

Mapping the Voice Swamp

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As Peter Elbow explains in “Voice in Writing Again: Embracing Contraries” in the November 2007 issue of *College English*, “voice in writing” has largely died as a composition topic. Peter Elbow asks us to “reawaken the discussion” (168), lamenting the absence of it in our scholarly journals (170). Despite the critics, he explains that voice is

“alive and well, yet no one comes forward any more in our field to argue for it or even to explore very seriously why it’s so alive. . . . We’re left with an unresolved contrary that strikes me as unhealthy and unproductive” (171). As he explains, very few people discuss voice anymore. In fact, if you have the bad taste to mention it at a CCCC’s cocktail party, you will most likely be rewarded with averted eyes and an awkward silence. As one of my colleagues succinctly put it: “Oh, god, voice again?”

Although the place of voice in composition was never truly resolved, many of us were stone sick of it by the end of the 1990s. Peter Elbow breathed some life into it when he published his authoritative collection *Landmark Essays in Voice in Writing* in 1994. Then, the following year, Darsie Bowden knocked the wind out of it in her article “The Rise of a Metaphor: ‘Voice’ in Composition Pedagogy” in the Autumn 1995 volume of *Rhetoric Review*. She subsequently pronounced voice dead in her book *The Mythology of Voice* in 1999, declaring

voice has served an important function in the movement away from current-traditional rhetoric, but that, as a metaphor, it has outlived its usefulness. I will show how voice epitomizes a logocentric, Eurocentric, patriarchal approach to discourse that –despite the fact that both literary theory and composition theory have embraced multiculturalism, electronic technology and feminism – remains stubbornly embedded in our conversations about texts. Underlying my argument is the assumption that there can be no such thing as voice, that it was a metaphor of particular historical moment, and that that moment has passed. (viii)

No one seemed to want to tackle this argument, and very little has been published since.

These works from Peter Elbow and Darsie Bowden supply the most thorough history of the voice debate, outlining its troublesome areas that largely center on the question of “authentic self.” Although Bowden in particular does an amazing job of tracing the history of voice through literary studies and classical rhetoric, she does so in order to demonstrate the murkiness of the term, and to argue for its abandonment. I find myself siding with Elbow, however, and argue that the tangled history of voice is not a weakness, but a strength that mirrors and bridges the various impulses within our discipline. Elbow is right—“embracing contraries” is what composition does well and needs to continue to do. Stephen North described “the house of lore” (22) in *The Making of Knowledge in Composition: Portrait of an Emerging Field* as a rather untidy house, with few clear connections among writing concepts. Although the house of composition needs sweeping occasionally, as Bowden tried to do, voice needs to be more fully explored instead of swept out. If we can tidy it up, make connections among the different perspectives on voice, then we’ll have a term we can use more consistently.

Therefore, I want to resuscitate the voice debate, and offer a new perspective that builds upon Elbow’s framework. Beginning with his five meanings of voice—audible, dramatic, distinctive, authoritative, and resonant (*Landmark Essays* xx)—I have adapted the map he began in 1994, a map of the voice “swamp” (xxxiii). What has emerged out of the voice debate are four narratives about voice, which this article describes and for which it provides examples. These four narratives can allow us to keep voice as a composition term and use it more consistently.

My version of the “map” (see Table 1) presents several common metaphors for written voice and aligns them into four “paths”: Speaking From, Speaking To, Speaking Up, and Speaking Out. This table reveals that there are four narratives for discussing voice, each with its own history. It also indicates that voice has emerged as a “bridge”: first, between the studies of rhetoric and poetics, and second, between the canons of style and delivery. Both “bridgings” reveal the strength of modern composition studies, which builds on the old and reinvents the tools we need today, adapting to the needs of a diverse student audience. However, they also add to the “swamp effect” that keeps us from using voice in consistent ways. The criss-crossings within voice are why a map of voice approaches is so critical.

In Table 1, the words in bold are Elbow’s original five meanings of voice. His five meanings can be reorganized within the four perspectives on voice. That is, what Elbow describes as the five ways of categorizing student voices, fits neatly within the four narratives scholars use to think about and discuss voice.

Speaking From is a narrative of voice that indicates the body or the soul, as a voice that emanates from deep within the body, perhaps even below consciousness. This view of voice comes to us from poetry, but is also recognizable to anyone who follows body criticism. The Speaking To view of voice tends more towards the rhetorical, with a focus on the writer’s effect on audience. Speaking Up fits with the Expressivist view of voice, as a way to find and express oneself, to “come to voice” as bell hooks puts it (53). Speaking Out is a kind of voice that may involve all of these ideas, but is marked by an activist agenda. The Speaking Out voice demands change. All four of these narratives can blend and overlap in confusing ways, unless we have a map that clarifies which path we’re taking.

You will notice in the table that you can see style and delivery criss-crossing in the ways we discuss voice. This is important to note for those who dismiss voice as just another way of referring to style. Rhythm is connected to style, but is also part of delivery; euphony is considered an important part of style, but also part of delivery, etc. Many of the terms relate to both canons, and so voice cannot be dismissed simply as part of one or the other.

You can also see the connections between rhetoric and poetics. Rhetoric had early connections to drama in the Greek and Roman traditions, and so we get words such as “mask” or “role” connected to voice. Peter Elbow’s “dramatic” and “resonant” voices would also be important concepts for both rhetoric and poetics, as they imply both meaning as well as sound.

Table 1: Mapping the Voice Swamp

Speaking From (Poetics) <i>Writing that suggests physicality or soul; a suggestion of bodily presence; a physical or spiritual voice</i>	Speaking To (Rhetoric) <i>Writing in a shared discourse or context; common ground; a voice speaking to a reader</i>	Speaking Up (Expressivism) <i>Writing as a “coming to voice” or discovery of identity; a voice asserting personal authority</i>	Speaking Out (Activism) <i>Writing with an agenda; a voice speaking in order to assert authority, to resist others, and to effect change</i>
Author/Poet Body Essence Physicality Presence	Implied Author Narrator Scriptor Speaker Writer	Distinctiveness Individuality Personality	Authoritative Experience Revolutionary
Divinity Magic Soul Spirit	Actor Character Dramatic Mask Persona Role	Belief Confession Truth	Conviction Freedom Insistence Liberation
Dance Electricity Energy Fluid Juice Naturalness Rhythm Tempo Vigor	Arrangement Authoritative Control Credibility Ethos Identification	Personality Self Sincerity	Consciousness Self-awareness
Expression	Focus Point of view Stance	Authenticity	Perspective
Audible Euphony Intonation Harmony Melody Resonance Sound	Delivery Distinctiveness Recognizability Resonance Style Tone	Authoritative Embrace Mood Release	Authoritative Power Struggle Resistance

The Narrative of Speaking From

To help put this table into context, consider that composition marks a site where rhetoric and poetics merge. In many English departments across the U.S., literature and composition work together. Some Lit folks teach Comp, some Comp folks teach Lit. We share a common interest in the written word, much like Aristotle who taught both rhetoric and poetics. The 2006 collection, *Composition and/or Literature: The End(s) of Education*, edited by Linda S. Bergmann and Edith M. Baker, with a foreword by Winifred Bryan Horner, addresses this very issue.

As an historical example of the merging of rhetoric and poetics in composition, consider the effect of the New Critics on the teaching of literature. A major influence on the teaching of poetry in the twentieth century was the publication of Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's *Understanding Poetry* in 1938, which continued into a fourth edition in 1976. These two New Critics influenced several generations of writing instructors, and coined the now ubiquitous term “speaker’s voice.” This history provides the background for the Speaking From approach, with its focus on the poetic.

An excellent example of the Speaking From approach comes from Peter Elbow himself, in his introduction to *Landmark Essays on Voice and Writing*. He uses several examples related to poetry and song to explain “resonant” voice, the trickiest version of voice to explain since it seems to call into question the writer’s self or identity (xxxiv). Elbow uses a passage from an article entitled “How to Write” by William Carlos Williams:

So poets [...] are in touch with ‘voices,’ but this is the very essence of their power, the voices are the past, the depths of our very beings. It is the deeper [...] portions of the personality speaking, the middle brain, the nerves, the glands, the very muscles and bones of the body itself speaking. (xxxvi)

Williams equates the “essence” of power with the “depths” of being, or more literally, the muscles and bones of the poet’s body. Williams is equating depth of knowledge with physical depth. Elbow uses this example to explain that voice has strength if it involves a great deal of a person’s being or body.

Elbow's second example is from Roland Barthes's "Grain of the Voice" in *Image, Music, Text*:

Listen to a Russian bass [...]: something is there, manifest and stubborn, (one hears only that), beyond (or before) the meaning of the words, their form [...], the melisma, and even the style of execution: something which is directly in the cantor's body, brought to your ears in one and the same movement from deep down in the cavities, the muscles, the membranes, the cartilages, and from deep down in the Slavonic language, as though a single skin lined the inner flesh of the performer and the music he sings. [...] The 'grain' is that: the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue. (xxxvii)

This example of singing indicates how voice resonates with the deeply physical.

Further, Elbow uses an example from the poem “Poetry: III” in the collection *Your Native Land, Your Life* by Adrienne Rich:

Even if every word we wrote by then
 were honest the sheer heft
 of our living behind it not these sometimes
 lax indolent lines these litanies. (xxxvii)

The words “heft of our living” indicates the physicality behind voice.

Beyond physicality, Elbow argues that “resonance” comes from the writer’s unconscious. Somehow “writers or speakers *do* manage to find words which seem to capture the rich complexity of the unconscious” and they “somehow seem to *resonate with* or *have behind them* the unconscious as well as the conscious” (xxxiv). If a writer taps into the unconscious, then he or she will produce a more resonant voice because he or she is connecting to something “deeper.”

The example Elbow uses for this point comes from D. H. Laurence discussing Melville in *Moby Dick*:

The artist was so *much* greater than the man. The man is rather a tiresome New Englander of the ethical mystical-transcendentalist sort: Emerson, Longfellow, Hawthorne, etc. So unrelieved, the solemn ass even in humour. So hopelessly *au grand sérieux* you feel like saying: Good God, what does it matter? If life is a tragedy, or a farce, or a disaster, or anything else, what do I care! Let life be what it likes. Give me a drink, that's what I want just now.

For my part, life is so many things I don't care what it is. It's not my affair to sum it up. Just now it's a cup of tea. This morning it was wormwood and gall. Hand me the sugar.

One wearies of the *grand sérieux*. There's something false about it. And that's Melville. Oh, dear, when the solemn ass brays! brays! brays! (xxix)

Laurence suggests there is an unconsciousness in Melville at times that is superior to his conscious effort. This view goes beyond physicality and moves toward a kind of spirituality, a tapping into the artistic unconscious, or, in the classical sense, providing a conduit for the gods.

In all of these examples, Elbow is demonstrating a Speaking From approach to discussing voice. From this perspective, voice is something coming from the body, and perhaps even the soul.

The Narrative of Speaking To

It also seems clear that the two rhetorical canons of style and delivery have merged in composition studies. For example, consider the timing of the formation of the CCCCs in 1949. Its goal was to join forces between composition and communication (written rhetoric with a focus on style, and oral rhetoric with a focus on both style and delivery). It's no surprise, then, that throughout the last half of the twentieth century composition studies gravitated towards classical rhetoric, yet never abandoned its first home in literature studies.

Walker Gibson began arguing to borrow voice from literature studies in 1962 in the CCC's article "The Voice of the Writer," and then in 1963 wrote "The 'Speaking Voice' and the Teaching of Composition" for the College Entrance Examination Board. Gibson followed with *Tough, Sweet & Stuff: An Essay on Modern American Prose Styles* in 1966 and *Persona: A Style Study for Readers and Writers* in 1969. His work developed an influential following among compositionists.

Rhetoric and poetics further merged in the 60s and 70s with the collision of the field's simultaneous interests in Literature, Expressivism, and Rhetoric, although often thought of as mutually exclusive approaches. Literature approaches to teaching writing gave way to Expressivism, which led composition studies well into the 80s, although there were early indications that it would give way to the rhetorical approach.

For example, in a 1967 *English Journal* article entitled "The Speaking Voice Approach Joins the Rhetoric Parade," D. Bruce Lockerbie pays homage to Gibson, and also comments on the field's shift towards rhetoric. He writes:

Becoming aware of rhetoric—or "joining the rhetoric parade"—has been the single most exciting influence upon my teaching. It has enabled me to direct my students toward what I am sure is a greater depth of consciousness concerning their functions as writers. Perhaps you too have become interested in the rhetorical or "speaking voice" approach to teaching composition.

Lockerbie provides us an enthusiastic contemporary account of the adoption of Gibson's work as well as the embrace of rhetoric.

Expressivism was finally overshadowed in the 80s and early 90s by the discipline's overwhelming interest in classical rhetoric. By this time, as James Berlin notes, composition became a discipline "complete with graduate programs, undergraduate majors, major conferences, and journals" (217), much in part due to the grafting of rhetoric into composition studies.

By the mid to late 90s, we were left unsure how to think about voice, except as a touchy-feely expressivist idea that didn't quite fit with the everything-old-is-new-again rhetorical direction of the discipline. And by the end of the 90s, we dismissed voice as messy and quit trying to reconcile it with our rhetorical approach. This history provides a brief background for the Speaking To approach, with its focus on rhetorical issues, such as ethos and audience.

One good example of the Speaking To approach is Shirley K. Rose's 1989 article "Voice of Authority: Developing a Fully Rhetorical Definition of Voice in Writing" published in *The Writing Instructor*. The article argues for incorporating voice into the rhetorical tradition by replacing it with "authority." This piece clearly demonstrates a move away from the poetic or the expressionist movements and towards a more rhetorical focus. Rose argues that, "Authority may be a more useful concept in developing a fully rhetorical theory explaining which elements of written discourse function in writing the way that the voice functions in speech" without relying on spoken discourse terms (112). Therefore, Rose's article is a good example of the rhetorical approach to defining voice.

Rose begins her article by referring to Donald Stewart and authentic voice. She expresses concern that writing teachers do not have an "agreed upon definition of voice" (111). Therefore, as many others have done, she tries to define voice by exploring one of its strongest connotations (authority). Authority is a particularly good choice for her agenda because she is taking a rhetorical approach, and authority is a recognizably rhetorical concept. Rose continues her discussion by focusing on context, another rhetorical consideration. Voice "establishes the rhetorical relationship between the speaker and the hearer.

And in most spoken discourse situations, it also locates the speaker in space and time. That is, it helps to establish context” (112). Rose argues that, “All three of these functions work together to culminate in a fourth and final function of the voice in spoken discourse—the manifestation of the right and the opportunity to express an opinion or desire” (112). And here we arrive at an authority in which the voice has “a political, as well as a social and individual presence” (112). Interestingly, because of the tangled nature of voice, Rose has effectively expanded her Speaking To approach into a Speaking Up approach that even suggests Speaking Out.

For further examples of the Speaking To approach, I refer you to Theresa Enos’s 1992 article “Voice as Echo of Delivery, Ethos as Transforming Process,” and Jan Swearingen’s 1994 article “Ethos: Imitation, Impersonation, and Voice.” The reframing of voice as a kind of rhetorical ethos is quite clear from the titles. Their discussions of voice focus squarely on how it relates to rhetorical concerns.

The Narrative of Speaking Up

A good example of the Speaking Up approach is Lisbeth A. Bryant’s 2005 book *Voice as Process*. She studied how her students struggle to accommodate the academic voice with their “home voices” (4). This work refers a great deal to Peter Elbow and is coming out of the Expressivist movement, but is also functioning unavoidably within the rhetorical approach with its focus on academic argument and persuasion.

Bryant fills her chapters with examples of students struggling to find new, authentic voices in the midst of a rhetorical setting, i.e. the composition classroom. She exults in student voices that are “hybrids and mestizas” (105), voices that escape the five-paragraph theme (101). She clarifies her position by noting that there are six “activities” in the voice process, a circle of “encountering, engaging, navigating, negotiating, rejecting, and integrating” (88). This recursive process involves a great deal of “parroting” on the student’s part, just to begin negotiating the demands of academia (91). Bryant argues that voice is not a product, but a process that focuses on personal struggles with an academic voice (7).

The focus on the student’s voice as a process of finding his/her voice(s), and combining it/them with an academic voice, is a form of Speaking Up. For example, Bryant documents her student “Leah,” who

rejected the sanctioned academic voices when she refused to write five-paragraph themes . . . Leah’s mission to use her voice and write her stories encountered the mission of her teachers to have Leah employ an academic voice and write essays and research. She erected a border that she refused to cross between her storyteller voice that she brought with her to school and the voices of the academy . . . (89)

Bryant describes Leah’s voice as a “storyteller voice,” bringing to her work the authority of an effective creative writer (40), but not an academic writer.

In the first essay assignment, “Where I Stand,” Leah was directed to introduce herself to the class (41). She chose to tell a story about “gentling a quarter horse” (41), but ignored the directions to provide focusing statements and a conclusion:

Leah ended her first 101 essay like she ends her short stories—not like an essay. This represents Leah’s struggle between her desire to write in a storyteller voice and the school’s expectation for her to create an academic voice. (42)

What Bryant is focusing on is Leah’s process of combining her personal voice with the academic, a process that is about “owning” one’s voice(s) and adapting it/them as necessary. This is a Speaking Up approach, providing a narrative that focuses on the very personal process of expressing and asserting personal authority, using the personal to navigate one’s way through the academic.

The Narrative of Speaking Out

The Speaking Out approach is best exemplified by the work of bell hooks. Not only does she insist on subordinating her scholarly voice to her personal voice, she consistently produces essays of academic value. In addition, she questions the status quo and discusses voice as a form of revolution.

In her article entitled “‘When I Was a Young Soldier for the Revolution’: Coming to Voice” included in *Landmark Essays on Voice and Writing*, hooks describes a feminist coming to voice as a “moving from silence into speech as revolutionary gesture” (53).

Having a voice is a “metaphor for self-transformation” for “groups of women who have previously never had a public voice” (53). hooks acknowledges that “finding a voice may seem clichéd at times, especially when the insistence is that women share a common speech or that all women have something meaningful to say at all times” (53). However, for women who have suffered oppression silently in fear, “coming to voice is an act of resistance” (53).

hooks believes that “[s]peaking out is not a simple gesture of freedom in a culture of domination” (57). Rather, speaking out can be dangerous personally and professionally. Speaking is “active self-transformation and a rite of passage where one moves from being object to being subject. Only as subjects can we speak. As objects we remain voiceless—our beings defined and interpreted by others” (53).

In keeping with her sympathy for authentic voice, hooks begins her article with a personal story (making use of *Speaking Up* to strengthen her article) about hearing Angela Davis speak the words from which hooks takes the title of her article (“When I Was a Young Soldier for the Revolution”) (51). She relates a history of her childhood interest in poetry, and how she grew intellectually as a writer in college creative writing classes (52). There she learned “a notion of voice as embodying the distinctive expression of an individual writer. Our efforts to become poets were to be realized in this coming into awareness and expression of one’s voice” (52). Here we see her focus on creating poetry connecting her *Speaking Out* view of voice back to a *Speaking From* perspective.

However, hooks was often stereotyped in her classes as a writer of Southern black speech. She found that she was praised for her “‘true,’ authentic voice” and she was encouraged to “develop this voice” (52). These comments troubled her because they “seemed to mask racial biases about what my authentic voice would or should be” (52). Here begins the crux of her discussion: speaking from experience can be liberating, but easily stereotyped, therefore limiting to the writer. “Resistance,” in her way of thinking, implies a voice that speaks against such stereotypes. She is advocating the personal essay (*Speaking Up*) as a way to achieve *Speaking Out* (resisting dominating stereotypes).

In her search for a way of teaching her students voice, hooks takes note that the need for resistant speech is “validated in writings by people engaged in liberation struggles in the Third World, in the literatures of people struggling globally from oppression and domination” (54). These personal stories are tragic, moving, and all too real. But it is not just in creative writing that struggles for liberation are voiced: “Nonliterary works by writers opposing domination also speak to the primacy of coming to voice, of speaking for the oppressed” (54). Although hooks focuses much of her attention as a scholar on poetry, she is also well aware of political writing that makes use of biographical or autobiographical stories. hooks summarizes both genres: “In fiction as well as in confessional writing, those who understand the power of voice as gesture of rebellion and resistance urge the exploited, the oppressed to speak” (54).

hooks calls the resistant voice the “liberatory voice—that way of speaking that is no longer determined by one’s status as object—as oppressed being” (55). It is a way of speaking “characterized by opposition, by resistance” (55). Such a liberatory or resistant voice “demands that paradigms shift—that we learn to talk—to listen—to hear in a new way” (55). Calling upon Thomas Kuhn’s influential “paradigm shift” theory, hooks calls attention to the need for change, and that a resistant or liberatory voice can be a way of pushing for that change, and resisting stereotypes.

Conclusion

These four perspectives of voice I have outlined should help clarify our discussion of written voice. Peter Elbow has never given up hope that we can embrace the contraries within the voice debate, and I think by recognizing which narrative about voice we’re following will go a long way towards that reconciling those contraries. We do not need to abandon voice just because it is a nexus of meaning; on the contrary, we should be excited at the opportunity to map the meanings for more consistent use. *Speaking From*, *Speaking To*, *Speaking Up*, and *Speaking Out* are relatively simple ways to achieve this desired consistency.

It has been almost ten years since Darsie Bowden encouraged us to abandon voice. Yet, somehow, voice lingers in our hallway conversations, and I am not convinced that the usefulness of voice is over. The tangled history of voice can be untangled, and, with map in hand, the discipline of Composition can handle the plurality of voice narratives.

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