

**Peter Elbow**  
**Interviewed by Barbara Leigh Smith**  
**The Evergreen State College oral history project**  
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**FINAL**

**Smith:** The questions start with childhood and growing up. Some people don't want to go to that early stage and some do. I interviewed Merv Cadwallader and I offered him the chance to skip childhood, because Sally Cloninger and Marilyn Frasca wanted to skip childhood, and he said, "No! My childhood was most critical." Then he told me all about how he was born in South Africa.

**Elbow:** That's right, he was a missionary.

**Smith:** And his father was a missionary.

**Elbow:** Did you see Merv recently?

**Smith:** Yes. He lives in Sedona, Arizona, and he's 93. He's real cognizant but he's frail. We spent about two hours together and it was amazing.

**Elbow:** I should get his address or phone number from you.

**Smith:** I can send you that. I didn't know all the story about his background and the family. It was really something.

**Elbow:** In a way, the main thing I think about my childhood is that my mom had adult diabetes and every now and then fainted, so my parents hired a servant, a black woman named Estelle Jones. Her picture is over there. She was sort of my black mother, a very important person to me, a very amazing person.

I feel I inherited a strong voice and strong assertiveness from her. She had this power of voice. She wrote an autobiography, which I'm still trying to publish but I have failed. I'm trying to write mine and maybe I can publish the two together. I grew up with this woman who only went through the third grade but was a powerful person, a powerful voice. And she told stories.

My parents were standard middle-class, white. My mom was unconventional. She would take us out of school and go to Martha's Vineyard for a few days or a week in the spring to plant a garden. I said, "School's going on. I can't." She would say, "Who cares?" Her attitude toward middle-class propriety was "Who cares?" I got that from her.

**Smith:** So, you joined the profession of Who Cares, being a teacher?

**Elbow:** That's right. [laughter] You don't have to fit propriety. That's my main thing from her. She was very literate. She had language. My father owned a small men's clothing store with his father. He was involved in city government and he would write reports and give them to my mom, and she would slash and cut things back. "Don't be so wordy."

**Smith:** She taught you liberty and freedom and alternatives, it sounds like.

**Elbow:** Yes, that's a good way of saying it. But what I feel was the strongest influence was Estelle Jones. If I wasn't hooked up here, I'd show you her picture. Her picture is right over there. She only went through third grade but she told stories all the time. She would use this line all the time: "When I tell the story of my life." We'd say, "Estelle, do it. Do it."

One day Cami and I came back from Evergreen to Massachusetts and Estelle handed Cami a sheaf of about 60 closely handwritten pages. Interesting that she gave them to Cami. But Estelle always did things in slightly roundabout, devious ways. Late in life she wrote this wonderful autobiography. "My name is Estelle Jones. This is the story of my life." It goes on from there.

**Smith:** Wow. She's still alive?

**Elbow:** No, she's not alive now. But after my parents died and she moved back to South Carolina, I used to go down to visit her regularly. She was a very big influence on me.

**Smith:** That's wonderful.

**Elbow:** I've started trying to write my memoirs and I think when I have mine, then I can link it up with hers and get both published together.

**Smith:** Do you have brothers and sisters?

**Elbow:** Yes. I was the youngest, I'm the baby. Four years older than me is my brother and five years older than me is my sister. He died of a brain tumor, but my sister is still alive. She's losing it a little bit. She married a French guy so she lives in France. She has five children and 10 grandchildren and a couple great-grandchildren.

**Smith:** Do you see them?

**Elbow:** I do, not as much as I wish, but last summer I went over and saw them.

**Smith:** The whole brood.

**Elbow:** They're not all together, but I did see some of them. One of her children is a niece whom I'm very fond of, and this niece and her daughter, who was studying in the U.S., came here six months ago.

**Smith:** Nice. So, talk about school. What kind of school experiences did you have and what did they teach you?

**Elbow:** I lived in this little New Jersey suburb of New York City, 15 miles from New York over the George Washington Bridge. There was kind of a large suburban town, very mixed class—that was Fair Lawn—and within Fair Lawn there's a little town of Radburn, which was started by a British city planner, Ebenezer Howard. He's known by planning people. There was this little town, Radburn, with little streets and parks. He had this very good idea of not giving each house very much lawn and pooling it for big parks.

**Smith:** Common space.

**Elbow:** The commons, absolutely. This was a town of professionals. Daddies all went off to New York City to work, although my father went to Paterson, New Jersey. His father started a men's clothing store and that's where my father worked his whole life. He went to Princeton. Nobody in his family had gone to college. He didn't want his two boys to feel like they had to carry on the family business. He loved books. He loved things that were bookish and intellectual. And he loved discussions about books. I'm sure that influenced me. We spent summers in Martha's Vineyard Island—but not my Pop, who got only two weeks of vacation.

At the Vineyard we were away from the main towns. It was a region surrounded by Amherst College faculty. The president of Amherst College had a big house there and the Amherst faculty settled around. I always felt outclassed by these kids of college professors. They used to put on puppet shows of Shakespeare and I felt like a dumb kid from New Jersey with a father "in trade." [laughter]

I'm a little embarrassed to say this, but you could say that my career was an effort to win my way into that academic society. It's doubly coincidental that I ended up living in Amherst, Massachusetts. I felt very intimidated by these children of academics. And here I am.

**Smith:** It didn't stop you, though.

**Elbow:** It didn't stop me, no.

**Smith:** Then you end up at the University of Massachusetts? That's ironic.

**Elbow:** Very ironic. But various things influenced me to want to go against the grain a little bit.

**Smith:** Yes, you kind of kept that egalitarian streak, too. Do I fit in? I've got to be fair to everybody. Don't want to be an outcast.

**Elbow:** Certainly, anti-elitism. They were elite, and I felt intimidated by the elite and so I was pissed off at people who were elite, although you *could* say that I strove to be elite.

**Smith:** You came to the right college at Evergreen, too.

**Elbow:** That's right. I am, somehow or another, a competitive person, so I want to win the elite game and go to Williams and go to Oxford and Harvard. But it's a love-hate because I hate elite snobbism.

**Smith:** Where did you go to high school and which colleges did you go to?

**Elbow:** As a family, we'd gone to Vermont with some friends skiing a couple of times, and I just loved skiing. My brother and sister had gone off to college and I was left alone and kind of rattling around, so I asked if I could go to a boarding school. My parents always wanted us to make our own decisions, so they got a bunch of brochures and I decided where I wanted to go, which was this place called Proctor Academy in New Hampshire. There are all these elite boarding schools but this was very non-elite. Half the kids there didn't even plan to go to college. They had a program called the "liberal" program. It goes to show how the word "liberal" is used for so many things. But I assumed I'd go to college and half the kids did.

I picked out Proctor because skiing was compulsory. I loved skiing and I wanted to ski, which you couldn't do very much in New Jersey. That's how I later picked out Williams College—for a very perverse reason—perverse at least in relation to Williams College. I'd been doing competitive skiing in boarding school and I wanted to keep that up *and* I wanted to be in a division I competitive skiing school, but I knew I wasn't good enough to get on the ski team at Dartmouth or Middlebury. They were too good for me. Williams skied in that league, but I had a good chance of getting on the first team.

**Smith:** You had a chance to really make it. That's a good reason, I think.

**Smith:** Do you still ski?

**Elbow:** Cross-country skiing a little bit.

**Smith:** I love to ski, too. Lots of my time at Evergreen was spent down at Bend at Mount Bachelor with the Cushings and the exchange faculty from Japan. We did that for years. And with Pete Sinclair. He was a great skier.

**Elbow:** I never went to Bend. That must be very wonderful.

**Smith:** It is. It's got great skiing, and it's intermediate so there're not big moguls. There are those parts but it's friendly to people who like to ski and can ski, but don't want to do the strained stuff. John Cushing did all of that though. They live down there now, Judy and John Cushing.

**Elbow:** They came after my time.

**Smith:** Yeah. John came as the director of the Computer Center. Then he became a dean. Kind of an interesting rise. What about Williams, and what about your career in English?

**Elbow:** This school I went to, Proctor, wasn't very academically impressive, but the English teacher there was a wonderful man named Bob Fischer. It was his first year of teaching; he was an excited teacher. He made me love books and we'd have deep discussions. He was a skier. He had gone to Williams, and somehow that influenced me.

But I didn't have a very strong preparation, especially what you'd expect from a boarding school. I struggled in English, and one of the things I always remember was my third paper in freshman English, where we read poems and were supposed to analyze them. "Mr. Elbow, you continue your steady but far from headlong rise upward." The grade was a C-minus. In the '50s, college teachers at Williams wanted to knock any pretensions out of students, even confidence. They were intellectuals of the '50s and they felt aggrieved, I now realize, and they wanted to knock the middle-class plebian stuffing out of you and start you fresh.

**Smith:** So, you can rise up like them, right?

**Elbow:** That's right. [laughter] I went to Williams and it was a bit of a struggle to get good grades, but I worked at it and I finally got them. If your grades were very good you could win a scholarship to go to Oxford for two years.

**Smith:** How was that?

**Elbow:** At Oxford you meet with a tutor every week and you write them a paper. I haven't thought about that. My tutor was in his first year of being a don. His name was Jonathan Wordsworth. He was the grand-nephew of the poet. It was his first year as a don, and I was completely intimidated. He was not a nice man. He made fun of my writing. The story I always tell about him is this. I wrote a paper—and you read your papers out loud to your tutor—on a poem by Marvell called "On a Drop of Dew." When I pronounced the name of the poem, he broke in and said, "On a Ddrop of Djew" [upper-class English accent]. Maybe that's why you don't understand poetry, Elbow. You don't know what it sounds like." [laughter] If I needed any help in hating his snobbism, that would do the trick.

**Smith:** Did you have him the whole time you were there?

**Elbow:** No, my second year, I managed to change to a different and more human and charitable tutor (an American, as it turned out). But I was an eager beaver and innocent child. For my whole school career I just wanted to get patted on the head for being a good boy. I don't know what made me into that kind of person. I think I grew up in a family where they didn't hug much, and I think Estelle Jones didn't think she could hug a white child--anyway she didn't. The substitute for getting hugs was to get A's. [laughing] I wanted to get A's and I knew how to please the teacher. I was a very good teacher pleaser. But I just couldn't please this guy.

**Smith:** They don't give grades in England, do they?

**Elbow:** They don't give grades, no.

**Smith:** I spent one year at Leicester University.

**Elbow:** No, you just write these papers. But at the end of two years, you take nine three-hour exams.

**Smith:** I took it at the end of one year.

**Elbow:** Did you?

**Smith:** In this giant arena, and there're dons sitting on tall stools. We were all mixed up, engineering and math and English and politics, which I was doing. Then they post your rank on their door.

**Elbow:** At Oxford—because of the prestige--they put the grades in the *London Times*.

**Smith:** Really?

**Elbow:** Yes—or they did then. [laughing]

**Smith:** Ooh!

**Elbow:** So, I had a hard time writing because I felt intimidated. Second year, I changed to a different tutor and it went all right. You take these nine three-hour exams and I was very relieved that I passed. I didn't do very well but I did respectably. I had already applied to get a PhD at Harvard, and I was so burned out from studying that I tried to put that off.

**Smith:** Deferred admission?

**Elbow:** Yes. But I had a scholarship from the Danforth Foundation to get a PhD. It was for people who want to be college teachers. I asked permission to put it off and they said, "No." So I started this PhD at Harvard and I couldn't write the papers; I got B-plus and that was judged unsatisfactory for graduate

work. I limped through my first semester, and as the second semester started, I realized it wasn't going to get any better, so I just quit.

That was a very big deal for me. I couldn't do it. I'd always been successful in school. A lot of kids say, "Oh, fuck it! I don't care." But I cared. I tried and couldn't do it. I experienced that as total failure. I slunk away feeling like I would never, ever enter an institution of learning again. This was 1960, and I remember getting a job riding my bicycle around Somerville taking census.

I didn't know what I was going to do, and then I found a job in a little private school in Cambridge; a kind of tutoring school. It was a matter of just holding a stopwatch: giving practice tests. It was used for kids who were athletes and couldn't fit into the school calendar.

But then a teacher of mine from Williams had been hired to start a humanities program and major at MIT. I needed a job and got hired as a Humanities instructor. I was scared I wouldn't be able to hack it. For I felt truly wounded. But I needed a job.

This was required freshman humanities. Actually, it was a very interesting course where you read the Greeks and the Romans and up through the Renaissance. It had nothing to do with English literature, which was good for me: Plato, Thucydides, Aeschylus, Sophocles. What a breath of fresh air: and no longer trying to please a teacher. Instead, I had to figure out what to do with Aeschylus and a class of 20 MIT freshmen. They had no interest in reading Aeschylus. How can I make it interesting?

That was a great education for me, and the guy in charge was a distinguished classical scholar, Harald Reiche. There were 20 or so of us teaching, but each of us was totally in charge of our own section. And no lectures by the main teacher. We were all teaching our own class totally on our own.

**Smith:** Did you ever work together?

**Elbow:** We would meet in the coffee room and trade ideas but we didn't actually teach anything together. Each of us was totally autonomous. I was very scared, but halfway through the first semester—maybe later—I just said, "Okay, this is interesting. I can do this." My job wasn't to please somebody in charge, my job was to make this book interesting to these 20 MIT kids. That was neat. The phrase that somehow came to me was this: how can I make Socrates and Aeschylus interesting to me and my girl? [chuckles] That was fun. I did that for three years. But then I suddenly had a chance to teach at Franconia College. It was the first year of a brand-new college with only five faculty members.

**Smith:** What did you teach there?

**Elbow:** It was very interesting. The main task was to devise from scratch a two-year humanities course that every student had to take.

**Smith:** Was it just the Greeks again?

**Elbow:** No; we invented it together. It was a two-year course and double credit—so you could say it was a step toward fulltime, like at Evergreen. There were six quarters and we divided each in half to make 12 units, stretching over two years. We picked out 12 moments in history to focus on. I had been studying interdisciplinary learning on my own. So we made up an interdisciplinary course with 12 moments. I'd heard of people taking disciplines and combining them. But I think I might have been the person there who had the idea of structuring it around *moments*. So one moment was when Socrates decided not to run away from prison. His friends said, "Go away. You can get out of jail." But he decided to stay and drink the hemlock. A previous moment was Moses listening at the burning bush.

**Smith:** Turning points. And decisions.

**Elbow:** The five of us who put this course together were interesting. One guy, Bob Silver, was a nonreligious Jew. Another, Bob Tannen, was a far-out New York artist. (One of his sculptures was a side of lamb encased in plastic—though as it turned out not perfectly encased, so it began to fester.) Anyway, instead of looking at disciplines, we decided to look at moments and study them in such a way as to introduce the different disciplines—to bring a range of abstract disciplines to bear on single, concrete moments.

**Smith:** To analyze what was going on. What a wonderful idea.

**Elbow:** It was really great. How does history look at Socrates' decision to stay in prison and die? How does religion? Literature? So we centered this two-year course on moments of decision. The next-to-last moment was Marilyn Monroe committing suicide. And the very last one was a case of randomness—a *nondecision*. It was Camus dying in a car accident. Nobody's decision.

**Smith:** Did Camus really die in a car accident?

**Elbow:** He did, and so it seemed fitting for the 20<sup>th</sup> century to choose a *nondecision*.

**Smith:** I've never heard of that way of doing interdisciplinary, but it makes a lot of sense.

**Elbow:** I've often thought so. I also designed a program at Bard College. I wish someone would write up these two curricular experiments—I never thought about that—Evergreen and Bard.

**Smith:** Just different approaches to how we organize things. That might be more meaningful.

[laughing]



**Elbow:** That's good.

**Smith:** That's a great story. Wow. One of the things that Mervin stressed about Evergreen that he thought was crucial—and I think it is, too—was that they hired a bunch of early faculty who were second-generation experimenters. They knew how to handle the turbulence.

**Elbow:** That's right. Franconia died from the turbulence, but we learned. He was right. We were second-generation experimenters: Franconia, Santa Cruz, and other places.

**Smith:** They had been at San Jose and that blew up, and Old Westbury blew up and a whole bunch of people came from there.

**Elbow:** Did he tell the story about . . . who's the guy from Old Westbury? He was involved in the Peace Corps.

**Smith:** Byron Youtz was at Old Westbury, but he was an administrator there.

**Elbow:** This guy who was at Old Westbury became president of Old Westbury, and he was involved in the Peace Corps. Anyway, the joke about him was he never lost a discussion. [laughter]

**Smith:** Who would say that? Him or other people?

**Elbow:** Other people.

**Smith:** That's real then. [laughing] That's a little teaching scenario and some of the memorable approaches to it.

**Elbow:** [Cami walks in] Here's Cami. [Introducing]: Barbara Smith.

**Smith:** Hi, it's good to see you.

**Cami:** You were at Evergreen.

**Smith:** I was.

**Cami:** Yes. Gawd that's a long time ago.

**Smith:** Oh, c'mon. Only 45 years ago.

**Elbow:** Just yesterday. [laughter]

**Smith:** I'm still there but I'm retired and now I just don't get paid for doing things.

**Cami:** We all know how that feels.

**Smith:** Yes.

**Cami:** Nice to see you.

**Smith:** Thank you. My very first quarter at Evergreen—I was hired as a dean—they had a practice of putting any new administrator in a program for a quarter so they'd get it. They don't do that anymore and that's a mistake. I got put in a program called Voices of the Third World with him, York Wong and Rainer Hastenstab.

**Cami:** Interesting.

**Smith:** I thought, well, this is a strange place. Why am I in a program? I was hired as the Budget Dean. Why am I doing this?

**Cami:** What year were you hired?

**Smith:** '78. I was a dean for 12 years, and then I was the Provost for eight years. Now I'm this retired Native American specialist, so things migrate.

**Cami:** They do. It's good to see you.

**Smith:** Thank you. He's telling really good stories.

**Cami:** Oh, good!

**Smith:** Other work and play things that influenced your life that you want to mention? You don't have to. You can pass.

**Elbow:** I guess all my jobs have been in colleges.

**Smith:** That's like me, too.

**Cami:** Did you talk about skiing?

**Smith:** Yes.

**Cami:** That's what comes to mind.

**Smith:** Yes. I didn't know that about him but I understand that.

**Elbow:** I'm trying to fit this in chronologically. I was hired by Harvard to give a writing class to Native American administrators who were getting an M.A. at Harvard in education.

**Smith:** Really?

**Elbow:** Yeah, so that's when I met Cami. When did we meet?

**Cami:** 1970.

**Smith:** Was Cami part of Harvard, too, in some other capacity?

**Elbow:** I found her at Harvard. You were an administrative assistant?

**Cami:** Yes, I had a short half or one-year job looking at OEO [Office of Economic Opportunity] grants. It was housed at the Ed School at Harvard because the faculty person was in the Ed School. Harvard's Ed School owned some rural farmhouses on the campus. True story. That's where I worked and Peter was on the top floor.

**Elbow:** I would walk up the stairs and look at this pretty girl in her office.

**Smith:** She's still pretty, I have to say. They sent me to Harvard when they hired me at Evergreen. They thought I could learn something. I knew nothing about budgeting. They just hired people. They didn't think there was any skill in administration at all.

**Cami:** I think that's true. [laughing]

**Smith:** So, it was the Department of Education's Institute of Educational Management. It was a five-week thing for administrators. I roomed with someone from Empire State because we were from two of the deviant colleges. That was interesting. That's where I got interested in case studies because that's all case-study-based. This is not about me, though.

How and why you came to Evergreen, and your first impressions. Can you talk a little bit about that?

**Elbow:** Mark Levensky came the year before. I guess I knew Mark in Boston. How did we meet Mark?

**Cami:** You knew Mark from MIT from years and years ago.

**Elbow:** That's right.

**Cami:** But I thought he learned about Evergreen from you.

**Elbow:** That might be true, but I met him at MIT.

**Smith:** He was up at New England, wasn't he, with Marilyn Frasca?

**Elbow:** Yes, Henniker. New England College or something like that. He came to Evergreen a year before I did. I guess Merv had come across me. I agreed to come to Evergreen, but for some reason I needed to stay one more year. Mark went first. He was there for the planning year. I wasn't.

**Smith:** What was it like then when you did come? What was the tenor of the campus? What was the faculty like?

**Elbow:** What jumps into my mind first is that I was in this program called Mind and Body. The doctor guy, I forget his name—

**Smith:** A medical doctor guy?

**Elbow:** Yes.

**Smith:** He wasn't there when I came.

**Elbow:** And a long, willowy woman faculty member. At one point, we were discussing how to set up the program, and they accused me of being an uptight Eastern intellectual. [laughter]

**Smith:** I guess elitism is variable, isn't it?

**Elbow:** That's right. [laughter] I think I wanted something more structured than they were letting happen in this program: Mind and Body. Two things come to mind. For some reason I said I would give a lecture about digestion or about food. It wasn't metaphorical. It was about input. How does the body take things in? In my lecture about eating, I took a doughnut and rubbed it against my stomach. I wanted to illustrate how the intestines take in food cells.

**Smith:** Look at this! This is the little book where each of the early faculty wrote short autobiographical pieces by way of introduction. I was the person who got this to happen. I was interested in autobiographical writing.

**Cami:** That's the first year.

**Smith:** I have this book. It's wonderful.

**Cami:** Each of you wrote . . .

**Smith:** . . . little autobiographies.

**Cami:** That's why I brought it out. I don't think it's alphabetized. In some cases people didn't even put their names on. But that's how it was. [laughing]

**Smith:** Yes.

**Cami:** I'm going to get out of here. I'm not going to stay here.

**Smith:** This is too fun!

**Elbow:** You're not going to correct my stories.

**Cami:** At least you can kind of look people up, not very well.

**Smith:** Rob Knapp astounded me in his interview. He told me that in those first years, Merv just assigned people to programs. They didn't self-form at all.

**Elbow:** That's not surprising. Although I think I did choose this. I said, "I need more of an adventure." The natural place for me to be was with Nancy Taylor and Thad Curtz in Western Civ. But I felt like I had

done that, so I got in Mind and Body. It was interesting, but I felt like I was never quite accepted by the team.

**Smith:** What about the students?

**Elbow:** I think I was okay with the students.

**Smith:** Did they work hard, or was that a period when there was still resistance from students?

**Elbow:** I felt like we could get them to work. I don't recall any difficulties on that score. I enjoyed the teaching, and I enjoyed the interdisciplinary nature of it.

Before I came to Evergreen, I had written a long, long essay about interdisciplinary learning and teaching; I've never published it. I got deeply interested in the topic as I was trying to think it through.

In that first year, things were chaotic. My office was right next to Willi Unsoeld's. We were sort of buddies.

**Smith:** We had snow in common, too.

**Elbow:** I did a program with him called Peace, Conflict and Social Change. We did our retreat in the woods. I got along with him.

**Smith:** He was an amazing man.

**Elbow:** For the retreat, he strung a rope across a gorge and all the kids had to go across it. Outward Bound experiential education.

**Smith:** Didn't he try to make faculty do it, too? Was Charlie Teske in that program?

**Elbow:** No, it wasn't Charlie.

**Smith:** I heard that he got forced to go across a rope by Willi at some other time and was terrified. [laughing] He didn't want to do it.

**Elbow:** Yes! But what I remember is how Willi did it. He set it up and I liked the adventure of it. Of course, we were all roped. But then Willi did it with no rope. Willi had an addiction to risk. He was such a wonderful man and he was a great teacher, so when I did the program with him, it would get to be 5:00 in the afternoon and I'm going home and Willi was still in his office dealing with somebody usually in tears. He believed in pushing people to the point where they cried. You could build a case that he pushed too far, but he was an excellent teacher. He was a very thoughtful guy. He had a PhD in theology.

**Smith:** Unusual background.

**Elbow:** Yes. But Evergreen was a great place to teach. I loved the fact that you're always teaching a book you've never read before. What's really sad about most education is that the teacher is an expert and only the student is a learner. That makes a difficult dynamic. I loved the fact that at Evergreen, I'm teaching this book that I've never seen before. The students are very likely to have a better insight than I do, or I can't understand that, but she can get it. It's what teachers need.

**Smith:** That's why I think the faculty have such energy, because they're learning right alongside the students.

**Elbow:** That's right.

**Smith:** And we've had some amazing students, too. They're not little shy students, afraid to voice anything.

**Elbow:** When professionals came to Evergreen to give a talk, they were always impressed with Evergreen students for being more thoughtful--and they think for themselves.

**Smith:** That's true.

**Elbow:** College is supposed to make people think for themselves, but it's kind of random about when it happens and when it doesn't.

**Smith:** A lot of schools are about teaching you obedience rather than to think for yourself.

**Elbow:** Right. And I loved teaching stuff I'd never read before. That's really what a teacher needs to do.

**Smith:** Didn't you have any sense of boundaries in some areas: I don't know anything about X, so how can I even do this program?

**Elbow:** That didn't bother me. I liked that because I felt comfortable being a learner, and I felt comfortable assuming that students are going to have sometimes good and sometimes better thoughts than I.

**Smith:** With your moments program, you'd had some previous experiences, too, with the structure that's like Evergreen with these long times becoming communities.

**Elbow:** By the time I came to Evergreen, I'd had two years of that "moments" curriculum at Franconia and then seven years at MIT (broken into two bits)—much of it interdisciplinary. By the way, there was a very different interesting MIT program I was in at MIT set up by a guy in physics. He was retiring. He looked at Nobel Prize winners and said, "People who have a PhD from MIT have a good record of getting Nobel Prizes, but not as many people with undergrad degrees at MIT get Nobel Prizes. What's the matter with our undergraduate curriculum?" That's thinking outside the box.

**Smith:** Yes.

**Elbow:** So, he started this program called ESG, Experimental Study Group, where you take 30 random freshmen—I guess whoever signed up first—where they get the whole year and they don't have to do anything at all. We had a set of rooms and five faculty members. I was the humanities person. Students didn't have to do anything, but they knew they would have to enter the regular curriculum as sophomores, so they couldn't just goof off. "What are you going to do with yourself for your freshman year at MIT? But we've got five grownups to help you in any way you want."

**Smith:** What did they do?

**Elbow:** I was struck by the fact that they got to know the institute. MIT is such an interesting place. They wandered around and poked their head in various labs to find out what was going on. Sometimes they took a course or two. They knew they had to learn freshman calculus.

**Smith:** Oh, there were some expectations.

**Elbow:** It's just that they knew they would have to succeed with the sophomore curriculum. [laughing] They knew they would have to learn calculus and physics.

**Smith:** Because of the kind of school it was.

**Elbow:** Yes. I suppose they didn't *necessarily have* to because they could just start all these other courses a year behind, but to learn what they needed, they couldn't fool around.

I started a writing workshop there. Every Friday people came in with pieces of writing they wanted feedback on. It was fun. It is still going on now at ESG.

**Smith:** Wow! That's where your writing stuff really got fueled, huh?

**Elbow:** Yes. But I love MIT because it's a place where people could try things out. My little story is that if somebody proposes something crazy at Harvard, they say, "We don't do that. We've never done that." If someone proposes something crazy—for instance letting freshmen have nothing they must do all year—people say, "Well, let's see what happens." People at MIT were truly empirical.

**Smith:** Very experimental.

**Elbow:** "Try it out." I admire that spirit, and as I say, ESG is still going and it's a success. They're having a 50th anniversary party this year. I don't quite feel like climbing on an airplane and going to Boston, but I'd like to go there. Maybe if I decide to get adventuresome I'll go this spring.

**Smith:** That's what I did in October: the 50<sup>th</sup>. They'd been having reunions really ever since '78 when it closed, but the main people who come were the founding students, the first-year students, because they created it, and they have an intense affiliation to each other and to the whole idea.

**Elbow:** It meant so much to them. But let me mention something different. I can't forget the feeling they made me feel during my first year at Evergreen: people felt I wasn't really experimental because I was too Eastern and too intellectual.

**Smith:** Really?

**Elbow:** It took me a while to feel like I was fully accepted at Evergreen. Evergreen is a place where you have to earn your acceptance—and it has its own snobbery and elitism.

**Smith:** And it's you're very public since it's team teaching.

**Elbow:** Yes, in a team. I remember Lynn Hammond who became my very good friend who later went to California. She went to Bard College as a dean for a couple years after Evergreen. She was a mountain person and she did one quarter with Willi; they were buddies. But she felt she was never accepted at Evergreen until she turned out to be a very good softball player. [laughter]

**Smith:** We can ask later. If you want, I can take a note.

**Elbow:** Okay.

**Smith:** I don't think she was there when I came.

**Elbow:** Lynn Hammond.

**Smith:** Oh, yes. Isn't that weird how things just pop back? I've had that happen a lot lately. [laughing] Other people I've interviewed said exactly what you said, including people that—like Rob Knapp said he didn't feel accepted, which seems crazy to me. I guess that dynamic must be more prevalent. I was an outsider from the beginning till the end, I thought, in some ways, because I was the outside dean. I was an administrator so long that I was a step away from all that, which was good in some ways. [laughing]

**Elbow:** Snobbery is universally human: there's "us" and "them."

**Smith:** And who gets in?

**Elbow:** And how they get defined gets tricky. But that was a problem at Evergreen, so I had a hard time feeling accepted. But then, when I got that Danforth Fellowship to have us sit in on each other's classes, that was good. A whole quarter doing nothing but visiting every class a colleague taught. We published the results in a Jossey-Bass book.



**Smith:** That was fabulous. That was still going when I came, and we did it for five or six years later. It was really useful and fun.

**Elbow:** I looked the other day for the book that I made out of those visits and I couldn't find it.

**Smith:** Then there was that other grant that was just before I came and wasn't there anymore from the Lilly Foundation, "Each One Teach One," where faculty were paired up in the summer and paid to teach each other something. Those were good ideas. But seeing some of that stuff going on for me was a real formative experience about faculty development, which is my favorite thing.

**Smith:** Faculty development makes me think of a good friend I had at UMass: Mary Deane Sorcinelli. She was such a good person.

**Smith:** Did things change much at Evergreen within your years there, from your point of view?

**Elbow:** I don't remember feeling, oh my gosh, things have changed. It makes me think of a student saying to a new student: "That's not how we do it here." Everybody tends to have their own feeling about how things are supposed to go at Evergreen; and if somebody is an outsider they say, "Oh, you don't understand."

**Smith:** Except, in fact, there were little groups that each had their own ways they did things.

**Elbow:** Right.

**Smith:** The sciences were pretty different from the humanities.

**Elbow:** I never had a really strong science program where I had to learn a lot of science. In Mind and Body, I tried to learn some physiology. I always loved science and I always loved math, but I never had enough training in it.

**Smith:** My husband's background is in philosophy and he taught at Evergreen, too. But he became a computer science person eventually, and then into neurobiology and cognitive science. That happened really because he was there and it was an opportunistic environment. Emerging fields because those fields didn't even exist before.

**Elbow:** That's right. To be in on the beginning of a field: that's something.

**Smith:** Pretty special.

**Elbow:** I can say I feel like I was in on the beginning of the study of writing.

**Smith:** Absolutely.

**Elbow:** I want to write down Merv's name, okay?

**Smith:** Why did you leave?

**Elbow:** I left for two reasons. I wanted to get back to the East so our kids could know their grandparents. And also, I knew I wanted to write some stuff, and Evergreen is so busy it's hard to get anything written.

**Smith:** Right.

**Elbow:** I was ambitious. I knew I wanted to have an effect on higher education. That's what's driven me all along: a feeling that there's something wrong with higher education. That was a formative experience for me. Nobody would have gone to Franconia College who could go anywhere else. We found these 70 students and they were terrible students. What we discovered is that they were smart. That was formative.

**Smith:** Yes, the right environment.

**Elbow:** That students who are defined by school as dumb are smart. That's what's driven me all along. I'm kind of an idealist. I feel like every human being is brilliant. Some people look dumb because they are more or less shut down; so they can't think straight.

I'm an amateur music player, and if you get lost while you are sight reading with others or you're having a hard time, your mind shuts down. So, I have this sympathy for people who get defined as not smart. I have this premise that everybody is brilliant, and the question is, how shut down are they? I forget how I started on that little rant. [laughing]

**Smith:** It sounds like it ties back to your beginnings of feeling inadequate.

**Elbow:** That's right.

**Smith:** And then the irony is you went to very classy schools. [laughing]

**Elbow:** Yes, trying to prove myself against the dirty bastards.

**Smith:** You also went to the experimental ones and programs, so you kind of satisfied both sides and that balance. That's interesting.

**Elbow:** That's right.

**Smith:** If I was a psychologist I could say more about that. [laughter] Were there any people at Evergreen who had a particular influence on you?

**Elbow:** Thad and I were buddies.

**Smith:** He's a wonderful man.

**Elbow:** And Nancy Taylor, although now I get to see Nancy. We are in a book group together. I like her a lot.

**Smith:** Huh. You're in a book group together?

**Elbow:** Yeah, just randomly.

**Smith:** That's cute.

**Elbow:** What was your question?

**Smith:** I just asked about people who were particularly influencing and important to you.

**Elbow:** Merv was very important. He was a special person.

**Smith:** He went to five or six places after he left Evergreen and tried to do things like Writing Across the Curriculum and team teaching. He was at Western New Mexico. He was at the University of Wisconsin Platteville. He went to the University of Phoenix. Very footloose and fancy free, and a visionary.

**Elbow:** He was a visionary, and made people learn, and he led people. In *King Lear*, Gloucester says something about Lear. "Thou hast in thy face something I would call authority" or something like that. Anyway, you want to follow this person. Merv could get people excited.

**Smith:** Yes. I really didn't know him at all. He came to a conference that I put on and he wrote an article for a book I brought—I put out—but I'd heard all these stories. He was very crucial.

**Elbow:** Yes.

**Smith:** He told really funny stories in this interview, especially about the beginning years. And about how Charlie McCann was really important, but he also had certain fundamentals that were traditional that he wanted to hold onto, and how he would kind of maneuver him. Like this issue of regalia at graduation, he wanted to make everybody wear regalia and the students didn't want to. The deans talked him into letting it happen, with certain conditions about how they did things.

**Elbow:** McCann wanted regalia and Merv didn't?

**Smith:** Yes.

**Elbow:** Because that would reinforce the hierarchies.

**Smith:** Right.

**Elbow:** Oh, what I want to say about Merv, every memo he did was written with his Flair pen. Did people talk about this?

**Smith:** No.

**Elbow:** Written by hand with a Flair pen and one sheet. He said, “If I can’t say it in one sheet with a Flair pen, I’ve got to change it.” In terms of writing, what a discipline that is. Mine are always 10 times too long. But he said, “If you can’t say it with Flair pen on one sheet of paper, then there’s something the matter.” That is a real skill. You should put that in the thing about Merv.

**Smith:** I can’t add stuff after the interview. I can just correct things.

**Elbow:** But you could say that I said that.

**Smith:** It will be in your interview.

**Elbow:** I admired that Merv could make one-page handwritten memos. They were never more than one page. He could have attachments if he needed it—documents—but what he had to say had to fit on one page with a Flair pen.

**Smith:** I think lots of people have little habits like that, don’t they?

**Elbow:** Yes.

**Smith:** Levinsky had habits about a lot of things. [laughing]

**Elbow:** I have not seen Levinsky. Are you interviewing him?

**Smith:** I haven’t yet. I’m trying to get Marilyn Frasca to interview him because they’re very, very close.

**Elbow:** That’s a good idea.

**Smith:** He needs to be interviewed. He was a very important person.

**Elbow:** My first book, *Writing Without Teachers* came out during my first year there. I showed it to him. He read it and said, “There’s not a true word in it.” [laughter]

**Elbow:** He said, “If I ever start going out with a student, just tell me that I promised I would never do that.”

**Smith:** Really? One of my memories was the sexual harassment discussions that emerged in the late ‘70s, and how divided the women and men were over the issue. Because a lot of them were married to students. [laughing]

**Elbow:** Yeah, it’s so traditional for faculty members. I remember a friend of mine, a faculty member at Mount Holyoke, when he was being interviewed for the job, another faculty member said, “The pay isn’t very good, but you can sleep with the girls.”

**Smith:** Argh! You can’t talk like that anymore. That’s good.

**Elbow:** That’s good.

**Smith:** What do you think were challenges or paradoxes, or successes and disappointments?

**Elbow:** One important one that comes immediately to mind was this. Evergreen was so experimental, “We’re going to do things differently,” but over and over again someone proposed some course of action and, instead of arguing why it’s not a good idea, they said, “We don’t do that at Evergreen.” It’s exactly the same argument they use at Harvard. [laughter]

**Smith:** Rules but no rules.

**Elbow:** Unspoken rules are the worst. I’ve thought about that a lot with places like Oxford and Harvard. You keep people in line by having rules that are *not stated*. That pertains to writing, too.

**Smith:** It’s a weeding device, too.

**Elbow:** At elite colleges they say that’s wrong or that’s not good enough, but I’m not going to explain what’s the matter and how to fix it. You haven’t done it right, but we don’t talk about how to do it right. You’ve got to know.” That’s how elitism works. The rules are unspoken.

**Smith:** It’s funny because I thought—and I’m probably wrong—that some of the elite schools aren’t elite once you get in. Because they have very high grades. There’s not weeding and high dropout rates.

**Elbow:** Yes, Harvard is proud of this—or at least the smart people are. I’ve thought about this issue a lot. Certain colleges are hard to get in to and hard to flunk out of. It’s very hard to get into Harvard, but once you’re in, they’ll do everything they can to help you succeed. I had a friend, Terry Walsh, who worked in the Harvard Bureau of Study Counsel where they helped kids who had troubles. They didn’t want to lose any students. In a way, they’re saying, “We have a good admissions process, and if you’re accepted to Harvard, we want you to succeed.” The opposite is a big state university where they accept a lot of kids but then flunk out the ones who don’t make it.

**Smith:** You do the normal curve thing.

**Elbow:** Yes. Elite places can embrace you once you’re there.

**Smith:** It’s the selection process, though.

**Elbow:** Yes.

**Smith:** That’s pretty narrow.

**Elbow:** Very narrow.

**Smith:** Did you get involved in governance and administration at Evergreen?

**Elbow:** I ran to become a dean. I was disappointed and hurt that I didn't get accepted, although it's probably just as well. I was interviewed by phone. We were in England on a quarter off. But, no.

**Smith:** Why did you want to be a dean?

**Elbow:** Why did I? I just thought it was an exciting place. I think I just wanted to be part of the leadership and try to keep it going well. Now, Evergreen is having all these troubles. I felt like I had a lot of experience with experimental colleges. But I probably wouldn't have liked it.

An important experience for me was afterwards, when I directed a writing program at Stonybrook and then at Amherst. At Stonybrook there were 90 sections of freshman writing and I was in charge of them all, theoretically. But each graduate student had total charge of his or her section. That wasn't very much administration--which I'm not good at. I'm good at making a team. I'm good at making a roomful of people feel like they're a community: my textbook is called *A Community of Writers*. I like trying to build community.

**Smith:** Me, too. That's the most fun.

**Elbow:** I think I have some gift at it, but Evergreen would be a place where you learned to do that.

**Smith:** Yes, and the way it was done then was the phase that Marilyn Frasca called Evergreen One. She said we have had three phases of Evergreen. Evergreen One was when you were there. Evergreen Two was when I was in administration. Now we're in Evergreen Three, and the event that triggered that was the establishment of the union and the collective bargaining agreement.

**Elbow:** She felt it was sad when the union was started?

**Smith:** Oh, yeah. It passed by 15 votes. It was a very close vote.

**Elbow:** It was very close. I was involved. You didn't have a chance to interview Ron Woodbury. Did you know him?

**Smith:** No. He was a dean when I was, though. We had a good time together.

**Elbow:** People didn't appreciate him enough. I remember we were talking about unions, and I had this feeling of "Oh, we don't want a union," perhaps because my father ran a men's clothing store. I was against it for a while and then Ron said, "Do you think you own the means of production?" [laughter]

**Smith:** Nope.

**Elbow:** He was a very thoughtful, smart guy.

**Smith:** Yeah, he was. He was there in my beginning years and Byron was the Provost then.

**Elbow:** Byron was such a good guy.

**Smith:** Yes. That's, I think, why the college thrived and did that big turnaround. Because the first year I was the Budget Dean we were under-enrolled by 600 students and almost went into a reduction in force. The whole state was under-enrolled. That was because of the Boeing crash. It turned around pretty fast, and then it was all up. Then we got greedier and greedier about how big to be, so I think it outgrew its natural niche.

**Elbow:** Yeah. It's a temptation to get larger. I guess it helps for budget reasons.

**Smith:** I don't think it does, because you develop more and more infrastructure and complexity, and the work is hugely different. When I was dean, we did annual reviews of everybody and visited all the classes. I had 37 faculty in my group. It took way more than half your time, but you were deeply invested in what was going on and knowledgeable as a result. There was great community building in that, and now it's nothing like that. The faculty is three times as big so deans can't do that anymore.

**Elbow:** Community is so important, and it's hard to do if the size is too big.

**Smith:** Size is a huge variable. Whoa! I guess the end part of this is your life since retiring, and how you think about Evergreen in hindsight.

**Elbow:** My life since retiring is very much carrying on as a writer. I've been an academic my whole life but I feel like a writer, and I'm trying to write stuff now.

**Smith:** What are you writing? Do you have a long list of ideas?

**Elbow:** No. The one thing that's driving me crazy is the appendix to *Writing About Teachers*.

**Smith:** The believing game and the doubting game. That's the piece I will always remember.

**Elbow:** How wonderful! I've been working on that forever. I'll have to send it to you. And I'm trying to get it published as an op-ed—which meant shortening it a lot. I think in a way that's the biggest idea I've had in my career. Our whole culture is about using logic and doubting, and that's what good thinking is. It's true. It's good. I have no argument against it. Nothing can be said against it except that it seems to have a monopoly. I'm trying to show how the believing game is a form of disciplined thinking.

**Smith:** The thing that strikes me is that both believing and doubting are so cultural, so the more diverse your world is, the more there's not going to be a prevailing view of either end of those things and conflicts.

**Smith:** It's like the believing game, America, I think, is the symbol. You think of democracy as multiplicity of voices and all that. Totalitarian societies are all about not only the believing game but a despot giving you the script. [laughing]

**Elbow:** Only one voice.

**Smith:** Yes, but it's hard, I think, to have both sides all the time.

**Elbow:** But that's what the believing game is good at. It's like if you say something and I think it's wrong, I have to say, "Oh, what happens if I believe that?"

**Smith:** It's suspended judgment.

**Elbow:** Not just suspended judgment but, as Karl Rogers says, "You listen so well until you can repeat what the other person says, not just accurately, but to the satisfaction of the person." In other words, you have to repeat it sympathetically so that the person would say, "Yes, you understand me."

In a way there are three degree of dealing with a thought you disagree with. First you learn to restate what they said more or less accurately; second you restate it so they feel comfortable with your formulation; and then I'm adding the third step: playing the believing game. To actually believe it: not with full committed belief, but genuine—

**Smith:** Understanding.

**Elbow:** More than understanding. A kind of genuine "entering in." One of the medieval fathers, Tertullian, said "*Credo ut intelligam*"—"I believe it in order to understand. I can't understand God unless I believe there is a God."

I'm trying to do an op-ed version of it. It might be a mistake because there's so much lost, there's so much to it to fit it into a short thing. I'm beginning to think I should stop that and write something that's better. Because the only thing I have that's published is the long 1967 version in *Writing Without Teachers*. I feel like I'm the Pied Piper. I feel that the world needs this.

**Smith:** I think it's the answer to the conflicts and divisiveness of the current times. That's why it belongs in an op-ed, but can it be boiled down?

**Elbow:** Actually, I did boil it down, but they haven't bought it yet. I've tried the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*. I haven't yet sent it to the *Washington Post*. That's my next step. But if I didn't have this ambitious dream of getting it in one of those papers, it could be a little longer. It needs to be longer. For instance, there's the whole gender business about women and men and aggressiveness and adversarial-ness.



So, if I'm not getting it in a newspaper as an op-ed, but I want as many people as possible to see it, where should I send it? Who would publish it?

**Smith:** *Harper's* or *The Atlantic*.

**Elbow:** I did try one of those. I forget which I tried.

**Smith:** *The New Republic*.

**Elbow:** Yes.

**Smith:** There're a whole bunch of magazines, I think, that are possible. Hmm. Have you read any of Malcolm Gladwell's books?

**Elbow:** A little bit.

**Smith:** *The Tipping Point* and *Blink* and stuff. He's got a new one called *Talking to Strangers* that I was going to bring to you. Did I put it in my bag? It gets at this thing of believing. No, I forgot it.

**Elbow:** I can track that down.

**Smith:** He cites all these studies about why we believe certain people and do certain things. There's a whole bunch of psychological stuff embedded in it, like in all his books. That might connect in some ways to what you're talking about. I think that's a really important idea. What about building on it academically and publishing it that way?

**Elbow:** That's the thing. When I wrote *Writing Without Teachers*, I remember I had this image. Writers always say, "Who's your audience?" I say, "I just want to stand on a mountaintop and tell everybody."  
[laughter]

To boil it down that far, I'm now realizing, so much is lost. I should do a fuller treatment. Where to publish it? *Harper's*, *The New Republic*, and *The Atlantic*.

**Smith:** The other thing I read is a weekly called *The Week*. At the back, there's always a two-page essay that's interesting on an interesting topic. They might be interested.

**Elbow:** I've seen that downstairs.

**Smith:** Has your approach to being a teacher and scholar of writing changed over the course of your life?

**Elbow:** People are saying, "How have your ideas changed?" I believe in change and rethinking, but I don't think they've changed. [laughing]

**Smith:** Okay. About how to lead it, how to promote it, how to do it. You ran a whole bunch of writing things.

**Elbow:** At different institutions.

**Smith:** Is that being done well, in your opinion?

**Elbow:** I'll tell you one thought that just went by: here I am trying to do these op-eds. So much writing in the world is now very short. In a way it's a good thing, because you don't want to have to read a whole book. I think that's a big change. The Internet—the fact that anybody can publish anything, I think, is a really big deal. To get it read is another factor, but you can put it out there. I think that's empowering. Supposing I'm completely uneducated and I've never written anything. I can still put it on the Web and I can get my friends to read it. I think that's a big change. Publishing used to be such a closed system. You had to persuade a publisher or a newspaper or a magazine. It's a wild west, and I think that's good.

**Smith:** I think that's a paradox. It's a cost-benefit thing, too. It's good in some ways and—

**Elbow:** What are the costs that jump to your mind?

**Smith:** Some are around information literacy and accuracy and motivation.

**Elbow:** Yes, facts. [laughing] What is motivation?

**Smith:** A lot of stuff is being produced as fake and to kill people.

**Elbow:** Noxious ideas can get out there.

**Smith:** Yes. Your whole way of believing, the way you articulate it is humanity centered. It's about goodness, and a lot of things that are happening now are not motivated by that at all.

**Elbow:** Right. So, am I guilty of saying, "We should all believe Trump?"

**Smith:** Right. If you watched the impeachment hearings the last four days, you really see that in the way the questions are done.

**Elbow:** Say what you've noticed.

**Smith:** The act of communication isn't happening.

**Elbow:** That's right. The country is so divided. Nobody is listening to anybody.

**Smith:** They couldn't even agree on what facts or argument would make a difference. It's like their ears are closed. [laughing] It's theater.

**Elbow:** That's right. I am more than kind of an idealist.

**Smith:** Yes!

**Elbow:** I feel like if everything can't get out there . . . [laughter] Even John Stewart Mill: "If all the ideas are out there, the best ones will come to the top." I don't want to let go of that.

**Smith:** I don't either, but it doesn't automatically happen.

**Elbow:** It doesn't.

**Smith:** You can see that all around the world.

**Elbow:** People are susceptible to bad ideas, especially hateful ideas or exclusionary ideas.

**Smith:** Right. It's frightening the proportion of people that are, too. It's much bigger than I thought. Or hoped. I think public education should allow to happen. But it's like Maslow, self-preservation first, and altruism is way down the list. Your topic is right in the mud on that whole discussion. It's important, but it's hard. The whole believing/doubting game is a foundation of idealism. In the current environment, it's really a test. But I don't want to make you feel sad.

**Elbow:** No, I know the difficulty of getting that heard and the difficulty of getting it published. I think I should stop trying to get it into a mass audience thing and just try to get it somewhere—*Harper's*, *New Republic*, *Atlantic*, *The Week*.

**Smith:** If you just go to the library and look at all the books on the magazine rack, you'll see others that I don't even know about. Anything final you want to say about Evergreen, in retrospect?

**Elbow:** It's exciting that Evergreen was a State school. Franconia was such a tiny little place.

**Smith:** And it doesn't have a bigger budget. From the beginning, it was funded at the same student-faculty ratio.

**Elbow:** Yeah, 20 to one.

**Smith:** That's gone up, but it's gone up for everybody.

**Elbow:** At the universities—the UW—they get a higher piece of money per student.

**Smith:** A little bit.

**Elbow:** But the State colleges, they're all the same.

**Smith:** Right, so it's sustainable.

**Elbow:** Yes. I think, in a way, the main curricular innovation at Evergreen was this: Most colleges say to each student, "You get a quarter of one teacher and each teacher is going to teach three or four classes. Evergreen says, "You get 100 percent of this one teacher." That's a huge structural experiment. It has a

cost, because the student doesn't get to see as many teachers. People are always saying, "I know someone who went to Evergreen. Do you know him?" [laughter] Because students see so few teachers. There are the lectures, though; they help some. When I was there you really didn't see a teacher unless you were in his or her program.

**Smith:** I think from a student point of view, their community is pretty small, especially if they don't live on campus. It is the program that they're in. We really controlled individual contracts, because they were starting to take over when I was there.

**Elbow:** Because it's such a temptation.

**Smith:** We really had almost no one available to do that on purpose. And everyone was in teams. Now, only 50 percent are in teams.

**Elbow:** Really?

**Smith:** That's very dangerous, I think.

**Elbow:** Fifty percent are in individual contracts?

**Smith:** Or they're in single-person-taught programs. I don't think it's healthy to have only one teacher, fulltime, all year, just that one person. It's also a horrible workload, I think, for the teacher if they have to really, seriously teach 26 students all by themselves. It just amazed me, as I visited programs, to see what a difference it made to have teammates. It wasn't just collegueship, it was variety: students liked you but they didn't like me, or they didn't like Mark but they liked Marilyn, so they find compatibility there in the style diversity.

**Elbow:** If I'm a student and I get this teacher I don't like, I'm stuck.

**Smith:** Right, but if there're two others that you're teaching with, they can work it out. I think the structural stuff is brilliant. It's efficient, it's a learning environment for everybody. Teachers don't have that kind of learning environment in traditional schools.

**Elbow:** Here's an important observation. I've taught at amazingly many colleges and I've never seen a place where there was such a spirit in the air of teaching and learning.

**Smith:** That's well put.

**Elbow:** In a way, that's kind of a byproduct, but that's also in a way the main thing about Evergreen. Everybody is breathing teaching and learning.

**Smith:** You're back to what you said in the beginning, that you like to be in a program where you hadn't read the books before because you could learn. [laughing]

**Elbow:** That's right. I wrote a book about Chaucer. Imagine spending my whole life teaching Chaucer. Ugh.

**Smith:** Mind numbing. I taught at two different schools before Evergreen, too, and it was three sections of 60 students in American Government, and it's mind numbing and it's boring. It didn't include half of America. There wasn't one word about American Indians in any political science course that I'd ever taken.

**Elbow:** I meant to mention this earlier. At UMass, I made some money being a consultant to a textbook company, McDougal Littell. All of a sudden, they managed to sell a lot of books, so I made a bunch of money. I set up a program at UMass called the Symposium for the Study of Writing and Teaching Writing.

**Smith:** Nice.

**Elbow:** About 10 or 12 faculty members can come every year for a week to talk about teaching writing. I met a woman there. I knew her only by recommendation; she's a black Native American Indian woman who taught down South, I forget where it was. Anyway, we wrote a neat paper together. Somebody had forgotten [chuckles] to remind me that I had spent my whole life on land that was stolen from Indians. [laughter] I'd never thought about that.

**Smith:** Yes.

**Elbow:** We wrote an essay together about teaching writing in land that was stolen from Indians.

**Smith:** Really?

**Elbow:** I should send you this essay.

**Smith:** I'd love to see that.

**Elbow:** It's a nice essay.