

Response to Kelly Ritter

Peter Elbow

I can't argue when Kelly Ritter complains that I was neglecting the traditional job of a review. Indeed I used exactly that phrase in the fourth sentence of my essay review—alerting readers to my neglect. Instead of arguing with Ritter, I can only thank her for doing so well the job that I didn't do—so that readers of *WPA* can now have that useful substantive kind of review.

I made it clear in my opening sentences that I was resorting to the broad genre of a “review essay” so I could take on a different task. I had decided that it was worth using my invitation to write a review in order to warn readers of an implicit danger that I felt was tangled up in the two volumes—a subtle danger that I thought few people would recognize, especially because the volumes did such a good job at what they set out to do. It's the danger of a tightly-coupled educational system with agreed upon standards: a system that frightens me because it narrows pathways to success and thus excludes more and more students. This system has already exerted huge influence on primary and secondary education in this country (given the powers of No Child Left Behind and other massive assessments). But the danger to U.S. higher education is too little noticed, and it scares me.

It's not that I claimed in my review essay that the writers and editors of these two volumes were consciously trying to foster such a system. They were simply trying to answer the question in the title: “what is ‘college-level’ writing?” But in doing this, they were tending to assume that the question *should* get an answer. That is, few writers in the volumes *questioned* the question. My claim is that we need to question it. (Jeanne Gunner questioned it, and forcefully.)

So what's wrong with the seemingly innocent job of defining college-level writing? What's wrong with trying to reduce the wild chaos of standards across higher education?—with trying for more neatness, coherence, and standardization? I used my review to spell out my reasons. Interest-

ingly, my central argument could be seen to follow from the diversity and excellence of the definitions of college writing given in the two volumes. My point was that if one definition should win—if we should succeed in defining college-level writing—we would create a tightly coupled system where students who create the wrong kind of excellent writing would be judged as having failed to reach the “level” of “college writing.”

In essence I made two points in my review essay and I acknowledge that both are very arguable.

(1) My review is arguable when I claim that most of the writers in the two volumes *do* assume or imply that their goal is to figure out what college-level writing really is—to figure out a definition or standard. Ritter says they are not making that assumption and points to the many real differences among essays in the volumes. Nevertheless, I think she herself makes that assumption. Look at her rhetorical question on her first page: “If we cannot define “college-level” writing, I surmised, then *certainly* we cannot, by any good, comparative measure, define “basic” writing.” The sentence surely implies (inadvertently?) that of course the volumes are indeed trying for an agreed upon standard—and that such agreement is a good thing.

(2) My review is even more arguable when I praise and indeed celebrate what could be called chaos and anarchy in standards for college-level writing. Is it really true that a system of agreed-upon, system-wide standards will narrow pathways to success and exclude more students? Is it true that if we tolerate different standards across different writing programs and different colleges, we will foster more *real* excellence and creativity than we get with tightly coupled systems such as we see with NCLB and the French and English systems of higher education? I give my reasons in my review, but plenty of readers will probably disagree.

(In this short response, I can't resist adding another point, also arguable, that I didn't make in my review essay. That is, the job of defining college-level writing is not just undesirable but impossible—by definition. The fact is that the goal of writing is to succeed with human readers, not to conform to some definition of excellence or to satisfy “trained scorers.” Human readers are just too different to ever agree on the same standards of quality. It's true that administrators of large scale assessments achieve “reliable scores” among human scorers, but only by forcing them to park their own human judgments or criteria at the door and do their scoring instead with common criteria—usually set by the administrators. See my “Good Enough Evaluation: When is it Feasible and When Is Evaluation Not Worth Having?” *Writing Assessment in the 21st Century: Essays in Honor of Edward M.*

White. Eds. Norbert Elliot and Les Perelman. Cresskill: Hampton P, 2011. 363–393.)

Readers will have to decide for themselves whether they agree with these three arguable claims—and whether it was defensible for me to abandon the task of a regular review in order to advance them.

