My Response to “Ranking, Evaluating, and Liking: Sorting Out Three Forms of Judgment”

This is perhaps the most interesting and important article I have read so far (hooray!). Peter Elbow is not only a teacher, but a thinker, a thinker who is able to make more people think and inspire writers. When I read his article, I saw his influence on the teaching of my professors and began to realize why they did certain things. And then I obtained a consciousness of what to do, why to do that, and how to do it concerning my own teaching. Before I read this article, if I choose to use portfolios in my class, probably it is merely because I saw my professors use them and they are popular. Now I see the philosophy behind this form. I see the big picture. More importantly, I believe what Elbow intends to achieve behind this philosophy is especially meaningful. That is, try to help students concentrate on writing itself and enjoy the process. Writing is the purpose, not a means for grades, and writing could be fun. Elbow is liberating students from viewing writing as a burden and this would be a critical step for them to become real writers. As Elbow points out that “good writing teachers like student writing” (406), students also need to learn to like their own writing and develop their potential goodness. “Potential goodness” is a concept I really appreciate. It could change the way we think and behave as teachers. The responsibility of teachers is not to simply identify whether students have done well or not (through grades), but to recognize the potential of student writing and help turn the potential into strength. And Elbow clearly knows the magic of bridge – to help students obtain what they do not have through what they already have. He found it is more effective to say “Do more of what you’ve done here” than “Do something different from anything you’ve done in the whole paper” (408), which is illuminating. In this way, students will have a better sense of where to go and what is the right direction, with confidence. Personally I feel that another way to show students the direction could be to ask them to learn from the good samples written by their peers (Our Own Words is a very good resource, with which students will have a good understanding of what is a good paper and why writing is a process). By studying concrete examples, they will have a clearer idea of what does it mean to construct a strong voice, or what an excellent detail looks like. Sometimes I feel that students know what is good writing theoretically, but they are not sure how to do that. Analyzing their peers’ samples may be a starting point and it also helps them feel that good writing is achievable. Finally, Elbow’s article talks about evaluation primarily from the perspective of a teacher. However, in my view, there could also be a space for students’ own voices in regards of evaluation. If they have the opportunity to summarize their own writing processes, talk about their feelings about peer review and workshop, analyze their strengths and potentials, and tentatively grade their own papers, they can grow as writers on a different level. This is also an opportunity for them to defend their writing and communicate with their teacher on an equal basis.