others found them helpful and enjoyable.

These four classroom activities are ways that students engage in focused dialogue with each other in order to provide information about how a piece of writing has affected them. As Elbow says in several places, these are ways of letting writers know what is actually "getting into" the reader's head.

Dialogic response or feedback, according to Elbow, enhances one's development as a writer, especially in the early stages when the writer has little experience with how his or her written words affect others. It is difficult to obtain feedback about one's writing because of the special attention it takes from a reader and because much of the reaction is hidden from the writer unless the reader can verbalize reactions in dialogue with the author on the spot.

Criterion–Based and Reader–Based Feedback

In *Writing With Power*, Elbow refines the concept of feed-back described in *Writing Without Teachers*, calling it reader-based feedback, and he adds a new category: criterion–based feedback. The two types of feedback provide the writer with different kinds of information. Criterion–based feedback assists a writer in discovering whether the piece of writing meets the criteria "most often used in judging expository or nonfiction writing." Reader–based feedback, like the concept of feedback discussed earlier, "tells you what your writing does to particular readers" (240). In practice the two kinds of criteria are not so easily distinguished from one another. As Elbow writes, "A reader cannot possibly give you a piece of criterion-based feedback except from the basis of something having happened inside him; nor can a reader give you a piece of reader–based feedback without at least implying a criterion of judgment or perception" (241).

Elbow offers lists of questions, heuristics, that writers can use to initiate dialogue with anyone about writing, no longer limiting the dialogic situation to a teacherless classroom. For criterion–based feedback, the questions range over these four areas:

    a. What is the quality of the content of the writing: the ideas, the perceptions, the point of view?

    b. How well is the writing organized?

    c. How effective is the language?

    d. Are there mistakes or inappropriate choices in usage?

For reader–based feedback, Elbow offers these questions:

   a. What was happening to you, moment by moment, as you were reading the piece of writing?

   b. Summarize the writing: give your understanding of what it says or what happened in it.

   c. Make up some images for the writing and the transaction it creates with you. (240)

These heuristics become scripts for starting and directing dialogues with friends, teachers, or anyone who reads one's writing.

The writer, according to Elbow, should remain in control of the kind and, it is hoped, the quality of the feedback received from readers. Simply presenting writing to someone and asking what he or she thinks leaves the reader open to say anything or nothing. A writer's friends and family are often unwilling to criticize for fear of hurt feelings. People with little experience responding to writing may not readily be able to provide a reader with the kind of responses needed during the writing process. However, once a writer approaches a potential reader with specific questions, the resulting dialogue can be much more productive.

Elbow summarizes the benefits of each kind of feedback as follows:

> In short, the two kinds of feedback encourage readers to take different roles. When you ask a reader to give you criterion–based feedback you encourage him to function like an expert, a coach, or a commentator, that is, to stand off to the side and watch you from the stage wings as you give your violin concert and not to get too involved in your music. This helps him to tell you about your technique. When you ask your reader to give you reader-based feedback, on the other hand, you encourage him to