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Cover Page Footnote

Tim Doherty is Associate Professor and Coordinator of the Department of English and Communications at Rivier College where he also directs the campus writing program. He received his Ph.D. in English from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst in 1996 and currently writes about conflict resolution and the role it can play in college teaching and learning.

Lessons from the Believing Game

Tim Doherty

“It’s a game,” I tell my students. Like many runners and swimmers, we’re trying to improve our last attempt, as opposed to winning against others. See how much more deeply we can enter into an idea or point of view. By emphasizing both playfulness and the challenge of deep engagement with other viewpoints in the believing game, I try to lower the cost of relinquishing long-held (and often unexamined) assumptions and values. It’s frightening to imagine that one’s stance could be limited, vague, or wrong. From a developmental point of view, students take up positions in order to shore up a sense of identity. Assuming a new or different position casts students into identity confusion. But the threat posed by this instability vexes adults as well, I think. This fear of uncertainty, of being wrong, and of losing status could be the root of many intractable political conflicts.

I’ll begin by sharing an anecdote from my early attempts at using the believing game in my teaching of college writing, a time when I think my use of it involved some missteps—causing me to reflect on the temporal dimension of the believing game and how the believing game connects, in particular, to play and learning through role. I will share some lessons I have learned, reflecting refinements in my approach to the believing game—those I have pursued and those I am eager to pursue. First, I have found that students need time to think about belief itself, and then to be offered ample time to play the believing game. If I rush the process, students don’t seem to range very widely beyond their initial perspectives. The believing game is an apt teaching strategy for those who want to teach argument in college writing but who sense that an immediate leap into argumentation itself may put pressure on students to take sides prematurely and superficially. Second, I want to emphasize the word “game” and the spirit of play that the doubting and believing games can entail; the ethos of play invites immersion in perspectives. Third, I have learned to pay initial attention to students’ stories, emotions, and sense of attachment to beliefs and to discuss beliefs and our relationship to them. Finally, it may help to distinguish different ways of believing—particularly, when believing involves exploring a perspective through role. Role experiences create playful involvement and distance, increasing the capacity to attach and detach from belief, and most importantly, to test out solidarity—one’s potential identification with others.

Believing that Capital Punishment is Just/Unjust

Over the years I have kept a folder of student responses generated during believing games, waiting for this moment: a time to step back and take stock. In

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the beginning, I used the believing game as an informal, pre-writing exercise when teaching argumentative writing, often focusing on capital punishment. My approach was to canvass all the students to find out where they stand on the issue. Even those who were undecided would have to make a tentative choice of sides. Then, I would ask these collaborative teams to explore the perspective of the other position—in other words, to try to make a persuasive case for the other side. The discussions that would follow seemed lively and useful, and often students would say things like “This is hard! This hurts my brain!”

The believing game seemed like a motivating, challenging introduction to a non-adversarial stance, an alternative to traditional argument. That is true, but what I found in using the game as only an introductory exercise was that I didn’t witness students writing extensively from an alternative point of view afterwards, despite assignments designed to elicit that attempt. Furthermore, student writing often reflected a minimal engagement with the experiences involved in particular perspectives (the pain of victims’ families) or with the deeper claims of different perspectives—that factors of race and income unjustly influence decisions about capital punishment—or that capital punishment might deter criminals. Here are two typical responses:

Matt: “Today’s class influenced my thoughts, however I stand strong by my views regardless the circumstances. I did learn that ‘eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind.’ Revenge is not solving the case or bringing closure to it, but it is simply bringing minor relief to the family. However my views do not change.”

Danny: “Today’s class helped me to see both sides and even question what I stand for and believe. Many things factor in when sentencing someone, which I never thought about before. But I’m still in favor of the death penalty.”

The responses of these students revealed to me that the experience of the believing game they went through didn’t quite help them detach from their current beliefs and take the risk of lingering in a different view. One student, Pete, made this comment: “I thought the exercise was hard. It is hard to believe and think one way and then have to switch and try to support the opposite way. I feel as though I need much more practice.” Reflecting back on my initial attempts at the believing game with students, my basic misstep involved forgetting this statement by Peter Elbow: “The believing game is *constant practice* in getting the mind to see or think what is new, different, alien. . . . The believing game emphasizes a model of knowing as an act of constructing, an act of investment, an act of involvement” (*Writing Without Teachers* 173, emphasis added). I began to get very interested in the process of believing, each year developing a more extensive approach to the believing game. Below, I’ll sum up the lessons I’ve learned and some changes in my approach.

Lesson #1: Believing Takes Time

When I first started using the believing game in my teaching, I took too much for granted about the duration and depth of involvement one might need to

understand fully a given perspective. Believing takes time; there is a temporal, developmental dimension to empathy, a necessary practice in attempting to understand another point of view. While there can be some benefit in opting to do very short believing/doubting game exercises in order to warm up to issues, the brevity can exact a price: the superficial treatment of perspectives. I turn to the believing game precisely because of my frustration with superficiality in the arguments my students have written. Brief doubting and believing games also seem to reinforce the either/or, tit-for-tat, gladiatorial approach to argument, as well as promote an unhelpful relativism—there’s no time to weigh perspectives for their premises and supporting values, so all perspectives feel equal.

In general, my experience teaching written argument has pushed me more and more toward increasing students’ contact with different perspectives through the believing game rather than requiring them to toil from draft to revision in order to defend a thesis about a particular conflict. In “Moments of Argument: Agonistic Inquiry and Confrontational Cooperation,” Dennis A. Lynch, Diana George, and Marilyn M. Cooper make a similar point: we need to expand time to “engage students in a kind of writing that moves beyond the ‘opposing viewpoints,’ disputatious, display type of argumentation.” They argue against “rushing students to defend sides or to decide on a position.” Describing courses they have designed, they write:

we sought to give students more time to learn and think about the issues they were engaging, with the idea in mind that in the process they will recognize that the positions we take—especially the first, easy positions that we have “accepted”—usually have been socially, culturally, and historically determined and, not coincidentally, usually have unforeseen consequences for others, others whose positions are often not even represented by the manner in which the issues are handed down to us (“pro and con”). (69)

Over time, then, I have come to value the act of lingering in a view, to offer students a week to read, listen, and write their way into a perspective. While it would take elaborate coding of student samples to prove this assertion, my impression is that student writing has gotten better: I have witnessed progressively deeper engagement with alternative points of view the more time I devote to the believing game.

As I will describe below, the believing game works best if I . . .

- › take time to introduce students to the believing game and have them read about the believing game itself;
- › show students how the believing game is situated within an assignment;
- › carefully scaffold an assignment for extended experiences of believing;
- › and offer opportunities within written assignments for students to synthesize their experience and reflect upon the process involved in the believing game.¹

¹In developing this sequence, I have been guided by the work of Alan Shapiro, curriculum writer for The Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility.

Lesson #2: The Game of Believing

I have always been interested in how playfulness promotes learning, in Vygotsky's view that play fuels learning in childhood: "Action in the imaginative sphere, in an imaginary situation, the creation of voluntary intentions, and the formation of real-life plans and volitional motives—all appear in play. . . . The child moves forward essentially through play activity. . . . Play [can] be considered a leading activity that determines the child's development" (102-103). However, my own experience shows me the power of play for college writers as well, when they are encouraged to be less self-conscious, to find pleasure and motivation in an activity that creates just enough dissonance so that curiosity is aroused and challenge occurs. John Dewey pointed to the real (and neglected) benefits of play:

it is still usual to regard [play] as a specially marked-off stage of childish growth, and to overlook the fact that the difference between play and what is regarded as serious employment should be not a difference between the presence and absence of imagination, but a difference in the materials with which imagination is preoccupied. (236)

In "Conversation and Carrying-on: Play, Conflict, and Serio-Ludic Discourse in Synchronous Computer Conferencing," Albert Rouzie urges the field of composition to bridge the work/play split in western culture, arguing that play fuels personal growth, social connection, and disruptive critique. Like the online synchronous exchanges Rouzie studies, the believing game offers a space where risk and play are encouraged. Play blossoms when threat recedes. My current tendency is to delay using the believing game in large and small groups until the habits of the believing game are adequately introduced and developed, and there is a sense of confidence and safety. When I have moved too quickly to group-based experiences of the believing game, a competitive orientation to "game" seems to emerge, with the threat of somehow "losing" to the other side. The object of the believing game is to enter into a non-judgmental, unthreatening climate where we can believe as much as we can, to find in ourselves points of connection with a different view.

As in other experiences of play, the believing game can flag when fear, difficulty, or boredom are present. As Elbow points out, the believing game is often viewed with fear ("Methodological Doubting" 281 ff.), and the word "believing" arouses some anxiety because it carries the heavy freight of commitment:

Believing seems to entail commitment, where doubting does not. It commonly feels as though we can doubt something without committing ourselves to rejecting it—but that we cannot believe something without committing ourselves to accepting it and even living by it. Thus it feels as though we can doubt and remain unscathed, but believing will scathe us. Indeed believing can feel hopelessly bound up with religion. ("Do you BELIEVE? Yes, Lord, I BELIEVE!"). ("The Believing Game" 16)

To allay anxiety, I now try to warm-up students to the act of believing, to forge a link between the “game” of believing and the sort of theater games and improvisations actors pursue. Improvisation exercises encourage students to let down their guard, suspend disbelief, and take risks. This approach is common in the work of such theater and improvisation experts as Augusto Boal, Viola Spolin, Keith Johnstone, and Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow. Boal warms up large groups of non-actors about to engage in improvising roles in conflict scenarios by having them try to move their arms and legs in different rhythms simultaneously, emphasizing a need to break out of physical, sensory habits. He calls this process “de-specialisation” (62). He gives this advice: “The actor must never let himself become mechanised, or perform the same actions automatically whether or not his mind is on his role. In the theatrical experience, the actor must give himself utterly and completely over to his task” (51). As Frost and Yarrow claim, “being ‘innovative’ or ‘improvisatory’ may be something that is more necessary to all aspects of human relationship than is often acknowledged” (3).

It also helps to allay student anxiety about “what the teacher wants” by carefully explaining how the believing game fits into an entire project—the rules of the game, as it were. Once one is comfortable with a game, it’s easier to let go and play. My approach now involves overtly discussing the believing game after students read Elbow’s descriptions of it (“The Believing Game”). In assignment design, I try to scaffold or stage drafts into extended opportunities for believing. In the same way Ken Macrorie structures the I-Search paper in order to help students focus on changes in their own thinking as they research a subject, I have tried to create journal and essay assignments that involve reflections on the process itself, helping students track their learning as they go through a succession of believing games, immersing themselves in different points of view. The believing game goes well when care is taken to introduce it, contextualize it, experience it in phases, and reflect upon it. I have learned that it helps to take time constructing a process of learning about conflict, emotion, questions, and listening. How can a “shift” in perspective happen, how can one most deeply believe in an alternative perspective, without first preparing and becoming mindful of what the effort might involve?

Lesson #3: Work with Emotion and Attachment

In using the believing game during death penalty discussions, I noted that my approach really didn’t lead to much “detachment” from initial belief. It’s difficult to let go of our “baggage,” our position or initial belief in something. And when facing others, we can easily attach a position to a person, to fix them, to make them an “it” in Buber’s terms (13, 98). The enormous difficulty in opening up to alternative perspectives was captured recently by *Washington Post* columnist Shankar Vedantam, who describes a number of experiments by political scientists suggesting that, when faced with rebuttal, even irrefutable rebuttal, people simply dig in even more. The studies showed how people don’t let go of political misinformation after hearing a correction. The misinformation seems to spread, as people push back even harder when counter evidence is presented to their position. It doesn’t matter how evidence-based the refutation is; people just fight back. Indeed, it’s tempting to say that rebuttal itself (expressions born from the doubting impulse) triggers this response. Elbow writes, “No wonder people so

seldom change their minds when someone finds bad reasoning in their argument" ("The Believing Game" 14). The "argument culture," to use Deborah Tannen's term, is entrenched. It's difficult to expect anyone to detach from a current position when the cultural tendency is to associate threat and loss with argument.

When using the believing game now, I try to work directly with students' emotional attachments to particular beliefs or positions in a conflict. Through pre-discussion surveys, I often find students either are undecided or deeply attached to particular positions. With polarized issues such as the death penalty, whether undecided or entrenched, students know that the terrain they are entering is marked by division. I find that, in both cases, it helps to make time for students to establish initial thoughts and to be heard, to share the "story" behind their thinking, before they might detach enough to play the believing game and experimentally attach to new or threatening beliefs. I can't underscore enough the value of listening. As Carol Gilligan has remarked, "To have a voice is to be human. To have something to say is to be a person. But speaking depends on listening and being heard; it is an intensely relational act" (178). Elbow repeatedly emphasizes listening in the believing game, usually as a mode of entering another view, to "dwell in, enter in, or experience" ("Bringing the Rhetoric of Assent" 394). The believing game goes better, however, not merely when students are asked to listen to others; they themselves need to be heard, and perhaps thereby notice the way that being heard may also relax "the letting-go muscle" (390).

The importance of listening to personal story and perspective in conflict is a basic thrust of narrative mediation, a recently developed method within the field of mediation (Winslade and Monk). Its parallel, perhaps, can be found in those approaches to conflict that "tend to assume a much broader notion of argument . . . one that includes narrative, attention to the particular, sensibility, and appeals to emotion (Roberts-Miller 5). Catherine Lamb has claimed that "monologic argument," that is, writing to lay out a point of view without attention to others, with only our own interests in mind, plays a crucial role for college writers: "We still need this kind of argument . . . at the early stages of resolving a conflict, where both parties need to be as clear as possible about what they think and feel. Our students need to learn it for their survival in other contexts, and, more fundamentally, as part of the process of becoming adults. It promotes differentiation, the sense of self" (17). Such instances of private writing are safe moments for testing beliefs. Elbow tells us that there are times when it helps to ignore audience, to take "vacations from readers to think in peace" ("Closing My Eyes" 111). Fiercely arguing from one's committed position can provide a crucial, preparatory stage for the believing game. The art of teaching with the believing game is to know when writers are ready to venture out and to ensure that the journey is long enough for immersion in other perspectives. I am finding it much more productive to offer the believing game in two different modes: 1) private journal writing, in which students are given the chance simply to believe a perspective, to believe something on their own terms and not in response to anyone, and 2) role-based believing, in which they work together in class to try out a perspective or role after the habits of the believing game are secure.

Attachment to other and different beliefs, whether privately or collaboratively, however, rests on an ability to listen and witness, to enter into an experience or story (Elbow, "The Believing Game" 20). Stories and documentaries offer stu-

dents a verbal record or guide into a point of view, enabling them to access a first-person account of someone on death row, for example, and then to attempt to role-play that individual, bringing that language to life. It is for that reason that I think the believing game can take the form of role-plays that are constructed from readings and student research. Texts provide what Judith and Geoffrey Summerfield call “funding” or the vital verbal material that allows for perspective-taking (53).²

Roles offer students a bit of distance, a way of provisionally detaching from their actual beliefs and trying on a new perspective with an attempt at connection and empathy. Lynch, George, and Cooper suggest that many students view their argumentative writing as a “pointless” contribution to a conflict among people who are presumably so entrenched that they couldn’t care less about the outcome (61). Structured role scenarios give students a stronger purchase on actual people and their lives.³ For example, with the death penalty issue, I tried to create roles from actual cases, using news coverage and documentaries, in order to “put a face” on perspectives and positions. In a recent college writing course, I constructed a role-play from the death penalty case of Michael Addison, convicted of killing a police officer (Sanger-Katz). To begin, students composed “Part I: My Initial Thoughts on the Death Penalty,” in effect establishing a place for first thoughts. These writings became the basis for in-class listening exercises; each writer read his or her piece aloud, getting a chance to be heard. Then came “Part II: The Believing Game,” a section of the essay in which they would be asked to enter a contrary view and try on its perspective and values. Finally, I asked them to compose “Part III: Reflections on the Believing Game,” a chance for them to write about what they learned, what it was like to suspend their own positions and to explore the values and interests of an opposing view, and what view of the death penalty culminated for them.

For Part II, students drafted private “believing game” responses either to Helen Prejean’s “Executions are Too Costly—Morally” or to former New York Governor George Pataki’s “Death Penalty is a Deterrent.” They also read and discussed various statements by people involved in the Michael Addison case. They were then asked to engage in small group role-plays involving different “voices” from their readings, writing in their journals directly after dialogue events involving roles. I encouraged students to return to “Part II” of their essays after these role experiences and to revise in any way that might help them enter the perspective more deeply. Many chose to write Part II in the voice of either Pataki or Prejean. One student, Meghan, who was initially against the death penalty, wrote Part II of the assignment in the voice of someone allied with George Pataki, commenting about “cop-killers”:

Why shouldn’t we kill the people who put our brave men at risk? If these murderers are killing the people we have protecting us, then what good are they doing to the world? When these men are killed, it is not because we want to, it’s because

²The Summerfields select “primary” texts for students to read which embody roles. Based on such model texts, the Summerfields’ students then write “reactive texts,” texts which “impersonate” these roles in the material they’ve read.

³For a very well-developed role-play on the death penalty issue, see Catron and Stein-Holmes’s *Death Penalty Resource Guide* (Amnesty International).

they need to be killed. We cannot give these men a second thought when they do not even think twice about who they are about to kill. The people they murder are mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, aunts, and uncles; they do not think twice, so why should the government?

In students' reflective writing for Part II, this greater attention to the process of believing yielded more fruitful, extensive engagement with other perspectives, often as a result of being in role or responding to someone in role. One student wrote in response to her peer's performance of a role in class: "It didn't really effect me when I tried to play the wife of Officer Briggs, but when he [her peer] started talking about Addison being his brother and actually getting into the role, I believed a lot more." A fellow student wrote, "I definitely feel like my thoughts have been thrown. I felt more into the situation when he told us it was his brother. It felt more realistic and it made me want to be against the death penalty." Because they create a kind of immediacy and exigency about the conflict, these role-play experiences jar students out of their habitual positions. Group role-plays also pave the way for writing in role. Meghan's reflection in Part III demonstrates how writing in role creates a kind of listening stance, an attempt to "hear" another voice by ventriloquizing it. Meghan describes a productive struggle:

Writing the second part of this project brought me great difficulty. I was not sure what to do, where to start or how to even make it sound believable, but in the end I managed to get into character. . . . While writing the paper, I would find myself typing my own views and having to go back and delete them, because it was not supposed to be from my point of view. My point of view has stayed the same, even though I have entered [Pataki's] point of view. Although Pataki makes good points, I still cannot see why a person would want to kill a person to show that killing is wrong. I can say that viewing this topic from different points of view has made me more understanding of how other people feel on the topic and has helped me be open and understanding. . . . The difficulty of writing in someone else's point of view can become easier when an open mind is present.

Students can detach from their beliefs and endure the anxiety of uncertainty when they take time to listen to others and to be heard, to practice the believing game before doing it in a group, and to experience alternative views through role-play. Another student, Katie, wrote a final reflection that captures the lesson which the believing game can offer about listening and openness:

I did a lot of thinking over the course of this project and am now very much on the fence about this issue. A big part of me is still for the death penalty, the part who lets a want for vengeance determine my views. On the other hand, I can no longer ignore the reasons against the death penalty. Is it really

torture? And if it isn't, then why is it kept in such secrecy? But the biggest reason for me to begin to be against the death penalty is because it does make "us" as bad as "them," and I don't know that that is something I am willing to accept. At the end of it all . . . I can say that I still lean slightly to the side favoring capital punishment, but I am now very much more inclined to listen to the people who are against it.

Lesson #4: "Questions in the Service of the Asked"

The final lesson I have learned about the believing game came out of training I received at the Public Conversations Project, an organization that "guides, trains, and inspires individuals, organizations, and communities to address constructively conflicts relating to values and worldviews." The training involved a three-day workshop on "the power of dialogue," in which a version of the believing game was central. It involved a structured way of listening to other perspectives and then asking only those questions that would "serve" the person who has shared a perspective (Roth and Stains). This was a version of "active listening" discussed by Elbow ("Believing Game" 20), though the techniques of questioning went well beyond Rogerian summary. An entire two-hour session was devoted to helping participants in small groups create different kinds of questions to pose to individuals in a specific conflict scenario:

- > questions that flesh out a story;
- > questions that explore language, thinking, and decision-making;
- > questions that focus on how perspectives have taken shape or shifted over time;
- > questions that ask for explanation of nuances or "gray" areas;
- > questions that explore connections and relationships to others involved.

Thus far in my use of the believing game, I have not focused enough on the value of questions, tending instead to choose private writing and role-oriented interactions in which the emphasis is on listening and expanding perspectives. Yet well-crafted questions can do two jobs in the believing game: reassure the individual that she has been heard, and demonstrate the listener's ability to seek even deeper access to a perspective, thus building trust. In my subsequent uses of the believing game, my aim is to use questioning activities in these dialogues to help students shift toward other perspectives.

The Believing Game and Democracy

More and more, I believe in the believing game as a vital experience for college writers, especially if we believe that the central goals of college writing should be to help students prepare for public deliberation, to practice active listening to others in the context of conflict, to investigate multiple perspectives beyond pro/con, and to seek common ground in conflict, when possible. The believing game foregrounds the value of inquiry and a resistance to binary thinking. It's tempting to see our culture moving toward the values implied in the believing game, to interpret the election of Barack Obama as a cultural shift.

David Brooks describes a dinner which Obama hosted for conservative columnists. He states:

With some people when you disagree with them, you get the sense that it's like a little status battle, that their side is a little better than your side. And [Obama] has absolutely none of that. In part because he is so self-confident. . . . And therefore disagreement doesn't carry a lot of the emotional baggage that it might otherwise.

Another columnist, Eugene Robinson, writes, "[Obama] said . . . American politics has seen enough 'either/or,'" calling Obama "the personification of 'both/and.'" Obama's election may signal that the time is ripe for the believing game, for the capacity to welcome every idea, with the confidence that the dialogue can only help. The great hope in using the believing game is that, by practicing it deeply and repeatedly, we help nurture a flexible, open stance that is crucial for democratic deliberation. ☐

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