

B.02 Enlisting the Spoken Voice in Teaching Composition and Teaching Literature
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*A word is dead when it is said
Some say--
I say it just begins to live
That day*

Led by Erica Scheurer and Peter Elbow, this panel opened with the above lines from Dickinson as a catalyst for a playful debate. In embracing contraries-style, the presenters traded increasingly contradictory positions on spoken versus written language. Written language, first claimed as permanent and affixed to the page across space and time, quickly became ephemeral and shifting in its ability to be constantly reshaped in revision. Speech, first considered fleeting and momentary, was soon described as equally un-revisable, un-erasable. While much of the speech/writing debate works hard to delineate hard differences between speech and writing, Elbow and Scheurer understand the voice and the page as an inseparable knot. And with this assumption established, the panelists gave a compelling and pragmatic sell of bring the voice to the center of reading and writing. At the heart of this panel then was the perfectly simple idea that the spoken voice is a powerful, possibly natural, underutilized, and mostly ignored tool that should be harnessed and enlisted in the complex processes of literary interpretation and composing.

On the literature side, Scheurer took up the voice as an active doing of language capable of offering up powerful and competing options for what a work of literature might mean. The power of spoken voice for literary interpretation is in its mediating force between openness (that a poem might mean anything we wish) and close-ness (an immediate and inflexible commitment to *one* reading). As students begin literary analysis, Scheurer asks that they perform interpretive, voiced options of texts under discussion. These performances become integral to interpretation; as students try out different voicings, insights emerge as to weight, rhythm, emphasis, pace, persona, word choice, and ultimately lead to a coherent a reading of the work. Overall, Scheurer made a compelling argument about the utility of voice in this context, especially in altering how we tend to conventionally picture what pedagogies of literature look like: rather staring silently at the poem before them, students just have to first take up the poem in their bodies, hearing and feeling the language as a way in to the difficult process of taking a stab at its meaning(s).

Scheurer talked about this voicing strategy as a form of “academic recycling,” a nod to and revision of past elocutionary pedagogies in which the voice was central to reading practices. Elbow, by slight contrast, argued for the power of the spoken voice for writing through linguistic theories of how we come to know and deploy language. Elbow asked us to let our written composing be “ruled by the mouth and ear” because as he claims “the mouth and the ear know a lot.” He worked to convince us of this in two ways: first, he made us try it out. He showed us contorted, long sentences and asked us to work them out with our own voice and rewrite them in a way more suited to the mouth. This process, he emphasized, is one of trial and error—much like Scheurer's trying-on of voiced interpretations, the mouth and the ear don't necessarily get expression right the first time. But by calling on the body and using the wisdom of the mind, as Elbow said, options for expression—and eventually particularly apt ones—seem to emerge. While I think Elbow would be happy, generally, to stop persuading at the level of practical experience and use, he also provided some linguistic theory for understanding why the voice is so helpful to written expression. Intonation units, what Elbow

quipped were "the secret of the universe," are what linguists identify as the little bits or packages of words with emphasis and pause found universally across human languages. These pauses, linguists theorize, seem to be necessary for our comprehension of meaning. For Elbow, intonations units, as well as other insights from linguists about the childhood acquisition of spoken language, demonstrate that there is real grammar of language known in the body that is rarely acknowledged. Supposing then that we know language to some extent in our bodies, we should help writers more actively draw upon this physical knowledge of language and meaning, rather than say, our internalization of academic-speak, our rote knowledge of grammatical rules and structures, or any assumptions we might have about language "meant for the page."

For me, there is a clarity and simplicity, followed by a staggering reorientation involved in this embrace of the voice. The panel put into relief the way we tacitly code reading and writing processes as utterly *quiet*, graphic, and inside of us, in our heads. This automaticity towards the silent was palpably felt as the panelists throughout their presentation asked the audience to enlist their *own* voices right there in the room. Scheurer asked us to say "present" to one another and to voice different takes on stanzas of Dickinson; Elbow asked that we take up a long sentence in the mouth and make it easier to say. These commands generated quiet mumblings and whispers at first, then a crescendo toward laughter, conversational debate, and assertive reading voices. After having a chance to turn on our own voices, the panelists asked for volunteers to share their new sentence or their voiced interpretation...*into the microphone*. And here the room resisted, fell silent. In a large conference room in which almost every chair was filled, there was no rush to come up to the microphone and blast the voice out across the crowd. This hesitance was revealing.

In some measure, as the panelists would indicate, the voice is *natural*: we all have and enact voices rich with intonation, pace, rhythm, emphasis, but that does not mean that it is automatic or comfortable to use the voice with intention in reading and revising processes. While the voice is automatic and always there, in other words, it still needs practice, time, and willingness to perhaps sound silly in order to be used in the way Elbow and Scheurer advocate. Indeed during these silences, I was reminded of how the night previous, I had to elude my hotel roommate in order to get time in our room alone to revise my presentation. To draw on a bold, expressive, and intonated voice in revision and "be ruled by the mouth and the ear," I felt I absolutely needed silence and solitude. In order to access the powerful dimensions of meaning and expression that the voice can render, we have to break through these feelings of self-consciousness, and more importantly, our strong underlying assumption that reading and writing are silent enterprises.