Elbowing our way to better writing

A new book argues that people would write better if they connected better with their true 'mother tongue': spoken language.

By Ruth Walker / April 5, 2012

Personal archaeology can be a wonderful thing. A recent excavation of my desktop (my actual physical wooden desktop) has yielded a number of small bank notes of various currencies, a recording of Mahler's Sixth – and the galley proofs of a new book by Peter Elbow, professor emeritus of English at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst: "Vernacular Eloquence: What Speech Can Bring to Writing."

Well, almost new book. It was published in January, but I feel like someone who has located a mislaid invitation to a party just in time to realize it's happening tonight. It's not too late!

And ever since the book resurfaced, I've been dipping into it with interest and delight. Professor Elbow's big idea is that people can improve their writing if they bring to it the strengths of spoken language. He doesn't suggest "anything goes," or tell struggling writers (is there another kind?) just to drop the rules and "write like you talk."

The stickler's dilemma

Rather, he says, "Let's welcome unplanned speech for the rich resources it has, even for careful writing, but nevertheless learn ways to keep what's valuable – and ways to change what needs changing."

Elbow has two particular ways to enlist the power of speech into the service of better writing. One is a technique he calls "talking onto the page," letting the ideas flow without regard for "correctness," for the early stages of writing. One of the strengths of speech is its ability to let us blurt out the truth. Any teacher who has asked a student struggling with an essay, "What are you trying to say here?" and been rewarded with a surprisingly concise or even eloquent oral response can appreciate the value of this technique. The second way is to read aloud to revise in the late stages of writing.

Elbow encourages his readers to adopt a writing process consisting of "a dialectical alternation between easy freewriting and drafting on the one hand, and careful conscious revising and editing on the other."
And he adds, "My larger project here is to ask readers to rethink the very nature of speech and writing and how they relate to each other. Above all, I want to rethink what our culture means by literacy."

Elbow's title is borrowed (stolen, he says) from the great Italian poet Dante, who began but did not finish a work (in Latin) titled "De Vulgari Eloquentia." In it he argued, as Elbow explains, "that the vernacular language of children and nursemaids in his native Florence was in fact nobler than Latin." This was in the 14th century, when Latin was the only language deemed suitable for serious writing. Dante's more effective argument in this line was a book he did finish, "The Divine Comedy," a milestone in the development of Italian from a corrupt dialect to a literary language.

Vulgar is the English heir to the "vulgari" of Dante's Latin title. But vulgar has gone down-market over the centuries; what once meant "of the people" now means coarse, dirty, or even obscene. And so Elbow turns to vernacular to carry the meaning that vulgar once conveyed.

Vernacular comes from verna, a Latin word meaning a "slave born in the master's house, native," according to Merriam-Webster. Thus vernacular is tied to notions of how we talk at home – in our mother tongue.

And we all, Elbow argues, have enough power in the spoken language we learned at home to make us effective writers.