

Response to Peter Elbow's Review of *What Is College-Level Writing? Volumes 1 and 2*

Kelly Ritter

Each fall semester, I teach the graduate composition pedagogy course (English 747) at my institution. In doing so, I seek a balance between so-called practical versus theoretical readings, especially when some class members have extensive prior teaching experience at other institutions (or institutional types) while others have no experience whatsoever. To this group, college writing—and the act of addressing its agreed-upon components in a syllabus, let alone across assignments—is both pedestrian and mystical, finely outlined and amorphous. And so they ask, quite legitimately, year after year: What *is* college writing (anyway)?

That's no small question to posit, and one that has been hiding in the shadows of much of our field's scholarship since its inception, without a strongly voiced set of responses—until Howard Tinberg and Patrick Sullivan's recent two-volume project, *What is College-Level Writing?* I read the first volume of this project while finishing the manuscript for my book *Before Shaughnessy*, which challenges what it means to use curricular labels, particularly across diverse historical contexts. Tinberg and Sullivan's work not only provided me with a response to the queries of my graduate student teachers, but also clarified my own scholarly position on our field's nomenclature. If we cannot actually define "college-level" writing, I surmised, then *certainly* we cannot, by any good, comparative measure, define "basic" writing.

So, in my overlapping capacities as a reader of this journal, as a WPA, and as a scholar of composition studies, I'll admit I was a little upset when I read Peter Elbow's Spring 2011 review of Tinberg and Sullivan's work. Taking nothing away from Elbow's own obvious reputation or expertise, or his view of the state of our field (and the ways in which institutional and governmental assessment play complex roles in writing pedagogies), I feel he may have not fairly represented what Tinberg and Sullivan's work

does as much as emphasize what the mere existence of these volumes *might mean* to a critical outlook on assessment, testing, and standardization in our schools. Elbow seems to give the books very little attention *per se* in favor of using them as a springboard for a discussion of other issues. To put this point a better way: Elbow's review takes Tinberg and Sullivan's work to task for responding—in my view, in intelligent and important ways—to an often bureaucratic academic world that is not of their own making, nor in any way under their control. As such, I was compelled to write this response in order that my perspectives might bring forward a different way of viewing Tinberg and Sullivan's work, and in the process help other readers decide whether these books would be good inclusions in their own professional libraries.

Perhaps by briefly noting a sampling of the volumes' contents I can illustrate my counterpoints to Elbow's original review. In his essay, Elbow singles out just three pieces in detail, all from Volume One: by Ed White, Jeanne Gunner (as the "notable exception" to a search for definitions), and Sheridan Blau. In particular, Elbow focuses on Blau's passage about "the essence of college writing" (Elbow 157) and argues that Blau's definition is "elegant" but subsequently wonders "Do we really want to force everyone to agree on one [definition]?" (Elbow 157). In this example and in his review in general, Elbow focuses on the ways in which *a definition* might be posited—both by the books and by people *like* those contributing to these books. But I was comparatively struck by notable inclusions in these books that actually challenged Elbow's perception that high school and college teachers alike would use the two volumes (or the *presence* of them) to fall in line with national standardization. I was similarly struck by how much the books focus not on necessarily finding (or even debating) a *definition*, but instead on teasing out various arguments that illustrate the problem of engaging in cross-curricular leveling—even as we all may have, in many ways, already tried these very things on our own campuses, and failed.

Several essays in Volume One violate the obligatory curricular framing model we often assume is in place: college teachers blaming high school teachers for not doing their job (and the definition of the word "job" is one that these volumes contests as well), which results in dire need for strict classification, enforcing a college-level remediation of lessons "never learned" in high school. For example, Jeanette Jordan et. al.'s chapter, "Am I A Liar? The Angst of a High School English Teacher," articulates the frustration many secondary school teachers experience when faced with contradictory messages students receive in *college* writing courses—after often rigorous high school training. Jordan notes that although she taught "a variety of college writing courses" during her graduate education some fifteen years

ago, her “perception of what is expected may be dated.” Ultimately, because she strives to prepare students for postsecondary writing challenges, she would like “a clearer idea of what those challenges are at the college level today” (39). Far from falling into line with external mandates that necessarily limit and shape her classroom activities, Jordan says that she and her fellow teachers happily represent “a diversity of views on what a good paper looks like” (38). Despite this mission, Jordan concedes that “there must be some consistencies” across postsecondary writing programs (40). And I’m left with the question of whether this concession, as one articulation on the extensive continuum of pedagogical conversation, is so very bad?

Let me explain why I’m asking this question. In his introduction to Volume One, Patrick Sullivan acknowledges that

It may very well be that these conflicts [over uniform standards] are irresolvable and that all standards related to our students’ written work must ultimately be local, determined at least in part by our response to the complex realities of communities we serve and the individual students we teach. Any discussion of shared standards may require us to ignore or discount the very powerful political and social realities that help to shape students’ lives on individual campuses and in particular learning communities. We must also acknowledge that much outstanding scholarly work has already been done to address this issue, especially in the area of basic writing. On the other hand, it may well be that our profession could benefit enormously from reopening a dialogue about this question. At the very least, as a matter of professional policy, it seems reasonable to revisit issues like this routinely—to open ourselves up to new ideas and insights, and to guard against rigid or prescriptive professional consensus. (2–3)

In this articulation of the volumes’ purpose, I find ample capacity for both “sides” of the issue. On the one hand, yes, the local drives pedagogy (a concept with which I agree wholeheartedly). On the other hand, we cannot deny that some commonality *might* exist across venues, sometimes even in positive ways. Opening ourselves up to new curricular ideas about what is unique versus what is shared might very well improve our work, and would certainly better model the kind of critical and civic thinking we want our own student writers to do. While Elbow seems to reject this compromise in favor of what he calls “non standards” or “chaos” (157), I think Sullivan’s call is deserving of real attention in our literature.

This desire for a balanced consideration of micro and macro theories of teaching to, or against, standards seems to be echoed in other contributions in this volume. Whereas Elbow laments Tinberg and Sullivan’s work

as only representing an inappropriately broad “small slice” of all the writing that gets done in college (154), in fact their contributors finely articulate the many toppings, as it were, put upon that slice—which speak to the livelihood of many a writing teacher, particularly members of NCTE (the publisher of these volumes). Yes: a book, or set of books, on college writing writ large would be pretty interesting. But no: this project is not *that* project. And I think in order to fairly evaluate whether these two collections do a responsible job of what they set out to do, we need to keep their *actual* project in mind.

And responsible are the contributions within these books, in my view. For example, Yancey and Morrison’s essay, “Coming to Terms,” engages productively with the idea that college writing teachers might take up the role of “brokers” in regards to standards and high school to college transfer of skills and knowledge. Mosley’s “The Truth about High School English” provides a realistic (and sometimes stark) picture of the high school teacher’s workload and daily decisions regarding external assessment measures versus internal needs of students in any particular classroom. Mosley also calls for more dialogue between high school and college teachers—a call echoed elsewhere in our field, but often not respected at the local level. Muriel Harris’ essay “What Does the Instructor Want? A View from the Writing Center” voices a perspective not often heard in these debates: the writing center consultant, who is asked to be a servant to many masters. Whereas Elbow paraphrases a point from Harris’ essay that highlights the *end result* of defining “good” college writing—that “an A paper for composition might well get an F in engineering” (Elbow 155), I see Harris’ purpose as more nuanced, discussing process in sessions rather than final products in classroom teaching. As she puts it, “. . . as a tutor, I am not always sure which college-level writing I am supposed to recognize,” given the variety of styles and conventions represented by the disciplinary units assigning the work (121). This view is certainly one with which I can empathize, as a former writing tutor myself.

In Volume Two, essays such as Peter Kittle’s and Rochelle Ramay’s “Minding the Gaps: Public Genres and Academic Writing” and David Jolliffe’s “Advanced Placement English and College Composition: Can’t We All Get Along?” represent some of the more compelling responses to the project’s original framing question. Kittle and Ramay focus on the ways in which their students do, in fact, “engage intellectual issues in genres with public, rather than formulaic, tendencies” in their written work (102), responding to the call from many a writing teacher that student writing, and writing assignments, transcend the limited purview of the teacher. Jolliffe comparatively posits that since neither first-year writing courses nor AP

English curricula and examinations are going to “go away” (58) any time soon, should we not find ways to reconcile them as best as we can? Here is where, I imagine, Elbow would take issue: he might say that such concession (as opposed to rebellion) is a core weakness of this project. But I think that essays such as Jolliffe’s are clearly in the pragmatic spirit of these two volumes, one that says: let us see *where we are* and assess *what is, and what is not* true, useful, and possible, given the resources we share (but do not always effectively employ or acknowledge).

In this second volume, there is continued emphasis on student writing that itself addresses this question in variable ways. What I like about these pieces of student writing is that they are not used here as fodder for modeling, benchmarking, or anything, in fact, related to *norms*. Unlike the inclusion of student essays in readers, handbooks, or rhetorics—which *are* often meant to “show” student readers “how” to write—these essays are in the tradition of work featured in undergraduate publishing venues such as *Young Scholars in Writing*. They are themselves informed “insider,” contributions on the topic from a position very often neglected in this heated conversation. I think it is important to emphasize the value of this feature of both collections (and Elbow does mention it once, on page 154). We could use more scholarship that blends the voices of composition teachers and students on equal, dialogic terms.

This response has already gone on at quite some length, so I’ll say this: Tinberg and Sullivan, and their contributors, provide a healthy degree of the very skepticism Elbow argues we, as teachers, should adopt regarding universal “standards.” The authors in both volumes respond to the realities of external measurements of teaching and curricula within our classrooms, and in doing so represent all manner of voices admirably. They also raise allied challenges not interrogated in Elbow’s reading—such as how to identify the various “levels” of college writing (basic, standard, advanced, WAC-centered) against one another—and consequently articulate the difficulties we *all* have when balancing the local and national, the practical and theoretical, in our classrooms. As such, I know that these two volumes—while probably not perfect, as no book is—are going on my pedagogy course syllabus this coming fall.

