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## JAEPL, Vol. 14, Winter 2008-2009

Kristie S. Fleckenstein  
*Editor*

Linda T. Calendrillo  
*Editor*

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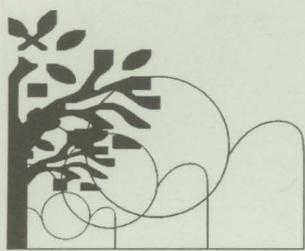
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J A E P L

*The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*

**Feeling Our Way:  
Teaching, Writing, and Reading  
with Belief**

**Volume 14 • Winter 2008-2009**

# The Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning

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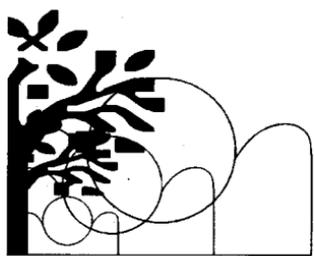
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*The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*

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# J A E P L

The Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning (AEPL), an official assembly of the National Council of Teachers of English, is open to all those interested in extending the frontiers of teaching and learning beyond traditional disciplines and methodologies.

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Topics of interest include but are not limited to: aesthetic, emotional, and moral intelligence; archetypes; body wisdom; care in education; creativity; felt sense theory; healing; holistic learning; humanistic and transpersonal psychology; imaging; intuition; kinesthetic knowledge; meditation; narration as knowledge; reflective teaching; silence; spirituality; and visualization.

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Send submissions, address changes, and single copy requests to Linda T. Calendrillo, Co-Editor, *JAEPL*. email: ltcalend@valdosta.edu

Address letters to the editor and all other editorial correspondence to Kristie S. Fleckenstein, Co-Editor, *JAEPL*, Department of English, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32306. email: kfleckenstein@fsu.edu

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## Editors' Message

*The ability to shudder with awe is the best feature of human beings.*  
Richard Rorty (10)

In the "Inspirational Value of Great Works of Literature," Richard Rorty makes an ardent plea for rebalancing what he calls "knowingness" and "romantic enthusiasm." Knowingness he defines as a state of the soul that is "dryly scientific" (11); it privileges critique, logic, and debunking, an orientation that has dominated Anglophone philosophy since the rise of logical positivism (10). In the wake of cultural studies, he explains, this state of the soul is coming to dominate literature, and it continues to serve as the organizing principle of composition studies. Without a doubt, knowingness is important, but so, Rorty insists, is "romantic enthusiasm": immersion in the passions of teaching, writing, and reading, a celebration of the heady infatuation we feel for what we do in the classroom, how our students engage with our subject matter, and what we say about both.

Quoting Dorothy Ellison, Rorty warns that "there is a place where we are always alone with our own mortality, where we must simply have something greater than ourselves to hold onto. . . . A reason to believe, a way to take the world by the throat and insist that there is more to this life than we have ever imagined" (Ellison qtd. in Rorty 13). Approaching literature or writing or teaching with a soul focused solely on knowingness unleavened by emotional-material experiences of deep engagement, teacher-learners produce "understanding but not hope, knowledge but not self-transformation" (13). To inspire, to offer "something greater than ourselves to hold onto," reading, writing, and teaching must sweep us off our feet (13). We must feel our way into teaching, learning, and writing before exercising our skeptical, debunking muscles. The essays in this volume celebrate the necessity of feeling our way, because, through such feelings—emotional, physical, and spiritual—we find our reasons to believe in the transformative possibilities of teaching, writing, and reading.

We open our celebration of romantic fervor with a polylogue of four intertwined essays, revised versions of papers presented at a featured session of the April 2008 Conference on College Composition and Communication. Led by Peter Elbow, each paper explores an aspect or an implication of Elbow's believing game, a means of engagement with texts, people, and realities that possesses at its heart a reliance on feelings as a foundation for critique. Elbow sets the stage for these four essays by revisiting the definition and the importance of the believing game in conjunction with the doubting game. As he explains in "The Believing Game or Methodological Believing," our culture has not yet, but needs to, develop methodological believing as a tool that separates believing from accepting. By decoupling believing from temperament or commitment, we use methodological believing to discover "which ideas look best after the scrutiny of believing." Unlike the doubting game, which is a rhetoric of propositions, the believing game is a rhetoric of experience, a tool that relies on narrative, poetry, images, sounds, and body movements. He points out the value of methodological believing as a tool for thinking: it assists us in locating the flaws in our own thinking, it helps us choose among competing positions, and it enables us to

achieve goals neglected by the doubting game, particularly because it privileges our immersion in the experience of believing. As a result, Elbow concludes with a plea to promote the health of methodological believing in our classrooms, our reading, and our writing.

Through a genealogical analysis, Nathaniel Teich elaborates the connections between the believing game and emotions by focusing on the complex experience of empathy. He argues that the believing game, genuinely engaged, can “function as a profoundly ethical strategy within a larger conceptual framework of what I have called for years ‘the rhetoric of empathy.’” Throughout his essay, he traces the family resemblances between Elbow’s believing game and the work of Carl Rogers, Michael Polanyi, Wayne Booth, and Martin Buber. Important to those linkages is the joint emphasis on the necessity of empathic listening and empathic understanding as the vehicle by which one enters into the viewpoints, orientations, and perspectives of an-Other. By creating and relying on the intersubjective relationships, teachers, writers, and readers feel their way into new ways of thinking. As Teich points out, the believing game “involves the interconnection of thought and feeling, cognition and affect, mind and body, that could lead to new understandings and new values and behaviors in personal and public spheres.”

In “Splitting the Cartesian Hair,” Mary Rose O’Reilley pleads for greater circulation of the believing game throughout our English classrooms, for, she claims, it opens up teaching spaces where students can feel their way to learning. Given the dominance of Descartes’s systematic doubt, the believing game can function as a trickster figure, a crow “mimicking the gestures of the devout one” and thereby challenging an orientation that makes it impossible to experience the mystery of one’s own being. Playing with the etymology of belief, O’Reilley connects the word believe to trust and love. She concludes that we must “return them [our students] confidently to scholarship as a believing game,” using the believing game to create and protect the classroom as “a space of imaginative transformation.”

Finally, concluding the polylogue, Patricia Bizzell in “Faith-based Worldviews as a Challenge to the Believing Game” claims that the believing game is Elbow’s most important contribution to the composition studies because it enables us to acknowledge the powerful and deep impact of emotions in teaching, especially in classrooms complicated by an array of religious beliefs. The academic, Bizzell argues, can usually play an intellectual version of the believing game, but stumbles when attempting to inhabit a position—to believe in a concept—that arouses emotions, especially those kindled by religious faith. Thus, using the believing game in a class rich with different religious faiths may be the method’s greatest challenge. Central to that challenge is emotion, for “to enter fully into a religious worldview one must do much more than perform a skeptical thought experiment in which consequences are deduced from premises. One must employ the full emotional and imaginative resources that Elbow calls into play for the believing game.” Delineating the difficulties posed by the emotional issues, such as religious faith, Bizzell concludes that Elbow’s “imaginatively, emotionally engaged believing game may assist us” in feeling our way as teachers, writers, and readers to academic discourse and interactions that provide a space for the play of complex emotions.

The four-part polylogue establishes the centrality of feeling as a reason to

believe in teaching, writing, and learning. Each author highlights the different ways that methodological believing can serve as a necessary balance to skeptical debunking. Our last three essays explore from diverse angles the impact of feeling our way in teaching. Turning to career burnout, Gina Briefs-Elgin in “Lessons with the Mystics: Refreshing Our Vision in Mid/Late Career” pushes beyond the initial flush of our infatuation with our careers to confront the realities of mid/late career disillusionment. What happens when, in the face of unending quotidian trivialities and a nagging sense of failure, enthusiasm for teaching gutters? When we lose our reason to believe in teaching, we also lose our inspiration and joy in the classroom, Briefs-Elgin argues, leaving only “an environment of gray” in which we teach our classes, pursue our scholarship, and mentor our students from duty or habit rather than passion. Briefs-Elgin finds succor and inspiration in Eastern mysticism. She urges us to feel our way back into passionate commitment through the portals provided by Hinduism, Sufism, Zen Buddhism, and Kabbalah. These mystical traditions offer a means to rekindle belief in the importance of teaching and writing.

In “Creating Spaces for Listening, Learning, and Sustaining the Inner Lives of Students,” Gesa E. Kirsch transforms her classroom into a risky site where students can nourish and sustain an inner life. Kirsch’s essay reflects on her efforts, in the face of personal and professional vulnerability, to bring her “whole self into the classroom, to invite students to do the same, to connect ‘mind, heart, body and soul.’” The rewards of such vulnerability include creating a space in the classroom that fosters “the rich dimensions of reflection, introspection, and contemplation which lead us to know and understand things beyond the analytical mind.” She emphasizes the “deep pleasure and great discoveries that writing can foster” through a variety of methods. For instance, Kirsch shares her experiences with oranges and seashells as invitations to pay attention, to be present, to the world. In addition, she highlights the role of story-telling—both writing the stories and reading them aloud—that arises out of students’ own experiences. To balance talk, Kirsch emphasizes the importance of generative silence in and out of the classroom. By feeling our way into such experimental and risky endeavors, teachers and students can jointly create “spaces to listen and wait, to invite wonder, silence, and wisdom into our lives.”

While each of the preceding essays emphasizes the role of feeling our way in face-to-face classrooms, Sue Hum tackles the importance of feeling our way as we teach in digital mediated classrooms. In “The Persuasiveness of Pleasure: Play, Reciprocity, and Persuasion in Online Discourse” Hum explores the reciprocity in an online discussion board that yields pleasure for authors and readers. Playfulness and pleasure are underexplored phenomena, Hum argues, that require our attention because through pleasurable play students and teachers “open themselves up to multiple modes of thinking and ways of living, both of which invite new insights into persuasion.” Play, she contends, is the lubricant that greases the wheels of persuasion by undermining closure and encouraging experimentation. To demonstrate the dynamic of play, pleasure, and persuasion, Hum analyzes students’ discussion board interactions, highlighting three different interactions: moments when author-readers fail to share pleasure, when play and pleasure fuse in persuasion, and when pleasure fails to yield persuasion. Hum concludes by suggesting four attitudes that foster the important interaction between play and pleasure in persuasion for both face-to-face and digital classrooms.

Students will be shortchanged, Rorty warns, if the “knowing, debunking, nil admirari kind” of teachers are the sole components of their learning experiences, their sole intellectual models. Students need as well the “connoisseurs of charisma” where feelings, passions, and inspirations provide not only a reason to believe in learning but also a reason to believe in each other. The essays in this volume provide a starting point for teaching, writing, and reading that celebrate the inspiration and transformation of shudders of awe. These essays insist on the necessity of feeling, or well as critiquing, our way. ☺

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# The Believing Game or Methodological Believing

Peter Elbow

In *Writing Without Teachers* I laid down a rule for what I called teacherless classes: no arguing. If a reader responds to your writing by saying something that seems wrong, don't disagree, don't argue, just listen and try to see your text through that reader's eyes. The same when readers disagree with each other. "Eat like an owl: take in everything and trust your innards to digest what's useful and discard what's not" (this was a later formulation in *Writing With Power* 264).<sup>1</sup>

But, as I was in the process of finishing that book in 1972, it struck me that many readers would feel that it was an intellectual scandal to outlaw what people feel is the foundation of good thinking: disagreement and argument. I decided I needed to write a theoretical justification of "no arguing." I clearly failed with Joe Harris who made exactly this critique in 1996: "[S]tudents in his workshops . . . do not seem to be held answerable to each other as intellectuals" (31). But I didn't want theoretical writing to clutter up a very practical down-to-earth book, so I made it a long appendix essay. Ever since then, I've been chewing on the believing game: this seems to be my seventh essay (see Works Cited). Looking back on my career, I now see the believing game at the core of all my work.

I still struggle with how to name it. In my second essay, I tried a fancier more theoretically self-conscious term: methodological believing. But then I worried that this was needlessly pretentious—and I like the irreverence of *game*. Yet, now as I write this essay, *methodological* seems central.

In what follows, I give a short definition of the believing game, then a tiny history of believing and doubting, and finally three arguments for the believing game.

## Definitions

I can define the believing game most easily and clearly by contrasting it with the doubting game. Indeed, the believing game derives from the doubting game.

The *doubting game* represents the kind of thinking most widely honored and taught in our culture. It's sometimes called "critical thinking." It's the disciplined practice of trying to be as skeptical and analytic as possible with every idea we encounter. By trying hard to doubt ideas, we can discover hidden contradictions, bad reasoning, or other weaknesses in them, especially in the case of ideas that seem true or attractive. We are using doubting as a *tool* for scrutinizing and testing ideas.

---

*Peter Elbow is Professor of English Emeritus at UMass Amherst. He directed the Writing Program there and at SUNY Stony Brook. He's taught at M.I.T., Franconia College, and Evergreen State College. NCTE gave him the James Squire Award "for his transforming influence and lasting intellectual contribution," and in 2007 CCCC gave him the Exemplar Award for "representing the highest ideals of scholarship, teaching, and service."*

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<sup>1</sup>I gave an earlier version of this paper at the annual Conference on College Composition and communication in New Orleans, 4/08.

In contrast, the *believing game* is the disciplined practice of trying to be as welcoming or accepting as possible to every idea we encounter, not just listening to views different from our own and holding back from arguing with them, not just trying to restate them without bias (as Carl Rogers advocated), but actually *trying* to believe them. We are using believing as a different tool for scrutinizing and testing ideas. But instead of doubting in order to scrutinize fashionable or widely accepted ideas for hidden flaws, we use belief to scrutinize unfashionable or even repellent ideas for hidden virtues. Often we cannot see what's good in someone else's idea (or in our own!) until we work at believing it. When an idea goes against current assumptions and beliefs—or if it seems alien, dangerous, or poorly formulated—we often cannot see any merit in it.<sup>2</sup>

### A Short, Idealized History of Believing and Doubting

Believing seems to come first. It looks as though it was evolutionarily useful for children to believe parents and others with authority. When I was very little, my older brother and sister held out a spoonful of horseradish and said,

<sup>2</sup>I'm on slippery ground when I equate the doubting game with critical thinking, since critical thinking has come to mean almost any kind of good thinking. Consider this hopelessly vague definition at the head of the website of the *Foundation for Critical Thinking*:

Critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action. In its exemplary form, it is based on universal intellectual values that transcend subject matter divisions: clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth, and fairness.

It entails the examination of those structures or elements of thought implicit in all reasoning: purpose, problem, or question-at-issue; assumptions; concepts; empirical grounding; reasoning leading to conclusions; implications and consequences; objections from alternative viewpoints; and frame of reference. Critical thinking—in being responsive to variable subject matter, issues, and purposes—is incorporated in a family of interwoven modes of thinking, among them: scientific thinking, mathematical thinking, historical thinking, anthropological thinking, economic thinking, moral thinking, and philosophical thinking.

Critical thinking can be seen as having two components: 1) a set of information and belief generating and processing skills, and 2) the habit, based on intellectual commitment, of using those skills to guide behavior.... People who think critically consistently attempt to live rationally, reasonably, empathically. (Scriven and Paul)

Who could ever be against anything here (except the prose)?

In short, “critical thinking” has become a “god term” (Burke) to stand for any kind of good thinking. This shows the monopoly of the doubting game in our culture's conception of thinking itself.

I'd argue, however, that despite all attempts to defuse the word *critical* of any skepticism or doubting, it still carries that connotation of *criticism*. (It's as though the previous definition is really saying, “Please don't think there's necessarily any doubting in *critical*.” The word *critical* still does that work for many fields that proudly wear it as a label. For example, in “critical theory,” “critical literacy,” and “critical legal theory,” the word still actively signals a critique, in this case a critique (of generally accepted “theory,” “literacy,” or “legal theory”). The OED's first meaning for *critical* is “given to judging; esp. given to adverse or unfavourable criticism; fault-finding, censorious.” Not till the sixth meaning do we get past a censorious meaning to a sense of merely “decisive” or “crucial.”

“Here. This is good.” I swallowed. After that, I wanted to distrust everything they told me, but soon I reverted to my natural trust and faith in them. That is, I tried for systematic doubt but failed. In the famous story (by O Henry?), the father tries to instill a more robust doubt by teaching his little girl to jump off the table into his arms—but then one day standing back and letting her crash to the floor.

But swallowing what looks good is a deep habit. Unless people are vigorously trained in critical thinking, they tend to grow up into adults who have a propensity to believe what looks obvious or what they hear from people in authority or from the culture. Adults, not just children, used to assumed that a rain dance could make it rain; they used to burn witches because of disease outbreaks. And plenty of people still respond gullibly to emails saying they’ve won hundreds of thousands of dollars if they’ll just send one thousand dollars for legal fees. My wife is a volunteer tax preparer and health care counselor for senior citizens and has a remarkably sophisticated client who was just wiped entirely out by such a scheme.

So human *credulity* gets us into trouble. But when some people get burned enough, they finally learn to doubt everything. We see this most nakedly in matters of the heart: some people who feel betrayed come to resist *any* close attachment. Sadly, we’ve been living through an era that tempts us into blanket cynicism. I catch myself starting to reject as false *by definition* any announcement that comes from my government or any big corporation. We all know people who have developed a knee-jerk skeptical temperament and reject all ideas.

But, despite feeling betrayed by Bush and Exxon, I actually realize that it’s *not* careful thinking for me to reject *any* statement or information that comes from their direction. For I’m the inheritor of a more sophisticated kind of skepticism that has developed over the centuries. This is a tradition of systematic skepticism that I call the doubting game or methodological doubting. The goal is not to *reject* everything but to use skepticism as a test to see which ideas are more worth trusting.

Socrates was in on the development of logic, and he showed the outlines of this systematic use of doubting in his adversarial dialogues (and note a recurrent playful or “game” element in those dialogues). He usually fueled these conversations with skeptical questions: “But *why* is it good to obey our parents, our rulers, and our traditions?” He spurred young people to question skeptically what their elders and their culture told them to believe—and he was killed for his efforts.

Descartes is famous for a more self-consciously formal version of methodological doubting. He said, “I will doubt *everything*.” But his goal was *not* to reject everything; his burning hunger was to find something he could *believe*, something that *survived* the test of doubting. It was with so called Enlightenment thinking of the eighteenth century, with people like Voltaire undermining all religious authority, that a lot of this kind of skeptical rationality became fairly orthodox. And there was an important social dimension to Enlightenment rationality. J. S. Mill gave the classic celebration of debate and argument. If we avoid censorship and create a truly free forum for the open debate of all ideas, he argues, we can winnow out bad thinking and find that ideas bear trust.

Note the important difference between blanket, naive, unthoughtful skepticism that rejects everything and the use of doubting as a methodological tool where the goal is not to reject but to test in order to see what’s more trustworthy. Only temperamental skeptics are good at instinctive skepticism, but when a prac-

tice gets formulated as a tool—and we teach it as a conscious method in schools—then it’s available to people of all temperaments.

Methodological doubting is central to the classical definition of scientific method (most famously formulated by Karl Popper): the process of trying to formulate various hypotheses about some particular issue in order to try to *disprove* those hypotheses—and thereby see which ones seem to survive. But most scientists know that any faith they put in a hypothesis they fail to disprove can only be *provisional* faith. No amount of evidence can give certainty. The only certainty comes with negative skeptical claims such as “All swans are *not* white.”

The incredible success of science has given powerful authority to the idea of methodological or systematic doubting. Scientific knowledge has garnered incredible authority in our culture because of the accomplishments of technology. The principle has become enshrined: we can advance knowledge if we try to doubt and disprove what we’re tempted to believe. For example, many people have faith in certain drugs or herbs that give them great relief, but scientifically double blind experiments show that many of these particular drugs don’t in themselves do the job. (I know: things are not quite as simple as the classic Popper story of scientific method. I’ll acknowledge that later.)

So this is where we are. We honor systematic skepticism or the doubting game as the best form of thinking. It’s easy to doubt what’s dubious, but the whole point of systematic skepticism is to try to doubt what we find most obvious or true or right. We can’t act—or even think very far—unless we accept at least some views, so we want to know which views are most worthy of trust. Scientists do their best to disprove a hypothesis not because they want to reject it but in order to see if they can show it is worth trusting—for a while anyway.

Let me continue this story briefly into the future. Note the progression so far: naive believing causes trouble, so this leads us to doubt. But total blanket rejecting is too blunt a tool—and not livable—and so our culture learned to develop a more sophisticated methodological skepticism.

As you might guess, I think we’re ready to drop the other shoe. That is, at the moment, we’re stuck with only naive belief. Our culture hasn’t developed methodological or systematic believing to match methodological doubting. We haven’t learned to use belief as a tool—as we use doubt as a tool. That is, over the centuries, we learned to separate the *process of doubting* from the *decision* to reject. But we haven’t learned to separate the *process of believing* from the *decision* to accept. This separation that we made in the case of doubting will feel difficult in the case of believing. For the process of believing has caused enormous problems—and still does—while the process of doubting has born great fruit. Therefore, the process itself of believing feels tainted; our concept of belief tends to connote the decision to accept, that is, commitment. We tend to feel that believing can never be a part of careful thinking.

Since that appendix essay in *Writing Without Teachers*, I’ve been trying to describe methodological believing as a discipline—decoupled from commitment—decoupled from naive or temperamental credulity. I’ve been trying to show that it is possible and that it makes sense to try to believe things that we don’t believe—especially things we don’t want to believe. And that trying can lead to a kind of conditional or temporary believing. People do it all the time, for instance when they hear and read fictional stories and tell and write them. Just as you don’t have to be a skeptical person to use methodological doubting, you don’t

have to be credulous or weak minded to believe things temporarily—and try to believe even more.

If this sounds crazy, it's probably because you've forgotten how hard it was to learn methodological doubting. When we were children, it seemed crazy for teachers to tell us that we should doubt multiple and conflicting ideas—that we should try to doubt ideas that we love. How can I doubt what seems right and precious to me—or doubt someone I trust? How can I doubt that the sun comes up in the morning? (When I taught at M.I.T., I regularly asked freshman to give me evidence for the why the earth spun on its axis and revolved around the sun. Many could not: their basis for accepting this idea was *belief in doctrine or authority*, not doubt of what's obvious.)

If you still think (naively) that it's easy to practice systematic skepticism—to try to doubt what you want to believe—you need only notice that lots of very smart people still can't do it. We see lots of our colleagues with PhDs who can only doubt ideas they *don't* like. We give our schools the job of teaching this ability: whenever people make lists of goals or outcomes for education at every level, *critical thinking* is usually central, and in this case the term usually connotes rational skepticism. Critical thinking or careful doubting doesn't come naturally to humans—especially to children. The point of a tool is to learn to do something that doesn't come naturally.

What especially interests me in true methodological doubting is the connative dimension: not just the need for an act of *intellect*, but also an act of *effort* or *will*. No one can *make* me doubt something I want to believe (for example, the efficacy of freewriting). It won't happen unless I actually *try*. The good news is that we've built a culture of critical thinking—at least in the academy—that makes me feel that I'm not thinking carefully unless I *do* try to doubt what I want to believe—even freewriting. This is good. My argument here is that we need to build a *richer* culture of rationality—richer than mere doubting or critical thinking—so that people will feel that they are not thinking carefully unless they try to believe ideas they don't want to believe.

So just as methodological doubting is *not* natural, so too methodological believing is not natural. It's not natural to try to believe ideas we disagree with or even hate. It has to be a tool or game that is decoupled from temperament or commitment. In short, methodological doubting and believing are symmetrical, and I'm claiming that we need both. If we try systematically to doubt everything, we're not trying to reject everything; we're trying to find flaws we couldn't see before. If we try systematically to believe everything, we're not trying to accept everything; we're trying to find virtues we couldn't see before. In addition to discovering which ideas look best after the scrutiny of doubt, we can discover which ideas look best after the scrutiny of believing. And (as I'll show soon) neither tool can demonstrate that anything is actually true.

### Three Arguments for the Believing Game

(1) *We need the believing game to help us find flaws in our own thinking.* The doubting game is supposed to do this job, of course: not just find other people's bad thinking but find weaknesses in our own thinking. But the doubting game or critical skepticism often falls down on this job.

The flaws in our own thinking usually come from our assumptions—our ways of thinking that we accept without noticing—that are part of the very *structure* of

our thinking. Some assumptions are particularly invisible to us because we are living as part of a community and culture. It's hard to doubt what we live inside of: we can't see it, and we unconsciously take it for granted.

Here's where the believing game comes to the rescue. Our best hope for finding invisible flaws in what we can't see in our own thinking is to enter into *different* ways of thinking or points of view—points of view that carry different assumptions. Only from a new vantage point can we see our normal point of view from the outside and thereby notice assumptions that our customary point of view keeps hidden.

Of course the doubting game has *one* method for helping us find flaws in our own assumptions: debate. If we talk with others who disagree with us and if we accept the rule of the doubting game that all ideas are fair game for debate—even our own cherished ideas—then we have a good chance of finding flaws in what we take for granted.

But most of the people we talk to live inside our culture, even our smaller community, and so we don't run into people who question these culturally shared assumptions. And, even if we do, critical thinking often helps us *fend off* any criticisms of our ideas or ways of seeing. We see this problem in much academic and intellectual interchange. When smart people are trained only in the tradition of the doubting game, they get better and better at criticizing the ideas they don't like. They use this skill particularly well when they feel a threat to their ideas or unexamined assumptions.

Yet they feel justified in fending off what they don't like because they feel they are engaged in "critical thinking." They take refuge in the feeling that they would be "unintellectual" if they said to an opponent what in fact they ought to say: "Your idea sounds really wrong to me. It must be alien to how I think. Let me try to enter into it and get a better perspective on my thinking—and see if there's something important that you can see that I can't see." In short, if we want to be good at finding flaws in our own thinking (a goal that doubters constantly trumpet), we need the believing game.

(2) *We need the believing game to help us choose among competing positions.*

Again, the doubting game is supposed to do this job. But consider some of the typical arguments that swirl around us. Should we invade countries where atrocities are happening? Should we test school children with nationwide tests in order to improve schools that leave children behind? Should we use grades in teaching?

The doubting game can reveal flaws or bad logic in *arguments* that support one position or another other. But flaws in an *argument* do not demolish the *position* itself that these arguments are trying to support. We see this problem everywhere. Over and over we see illogical arguments for good ideas and logical arguments for bad ideas. We can never show that an idea or opinion or position is wrong—only that a supporting argument is wrong. No wonder people so seldom change their minds when someone finds bad reasoning in their argument.

For example, there are arguments for and against military intervention to stop atrocities, for and against national testing and grading. It is possible to find flaws in many of those arguments, but logic cannot show that intervention or national testing or grading are right or wrong. To decide whether to invade or test or grade, these are *decisions* that involve acts of *judgment*. Decisions or acts of judgment always depend on how much weight to give various arguments. In short—and scientists are often more explicitly aware of this—the doubting game can find flaws, but it can't make decisions for us.

In fact, historians of science have shown cases where scientists have refused to give up on hypotheses that seemed to be disproven by experiments. They say things like, “Well, the testing was flawed” and even, “This hypothesis is just too beautiful to give up.” In effect, they’re saying, “The *argument* for my hypothesis is flawed, but that doesn’t mean my hypothesis is wrong.” They are making an act of judgment. I’d suggest that when they take positions like these (succumbing, it might be said, to “mere feeling” or “gut thinking”), they are actually using the believing game and finding virtues in a position that the doubting game seems to disqualify. Perhaps the disconfirmation was flawed; or perhaps there were flaws in how the position was formulated.

And suppose you are trying to get *others* to choose among options; that is, you are trying to persuade people who disagree with you. You will probably use the doubting game to show flaws in their arguments. Fair enough. But often (surprise!) they don’t change their mind and immediately agree with you. But you haven’t disproved their *position*, only their supporting arguments. They won’t change their position unless you can get them to *see* the issue the way you see it. For that, you need the believing game. Of course you can’t *make* them take the risk of playing the game, of actually *trying* to believe your position, even hypothetically and temporarily. But the believing game is inherently collaborative. You have no leverage for asking them to try to believe your position unless you start by taking the risk yourself of trying to believe *their* position. The best way to introduce the believing game is to play it and show that you’ve given a good faith effort to believe what they believe, even asking them to help you.

But there’s danger here. Your mind can be changed. (This is a not-hard-hat job.) And the believing game may seem permissive, but there’s also a surprising principle of rigor that Wayne Booth articulated: that we cannot validly *reject* an idea till we’ve succeeded in dwelling in it, in effect to believe it. If you in your mind dismiss their idea as crazy—or even if you can restate their idea “nicely” but from your alien point of view (the Carl Rogers task)—there may be something valuable and correct in it, but that you’re still too blind to see. They may seem wrong or crazy—they may *be* wrong or crazy—but nevertheless they may be seeing something that none of us can see. We may feel totally for or against invading to stop atrocities or national testing or grading, but usually there are gray areas that the believing game is particularly good at uncovering. It might help you believe that there are *certain conditions* or *certain senses* in which it makes sense to invade, test, or grade. Most “real world” practical problems or disputes are deeply hermeneutic, more like interpreting a text than getting the right answer in geometry. To show that a text truly means X does not displace the claim that it also means something quite contrary to X (even if only partly or in certain senses).

Bottom line: The doubting game is a tool. It won’t make a decision for us; it just puts us in a better position to exercise judgment about matters that cannot be proven. The believing game is also a tool. Our judging will be more trustworthy if we can use the believing game to find hidden virtues that might exist in positions that are supported by faulty arguments. Tools help us think better. This leads to my third argument for the believing game. It’s about thinking.

(3) *We need the believing game in order to achieve goals that the doubting game neglects.* I’ve given two arguments for how the believing game helps the doubting game meet its *own* goal. Now I argue how the believing game also serves a completely different goal: how it develops a different kind of careful thinking

from what the doubting game develops, a different dimension of our intelligence or rationality, and also a different way of interacting with others.

This is no argument *against* the doubting game in itself, since it obviously develops an indispensable dimension of intelligence or rationality. The only thing I'm arguing against is the *monopoly* of the doubting game in our culture's notion of rationality or careful thinking, a monopoly that has led us to neglect a different and equally indispensable kind of careful thinking.

So now I'll contrast the doubting game and believing game as ways of using the mind and of functioning with others:

*Phenomenologically*, the doubting game teaches us to fend off, spit out, guard ourselves. The believing game teaches us to welcome or swallow. For us sophisticated children of the doubting game, this is not easy: trying to believe an alien idea can make us fear being changed or polluted.

*With regard to learning*, the doubting game teaches us to extricate or detach ourselves from ideas. In contrast, the believing game teaches us to enter into ideas—to invest or insert ourselves. Wayne Booth talks about the need to learn to “dwell in” an idea if we want to understand it. Michael Polanyi insists that there is a “fiduciary transaction”—a core of trust—that is tacit in all learning. As children of the doubting game, we carefully invite our students to read and listen with a skeptical mind, but nevertheless that skepticism will not be very intellectually productive unless students have first *fully understood* what we want them to view skeptically. This means listening and entering into the words. (Think of all the believing and trusting it takes to get an M.I.T. degree in science. They have to learn a lot—“trying to drink out of a fire hydrant” is the common metaphor. There's no time to do much skeptical doubting.)

*Language vs. experience*. The doubting game is the rhetoric of *propositions* while the believing game is the rhetoric of *experience*. The doubting game teaches us that we can test or scrutinize points of view better if we put them into propositional form. This helps us bring logic to bear and see hidden contradictions (symbolic logic being the ideal form for scrutinizing thinking). The believing game teaches us to try to understand points of view from the inside. Words can help, but the kind of words that most help us experience ideas tend to be imaginative, metaphorical, narrative, personal, and even poetic words.

But not *just* words. Images and sounds and body movements are particularly helpful for entering into alien ideas, as are role playing and, yes, silence. When someone says what seems all wrong, the most productive response is often merely to listen and not reply at all. Teachers can productively insist on short periods of silence after a controversial point has been made. Not all cultures are so wedded to argument with its proliferation of words. In many cultures, silence is felt to correlate with good thinking.

*With regard to action*. The doubting game teaches us the value of disengaging from action: pausing, standing back, standing on the sidelines. This helps us see flaws we miss when we jump in and act on a point of view. Engaging or acting is just what the believing game can teach—but sometimes you can't understand something till you engage and act on it. This is where role playing gets its power: understanding through doing and inhabiting not debating.

*Gender*. The doubting game promotes ways of using the mind and being with others that have been associated in our culture with masculinity: arguing, resisting, saying no, pushing away, competing, being aggressive. The believing game promotes

mental and social activity that has been associated in our culture with femininity: being compliant, listening, absorbing, swallowing, accepting, saying yes, not arguing back, not sticking up for own view. When women play the doubting game—arguing, disagreeing, and debating—they are often seen as less feminine. When men play the believing game—not arguing back, accepting, trying to help the other person’s point of view—they are often seen as less masculine.

*The individual and social dimensions.* The doubting game promotes *both* individualism and social interaction. It promotes individualism by inviting the lone person to question and doubt the group and see the self as separate and different. As Socrates pointed out, logic allows the individual to outvote the group. But the doubting game is also highly social, since it invites us to use others in argument and debate in order to find flaws in what looks reasonable or natural, and especially to find flaws in our own views.

So, too, the believing game promotes both social action and individualism. It invites the social process of enlisting others to help us look for virtues in what seems wrong, hopelessly wrong to us. Here, the intellectual leverage comes from the cooperative process of merging with others. Temporarily at least, the individual pushes aside her differences and sense of uniqueness and tries instead to blend with others. “Help me see what you see; I can’t see it.” The believing game doesn’t strike me as highly individualistic except in this one crucial way: it invites the individual to listen and take seriously her own experience and point of view—even if it looks crazy—and not feel that one must subordinate one’s perceptions or experience or thinking to that of the group. But it supports this kind of individualism by asking for a flexible, constantly shifting methodological *groupishness*. It invites an individual who looks crazy to others to say, “Stop arguing with me; just listen for a while. If you can, help me make my position clearer and better.”

Consider a few of the ways that the believing game helps with the central activities of academic life.

*Reading.* The believing game helps us enter more fully into texts that we find difficult or alien—and also helps us discover and understand a wider range of interpretations. We want to teach students critical thinking, but they also need to learn to enter into texts that feel alien to them—to dwell in them and experience them—not stay untouched and outside them.

*Discussion.* Because of the dominance of critical thinking, especially in the academy, academics and students tend to feel that the best way to show they are smart is by pointing out flaws in the views of others. Discussions can take an adversarial tone. People tend to feel un-smart when they don’t see the flaws that “smart” people point out or when they hear something like, “What? Tell me more about that. I’m trying to see it as you see it.” Discussions tend to be more fruitful if we have more people giving this believing game response. (In discussions among philosophers, it often counts as an indictment when someone says, “I fail to be able to understand your train of thought.”)

*Writing.* Our current model for academic or essayist writing tends to be adversarial. When people write an essay advancing a position, especially in the academy, they are usually expected to start off trying to show that all other points of view are wrong. There are epistemological problems with this ritual. As we see most clearly in the interpretation of texts, right and wrong are not an either/or matters. The believing game suggests modes of writing persuasively and analytically that are nonadversarial.

## Concluding Reflections

*The believing game is alive in our midst—but not well.* Look more closely at people who are deeply smart and creative rather than just quick in debate, people who work out new ideas and creative solutions rather than just criticizing or developing existing ideas, people who collaborate productively with others and bring about action. I think you'll see that the believing game is central to the good work many of these people do.

But, because of our current model of good thinking (rational skepticism or the doubting game), most of us lack the lens or the language to see the skill these people exhibit—to dwell genuinely in ideas alien from their own—as intellectual sophistication or careful thinking. When we see them listening and drawing out others, we call them generous or nice rather than smart. We don't connect good listening to intelligence. We call creativity a mystery. We say, "Isn't it wonderful how they can mobilize others and actually get things done," but we see that as a social and personal gift rather than an intellectual skill. And, because our intellectual model is flawed in these ways, we don't *teach* this ability to enter into alien ideas. (See my 2005 *College English* essay for extensive suggestions for classroom uses of the believing game.)<sup>3</sup>

*A parting testament to the doubting game.* In case you persist in thinking that I'm biased against the doubting game, let me acknowledge that this essay is an exercise in skeptical doubting. All three of my arguments criticize weaknesses or flaws in the doubting game; I am being critical, adversarial, combative, practical, and hard-arsed; I'm using discursive propositional language, not experientially oriented language. I am using the doubting game as a tool to try to undermine what I see as misguided faith in the doubting game. If I wanted to use the *believing game* here, I'd have done better to tell stories and convey experiences—whether in words or, ideally, in workshop activities. (I've settled for inserting a few micro-story-examples.) One of the advantages of the doubting game is quickness—and I'm trying to make this a short essay. I hope my use of the doubting mode reinforces my larger message: I'm not trying to get rid of the doubting game—merely to add the believing game.

*Summary.* The doubting game and believing game are tools or methods. As such they cannot make decisions for us. The doubting game can't prove that a position is wrong; the believing game can't prove validity. For decisions we need to make judgments. But our judgments will be better if we get to use both sets of tools. In summary, I'm arguing for a richer and more accurate picture of rationality or intelligence or careful thinking.<sup>4</sup> ☐

<sup>3</sup> There's a teaching method that is widely used in some fields that reflects a *tacit* understanding of the believing game: role playing. And there's an even more widely accepted teaching method that favors the rhetoric of experience (central to the believing game)—and not just the rhetoric of propositions. That is, many teachers in various fields use *workshops* to help teach concepts to the students. They recognize the limitation of lectures and reading since they operate by propositions. They acknowledge Dewey's point that we cannot hand an idea to someone like a brick—that we need to *set up an experience* that leads the learner to create the idea herself. Experiential education has grown into a lively field with various journals and many conferences.

<sup>4</sup> I've been chewing on this bone so long that I can't possibly acknowledged all the help I've gotten. But one important story hasn't slipped my porous memory. I sent an early draft of my 1986 essay to two friends. One gave me a powerful sharp critique—a brilliant performance of the doubting game. It *should* have been enormously helpful, but I somehow couldn't digest or use it—it stopped me. The other friend—the late, brilliant, much-missed Paul Connolly—gave me a brilliant believing game response. He entered in and speculated and fantasized about what might make sense in my draft. This response got me to move—it carried me forward to better thinking and a better essay. There's no need to run away from a crass reason for the virtue of the believing game as a response technique: it says, in effect, "Please help me write this essay."

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# The Rhetoric of Empathy: Ethical Foundations of Dialogical Communication

Nathaniel Teich

In contrast to the doubting game, which involves rational, skeptical, critical analysis, and argumentation to persuade or defeat others, the believing game might seem uncritically naive, as an effort to listen, affirm, and non-judgmentally understand others. However, the believing game cannot be dismissed so easily. Genuinely engaged, the believing game can function as a profoundly ethical strategy within a larger conceptual framework of what I have called for some years “the rhetoric of empathy.” The necessary condition for honestly playing the believing game is an empathic stance, and the goal is to engage in ethical dialogue. Peter Elbow’s continual insistence on the value of the believing game, and the fact that it does not go away—given the need for empathic understanding and ethical practice in our private and public lives—calls our attention to the pragmatic and operational usefulness of the dialectical interplay of this constellation of ideas.

When we focus on Elbow’s dialectic of belief and doubt, however, we should clarify the role of *games*. Years ago, I was initially put off by Elbow’s labeling of his strategies for believing and doubting as *games* because this could imply that they are merely play, recreation, frivolous, as in “child’s play.” Yet *game* and *gaming* can be deadly serious, as in war game, or gaming as a strategy, the gaming industries, or the prey in the hunt. And games certainly are taken seriously in regard to sports and on-line gaming, as any player, spectator, fan, or detractor knows. However, Elbow’s games are not in the same league with those based on the cynical or ironic attitudes that call life or politics games. Underlying Elbow’s games there is the sincere, ethical assumption that we play the roles of belief and doubt honestly, openly, and thoroughly. This idea of role-playing in Elbow’s games requires, literally, recreation, in keeping with its meanings of re-creating and refreshing mentally as well as physically. Thus, role-playing in the believing game is literally “to create anew” and “entertain” (a term implying play and civility; see Huizinga 1-27) the thoughts, opinions, feelings of others and suspending criticism or judgment for the purpose of better understanding, even mutual understanding among all parties. For role-playing ethically, empathy is primary. While this could be just a game, it’s also more than just a game. So let the games begin.

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*Nathaniel Teich is now Professor Emeritus at the University of Oregon, where he taught literature and writing courses for more than 32 years. He has published on poets and literary theories of the British romantic movement, writing assessment, imagery, and rhetorical theory. In the field of rhetoric and communication, he has focused on non-adversarial approaches to argumentation and problem-solving based on the work of psychologist Carl Rogers. He edited and contributed essays to a volume reassessing Rogers’s theory and practice: Rogerian Perspectives: Collaborative Rhetoric for Oral and Written Communication (1992).*

## A Genealogy of Peter Elbow's Believing Game

Blake wrote, in "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," these cryptic words: "Without Contraries is no progression" (Plate 3). Peter Elbow's ideas of the believing game and the doubting game form a dialectical practice that embraces contraries. However, putting these ideas into practice necessitates a dialogical intersubjectivity that, depending on the situation, may not be easy to attain. Why this is so is a function of the believing game itself. The radical relevance of the believing game and the rhetoric of empathy is that they raise ethical questions that must be confronted in dialogical communication. Psychologist Carl Rogers asked the fundamental question: Can you risk non-judgmental understanding of others' opinions and beliefs to the extent that you are willing to modify or change your own positions? To Rogers, you risk "being changed yourself." And, Rogers continued, "This risk of being changed is one of the most frightening prospects most of us can face" (*On Becoming* 333; Teich 30).

It is not news that people may refuse to change their minds and buttress their positions with incomplete and selectively favorable supports. However, the current popularity of the term "truthiness" signifies an increasing tendency of people to believe that something feels true enough, without bothering to investigate further (Manjoo 189).<sup>1</sup> In the face of the apparently increasing difficulties for developing shared assumptions about what is true and how to verify the evidence, the believing game and the rhetoric of empathy provide some help. They offer not only theoretical discussions that help explain people's dialogical communication but also practical strategies that help shape new, productive behaviors.

To come to terms with the believing game, I have found it useful to trace a genealogy of Elbow's thinking from psychologist Carl Rogers and philosopher Michael Polanyi, through the thinking of rhetorician Wayne Booth, to theologian Martin Buber and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin in the early twentieth century. I do not have space here to go further back to the precursors of modern conceptions of empathy: from such late eighteenth-century views as Adam Smith's "Moral Sentiments" of sympathy and fellow-feeling, to nineteenth-century theorists and poets (Teich 275-76, 284-94). I do not mean to imply that Elbow's ideas and pedagogy are merely derivative, but rather that they can be situated and understood in terms of humanistic rhetorical traditions.

To start with Carl Rogers, I was surprised to learn that, after majoring in history at the University of Wisconsin, he entered the liberal Union Theological Seminary in New York. But, in less than two years, he had switched to graduate study in psychology at Columbia (Kirschenbaum 44-54). So I was not surprised that, later in his career, he reported that he found Buber's ideas congenial, such as the I-Thou dialogical relationship, Buber's concept of inclusion (which is similar to Rogerian empathy), and Buber's confirmation of another (similar to Rogerian non-judgmental acceptance) (Rogers, *A Way* 19, 63). Elbow's work fits directly into this lineage of Rogers and Buber.

After filling in more detail on my Elbow genealogy and the believing game in theory and practice, I will conclude with some practical suggestions for class-

<sup>1</sup>Farhad Manjoo, in *True Enough: Learning to Live in a Post-Fact Society*, surveyed research in psychology and media studies and analyzed recent world events to show how people select sources which only offer supporting evidence for their opinions while ignoring or rejecting equally relevant evidence for opposing views (27-58, 148-63).

room use of the believing game and the rhetoric of empathy. I include some examples of students' topics for an assignment in my advanced composition classes. Using a variety of situations and creative modes and genres, they apply Rogerian rhetoric in order to understand empathically—that is, to believe as well as doubt—various opinions and positions on controversial issues.

Early in my career I began to explore Rogerian rhetoric and issues of empathy and ethics as a result of my dissatisfactions with prevailing theories and practices of teaching argumentation. In contrast to traditional approaches of rational and adversarial debate, like lawyers in court, marshalling your best reasons and dismissing your opponent's views, the Rogerian non-adversarial approach aims for respectful understanding and practical problem solving for mutually acceptable solutions. Throughout my work, I've stressed that each of these approaches—adversarial or non-adversarial—is best employed situationally. Depending on the conditions at hand, it could be counterproductive to limit your strategies.

Years ago, upon revisiting Elbow's early ideas of the believing game and the doubting game, as well as other passages in *Writing Without Teachers*, I identified a core of Rogerian ideas that infused Elbow's writing about acceptance of the other, mutual understanding, and non-threatening conditions that lead to self-awareness and personal growth. However, in the sparsely annotated 1973 edition, Elbow did not mention Rogers in either the text or notes, although Polanyi was referred to in both the text and a footnote.<sup>2</sup> When I asked Peter in the early 1980s about Rogers's influence, I remember him saying that he was familiar with Rogers and found some of the ideas useful. It was not until later, in Elbow's new introduction to the 1998 25th anniversary edition reissue of *Writing Without Teachers*, that he acknowledged his "intellectual debts" to Rogers and others: "I probably got as many seeds of the believing game from Rogers as from Polanyi" ("Introduction" xxix).

Primarily, Elbow cited Rogers's practice of restatement for mutual understanding, which Rogers and colleagues called Active Listening (discussed below). Next was a core idea of the human potential movement and Rogers's writings on education: the trust that individuals want to learn and grow, especially when they feel the situation is safe and supportive ("Introduction" xxix-xxx). Elbow also mentioned his experience with group therapy, along with other personal revelations of his struggles as a writer in graduate school settings and as a teacher of writing. Thus, directly and indirectly, Elbow formulated strategies for the believing game and for peer response that derive from his experience of the theories and practices of Rogers and the humanistic psychology of the 1950s and 1960s.

Coincidentally, at almost the same time that *Writing Without Teachers* first appeared, Wayne Booth, in his introduction to *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent*, stressed that both Rogers and Polanyi were important contributors from their various fields to Booth's project of developing a "systematic assent" in the dialectic of his "modern" rhetoric (xvi-xvii). Booth addressed the need to balance the oppositions of doubt and assent, of denying and affirming. Over the years, Elbow has acknowledged Booth's work for his similar concerns and supportive ideas, although they had no connections when writing their books in the 1970s ("Introduction" xxvii). By 1986, Elbow, in *Embracing Contraries*, praised Booth's ideas from two of his books. First, from *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent*, Elbow praised Booth's "eloquent argument" for intellectuals to be-

<sup>2</sup>For a thorough analysis of Polanyi's influence on Elbow and Elbow's divergences from Polanyi, see M. Elizabeth Sargent 95-113.

come more believing (280-81). Second, from *Critical Understanding: The Powers and Limits of Pluralism*, Elbow praised Booth's 1979 effort to define and practice a "methodological pluralism" (257).

Pluralism, for Booth, entailed an expansive rhetorical activity, in which he sought "the possibility of a full embrace of more than one critical method without reducing pluralities . . . or canceling them out" (*Critical* 25). Here is another branch in the genealogy of Elbow's thinking that exemplifies a kind of American pragmatic pluralism, as found in Booth's theorizing and through Rogers to the educational and social philosophy of John Dewey. Philosopher Stephen Fishman took this line back to nineteenth-century ideas of self and society, especially German romanticism. Of Elbow, Fishman stated: "His emphasis on believing—the sympathetic hearing of diverse languages, public and private, professional and nonprofessional, personal and philosophical—is rooted in a romanticism that seeks not isolation but new ways to identify with one another and, thereby, new grounds for social communion" (654; see also Teich 5-12; Bertoff ix).

The key strategy for realizing this pragmatic pluralism in communication, education, and other endeavors is what Rogers and colleagues developed as "active listening." And both Elbow and Booth adopted Rogerian active listening as a methodology for their dialectics. In *Critical Understanding*, Booth reformulated Rogers's strategy, but (as often happens with Roger's influential ideas) without noting Rogers as precursor. Booth called it his "self-denying ordinance": "I will try to publish nothing about any book or article until I have *understood* it, which is to say, until I have reason to think that I can give an account of it that the author himself will recognize as just" (351; emphasis in original).

What Rogers and colleagues called "active listening" or "say back" spread as a strategy from his nondirective client-centered therapy in the 1950s to become a commonplace in all manner of dialogue situations (and often parodied in popular culture). However, it is important to recognize that Rogers soon went beyond the apparently simple saying back what the therapist understood to be the client's feelings and ideas. Rogers preferred the term "empathic listening" to embrace the broader idea of seeking to adopt the client's point of view (*A Way* 14, 50, 116, 137-39). For communication beyond the therapeutic setting, the goal is "to increase the amount of listening *with*, and to decrease the amount of evaluation *about*" others (*On Becoming* 335; Teich 32). "Real communication occurs," Rogers stated, "and this evaluative tendency is avoided, when we listen with understanding . . . to see the expressed idea and attitude from the other person's point of view, to sense how it feels to him, to achieve his frame of reference in regard to the thing he is talking about" (*On Becoming* 331-32; Teich 29).<sup>3</sup>

*Writing Without Teachers* is suffused with Rogerian principles of empathy

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<sup>3</sup>Thus, there is more embodied in this strategy than is apparent in Rogers's shorthand summary: "that you can't state your point until you can restate your opponent's point to his satisfaction" (Teich 60-61). I've called it his "restatement rule," as developed in his often-cited 1951 article, "Communication: Its Blocking and Its Facilitation":

Each person can speak up for himself only *after* he has first restated the ideas and feelings of the previous speaker accurately, and to that speaker's satisfaction. . . . It would simply mean that before presenting your own point of view, it would be necessary for you to really achieve the other speaker's frame of reference—to understand his thoughts and feelings so well that you could summarize them for him. (*On Becoming* 332; Teich 30; emphasis in original)

and active listening. For example, “if you want to improve someone’s perception or experience, you can’t do it by arguing. The best you can do is to persuade him to share yours. The only way to do this, almost invariably, is to go over and share his” (110). Since “the self cannot be removed” from dialogue, Elbow urged us “to get the feel of your own self-interest and to adopt the self-interest of as many other people as possible” (172, cf. 184-85). So, too, *Writing With Power* contains prescriptions for mutual understanding and peer group conditions of safety and support for sharing writings. For writing response groups, the believing game requires “entering into other people’s perceptions. . . . By trying to see things through the other readers’ eyes you deepen your own reading skills and you help produce an atmosphere of safety and trust that permits others to see and speak better” (270). For example, “If you just ask her to tell *more about* her reactions, it feels more like ‘Help me see the words through your eyes’” (271; emphasis in original).

While Rogerian restatement may have been parodied as well as practiced outside the therapeutic situation, Rogers’s broader aim was to expand empathic listening and understanding to reduce tensions and defensiveness in the process of communication and problem solving. He identified conflicts not only between individuals, but also among groups, such as racial, religious, labor and management, teacher and student, parent and child (*On Becoming* 334-35; *A Way* 115). Rogerian empathic listening and understanding are especially applicable to dialogical situations of negotiation or mediation where the parties are ostensibly on the same level. To charges that his reliance on empathic understanding was idealistic and impractical, Rogers pragmatically replied: “I don’t regard it as a cure-all, although some people say that I do” (qtd. in Teich 58). Clearly, people may hold some positions of belief or opinion that are not amenable to being changed, just as some conflicts may appear irreconcilable as a result of deeply held values and antagonisms of steadfast opponents. However, according to Richard E. Young, “Rogerian argument, in so far as it is an effort to respond to intense dyadic conflict, seems to offer a means for reasserting the dialogic character of rhetorical argument” (118).

By 2002, Elbow and Booth were in dialogue, with companion conference papers that were eventually published jointly in *College English* as “Symposium: The Limits and Alternatives to Skepticism: A Dialogue.” Booth began, with “Blind Skepticism versus a Rhetoric of Assent,” and Elbow followed, with “Bringing the Rhetoric of Assent and the Believing Game Together—and Into the Classroom.” Elbow first identified much common ground in their positions, especially the need to expand rhetoric to include not just how to persuade others to change their minds, but also how to consider changing our own minds (389). Elbow then stressed some divergences in their views. Booth wrote about his concern with the broader issues of “how our minds are changed” and “how . . . we decide whether to assent” (382-83). He was “trying to formulate some middle path,” such as “shared ground that would be discovered if opponents really listened to one another” (384-85). In contrast, Elbow opposed Booth’s goal of seeking an Aristotelian “golden mean” for consensus. Elbow expressed his radical and playful side by urging us to play the oppositional games of doubt and belief as “extremes.” “Extreme belief: go overboard and believe everything. . . . Then extreme doubt. . . . I’m arguing for a dialectical alternation over time” (391). “We don’t get the benefits of the believing game unless we make an active effort to believe various

positions, enter into them, dwell in them; merely listening carefully or refraining from arguing with unwelcome ideas is not enough" (392).

In a particularly cogent distinction, Elbow stated that "Booth focuses more than I do on the crucial act of making up our minds—the act of genuinely deciding—particularly on deciding that the other person is right and that we need to change our own minds. Rational assent" (392). In contrast, Elbow admitted that he's not really interested in the criteria for judging or the resolution of a conflict, but rather in the activities of the process of changing our minds. "My believing and doubting games are pictures of what to do *before* deciding" (392; emphasis in original). Thus, while Booth's position must inevitably address matters of epistemology, logic, and validation of truth claims, Elbow confined his "focus more on preparatory or exploratory activities and not on a conclusion." "I'm not against consensus among sensible people. But I'm against consensus that doesn't derive from a prior effort to believe views advanced against this consensus" (392-93).

Booth admitted that practicing the rhetoric of assent could lead to charges of "mere waffling, surrendering to vicious cases that should be fought against" (386). Similarly, these charges of weakness, waffling, and surrender have been brought by feminist and traditional rhetoricians against Rogerian argument for seeking understanding, reconciliation, and compromise, which feminists associated with stereotypically feminine negative traits (Teich 14, 17). Elbow, in *Writing Without Teachers*, acknowledged these gender stereotypes associated with doubting and believing (178-80). But, in his response to Booth, Elbow did not directly address the adversarial charge of weaknesses in the strategy of believing. Rather he asserted: "We can only play the believing game well if we do it collectively or cooperatively." We avoid conflict and disagreement "if we *cooperate* in exploring divergent views" ("Symposium" 393; emphasis in original). Thus, it is the dialogical nature of the believing game that answers questions about its efficacy. Elbow concluded, in effect, that there is parity between the doubting and believing games. Each is "*one kind or one dimension* of good thinking" (398; emphasis in original).

For Rogers, empathic understanding within dialogue, directly or indirectly, became a way to stretch his thinking. In the 1950s he turned to Martin Buber, best known for writings on philosophy, theology, and Jewish mysticism.<sup>4</sup> According to Rogers, "at the urging of my students, I became acquainted with Martin Buber (first in his writings, and then personally) and with Soren Kierkegaard. I felt greatly supported in my new approach [to the empathic therapeutic relationship], which I found to my surprise was a home-grown brand of existential philosophy" (*A Way* 39; cf. 19). Then Rogers actually met Buber in 1957 for "an unrehearsed dialogue" before a public audience.

Martin Buber wrote about what we would now define as empathy and dialogue in a 1926 essay on education (first published in English in the collection, *Between Man and Man*, 1948). Buber preferred his own term, "inclusion," be-

<sup>4</sup>The earliest dating that I could find for Rogers's interest in Buber is Rogers's announcement for a seminar in spring 1952 (Collection). A new transcription of the Rogers/Buber dialogue, with detailed analysis that corrects previous versions, was published by Anderson and Cissna. This was the first of several public dialogues that Rogers held with major thinkers over a period of years. Coincidentally, similar to Elbow and Booth, Rogers also found Polanyi's thought most congenial, especially in balancing the cognitive and the affective. Their dialogue took place in 1966 (Kirschenbaum and Henderson).

cause he considered the term empathy as a limited act of “absorption” into situations of life outside the self, which led to the negation or “exclusion of one’s own concreteness.” In Buber’s terms, rather than “one-sidedness,” “inclusion” involves the “mutuality” that characterizes “the dialogical relation” (98-101). Inclusion, then,

is the extension of one’s own concreteness, the fulfilment [sic] of the actual situation of life, the complete presence of the reality in which one participates. Its elements are, first, a relation, of no matter what kind, between two persons, second an event experienced by them in common, in which at least one of them actively participates, and, third, the fact that this one person, without forfeiting anything of the felt reality of his activity, at the same time lives through the common event from the standpoint of the other. A relation between persons that is characterized in more or less degree by the element of inclusion may be termed a dialogical relation. (97)

Buber’s centrality in the development of modern dialogical philosophy bears emphasizing. Certainly, Mikhail Bakhtin’s ideas of dialogism have gained prominence and been adapted by theorists and applied by teachers in our field. The early influences on Bakhtin from Buber and their common milieu are now better known (Clark and Holquist; Emerson; Perlina). Both were influenced by a turn-of-the-century, neo-Kantian philosopher in the German-Jewish tradition, Herman Cohen. The young Bakhtin was introduced to the pre-World War I writings of the older Buber. Then Bakhtin, through his friend Matvei Kagan, became familiar with a variety of “I-Thou” conceptions, including those of Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, who significantly interacted with and influenced Buber.

During this period, a number of writers from different points of view were formulating constructs of self and other. Buber’s development of his I-Thou has been traced in detail by Maurice Friedman, in his *Martin Buber’s Life and Work: The Early Years 1878-1923*. When Buber published *I and Thou [Ich und Du]* in 1923, according to Friedman, it was not simply the “human *I* to the *Thou* of God” but “man, nature, and art were also *Thou*” (409; emphasis in original). In a similar vein, Walter Kaufmann, in his prologue to his 1970 translation, argues for *Ich und Du* to be rendered “I and You” to reflect the less remote formality of the construct. “*Thou* immediately brings to mind God; *Du* does not” (14-16, emphasis in original).

A key problem, which is practical as well as philosophical, lies in defining and describing operationally how various constructs of self and other can accurately represent the intersubjectivity of dialogical communication. For example, Buber’s transcendental dimensions are not present in Bakhtin’s ideas that the other is needed for the possibility of realization of the “I.” However, both thinkers share a model of dialogue involving the interdependency of the formation of “I” and “other.” To Buber, it is the “essential reciprocity” of relationship between two beings that confirms their humanness: “the saying of Thou by the I” (208). Bakhtin’s view has been interpreted to differ “in its insistence on a separateness right up to (and including) the boundary between the two speaking voices” (Emerson 272). Where and how to mark the boundary or circumscribe the space between self and other is indeed a linguistic challenge. Yet, regardless of how it

is conceptually rendered, the nature of that dialogic, existential “space”—which has often been called “the between”—represents the grounds for possible reciprocity in the intersubjectivity of dialogical communication.

When I say, “regardless of how it is conceptually rendered,” I am referring to the many metaphorical or imagistic terms used to signify the act of empathy or rational efforts to achieve the intersubjective relations of self and other. We are familiar with such frequently used words as enter into the world of the other, go over, inhabit, dwell with, indwelling, walk in another’s shoes, put yourself in another’s skin (Teich 237-39). However, in thinking about what these words signify, we would benefit from Theodor Reik’s distinctions among such concepts as projection, introjection, incorporation (Teich 276, 287). Note, Buber stressed that inclusion does not entail a giving up or going out of the self by absorption into the other. Similarly, Rogers, from his clinical standpoint, stressed that empathy did not entail simple identification with the other. “This ability to see completely through the client’s eyes, to adopt his frame of reference” is to experience “*as if* one were the person, but without ever losing the ‘as if’ condition. . . . If the ‘as if’ condition is lost, the state is one of identification” (*A Way* 140-41; emphasis in original).

Unfortunately, Rogers and Buber were distracted from exploring “the between” in their less-than-satisfactory dialogue (Anderson and Cissna 99-105). Buber did trace back to his student days “a certain inclination to meet people, and as far as possible to, just to change if possible something in the other, but also to let me be changed by him . . . as far as it is legitimate” (21-22; my edit from transcript). Thus, while “the between” remains always irreducible and essentially unbridgeable, there is also the possibility of holistic experiencing, like that of Rogers’s empathy, Buber’s inclusion, and, I would add, Elbow’s believing game. They offer ways across, if only temporarily and incompletely. That Elbow and the believing game belong in this humanistic company is evident from this genealogical investigation.

### Classroom Applications of the Believing Game and Rogerian Empathic Understanding

To conclude with a return to the pragmatic world of teaching writing, to employ Rogerian empathy and the believing game necessitates different strategies and, thus, can achieve results different from those of traditional rhetorics and their strategy of accommodation. We now have more ways to encourage students. With the prominence of multi-genre alternative discourses, multi-media modes, and creative non-fiction, students can be encouraged to use their own creativity for narration and description of dialogue situations to understand others’ points of view. The universal elements of story are prevalent in non-fiction as well as fiction. It’s not impinging on Creative Writing departments to encourage students to use in their arguments and analyses such elements as personal narrative, dialogue, metaphor, anecdote, vignette, vivid description, and more.

If we expand the rhetorical options for dialogue and persuasion, students will respond positively. In my experience, they show genuine commitment to the task, express natural voice, and explore meaningful personal connections to a problem or controversial issue. In the process, students engage in a practice that

goes beyond reasoning in the cognitive domain to experience a wholeness in their writing that is usually separated in school and academic discourse. This wholeness involves the interconnection of thought and feeling, cognition and affect, mind and body, that could lead to new understandings and new values and behaviors in personal and public spheres.

As I said at the outset, the success of the rhetoric of empathy and the believing game will be a function of the situation. Just as some interpersonal, social, and political situations might call for uncompromising advocacy (because we have some issues that are non-negotiable and some values we will not change), in other situations we might recognize the benefits of cooperation and compromise for a mutually satisfactory solution to a real-world problem. In the former case of intractable issues and unwavering beliefs, at the least, the benefits of ethical, empathic dialogue may yield better understandings of differences and produce tolerance and civility.

Topic selection is crucial, however, since the writer needs to present positions fairly, with empathic understanding even of opinions possibly repugnant to the writer. Accordingly, I have stressed to students that they should not choose issues about which they are unwilling to treat all sides adequately. Here are a few examples from my classes:

- Conservationist vs. Logger: dialogue of two friends meeting years after high school in rural lumber town
- School Librarian: receives letters from two parents, one to ban controversial book and the other to keep in library
- Animal rights advocate vs. research scientist in campus lab using animals for experimentation
- Industrial park development vs. keeping open space for playing fields
- Internal monologue or dialogue between opposing sides of self
- Editorial in newspaper and letter to editor presenting differing views of an issue

For this assignment, the writers need not solve the problem or reconcile the parties, but just practice for the big games ahead. ☺

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# Splitting the Cartesian Hair

Mary Rose O'Reilley

It may be useful to think of *doubt* and *belief* as games; it certainly takes the pressure off for those of us who were raised in the old existentialist order. However, they are not games that play very well on the prairie. In the evening of my life as a rhetorician, I am haunted by the voices of two students: first, Sam, who came from a farm in southern Minnesota, who turned up in my first-year composition course. When I asked him to support an argument with several points of evidence, he broke a term's laconic silence to state: "You shouldn't ask a man his reasons. That's insulting. You better assume he has them." Then Arlo, self-identified as a right-wing libertarian, who resisted Rogerian rhetoric, the believing game writ large. I had asked him to lay out a fellow student's position supporting gun control and try to find common ground. He steadily refused. "If I laid out my opponent's argument sympathetically," he said, "I'd be honor-bound to consider changing my mind."

These students haunt me not because their positions are comic, though they are, or unassailable, which they are not, but because they cast the shadow of a kind of black mass in the church of our profession. The anthropologist and philosopher Loren Eiseley, in the later years of his own professional journey, was tormented by a kind of trickster figure, "masked and demonic," which rose up to mock his every pretension. In his essay "The Star Thrower," Eiseley associates this apparition with "the trickster as I have seen his role performed among the remnant of a savage people long ago." Perhaps in southern Minnesota, for all I know. This is how Eiseley characterizes the figure he calls "a jokester present at the most devout of ceremonies":

This creature never laughed; he never made a sound. Painted in black, he followed silently behind the officiating priest, mimicking, with the added flourish of a little whip, the gestures of the devout one. His timed and stylized posturings conveyed a derision infinitely more formidable than actual laughter. (175)

Well, I've taught a lot of students who fit that description. Mostly I'm grateful for them. If rhetoric is a game, they don't know where to find the board, or they have gotten mad and turned over the table because they are losing. Or the game is so passionately important to them that no gameboard, no set of pawns, can do it justice.

It is with this final position I wish to linger.

Blaise Pascal, in the eighteenth century, after many years of tearing out his

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*Mary Rose O'Reilley is the author of The Love of Impermanent Things: A Threshold Ecology and The Barn at the End of the World: The Apprenticeship of a Quaker, Buddhist Shepherd (Milkweed Editions). Her first book of poetry, Half Wild (Louisiana State University) won the 2005 Walt Whitman Award of the Academy of American Poets, judged by Mary Oliver. Her books about teaching include The Peaceable Classroom, Radical Presence and The Garden at Night: Burnout and Breakdown in the Teaching Life (Heinemann). Retired from university teaching, she works at being a gardener, potter, and folk musician.*

hair and worrying about hell, decided that doubt and belief are ultimately a game, what we might now call a social construction. He incarnated this idea in his famous wager. He had more to gain than to lose by believing—believing, in this case, in God and the one true church—than by doubting, which could get him damned to hell. Pascal's reasoning has always struck me as a bit self-interested but no doubt there were aspects to the argument I haven't grasped. I've never believed in hell seriously enough to gamble it away.

Not much later in the French syllabus, Rene Descartes invented the idea of *methodic doubt* to cleanse his palate of a diet of superstition and second-hand knowledge. He determined to approach every idea with the postulate, suppose this is not true. We all know how he worked his way up the chain of being toward the famous cogito, convincing himself that he, for starters, existed. This is a process of intellection lost on the average Midwesterner. I've mentioned a syllabus because I taught these texts in a two-semester course at the University of St. Thomas, taking the troubled young Minnesotan from Plato to T. S. Eliot between September and May of a formative year. We came to Descartes in February. In that cold month, hungry owls fly in from the northern reaches to seek easy prey amongst the Gothic towers of my university. It's a little micro-climate where the mice are not so secure in their icy tunnels, and the owls come to feast. Crows are notorious harriers of owls, so, typically, at 9:15 on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, just as I would launch myself on Descartes, twenty or thirty crows would start to caw outside my classroom window. Painted in black, you might say, and mimicking the gestures of the devout one.

Before me, Rene Descartes, behind me, a tree full of screeching crows. Beyond Descartes, the faces of prairie rectitude and naivete. "So," someone would bravely formulate, "let's see if I have this right: he needed to prove to himself that he existed. . . ."

*Caw!*

The phenomenologist Paul Ricoeur distinguishes between first and second-order naivete. This concept is a wonderful refuge for those of us who are growing somewhat demented. Ricoeur's is a fancy rendering of the Zen saying: "When I was a child, a tree was a tree and a river was a river and a mountain was a mountain. When I became a man, suddenly a tree was not a tree and river was not a river and a mountain was not a mountain. Now that I am old, a tree is a tree and river is a river and a mountain is a mountain." We in the emeritus stage of an academic career may be permitted to indulge a certain naivete in common with our students.

In between, there is professional life.

In his early work, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Thomas Merton wrote an indictment of Descartes. Merton, some may know, had gone through the French school system with its rigorous Cartesian discipline. *Cogito, ergo sum*, Merton wrote,

is the declaration of an alienated being, in exile from his own spiritual depths, compelled to seek some comfort in a *proof for his own existence* (!) based on the observation that he "thinks." If his thought is necessary as a medium through which he arrives at the concept of his existence, then he is in fact only moving away from his true being. He is reducing himself to a concept. He is making it impossible for himself to experience, directly

and indirectly, the mystery of his own being. (8, emphasis in original)

In other words, Caw!

Merton wrote *New Seeds of Contemplation* as a relatively recent convert to Catholicism, one who had flung himself whole-hog into the monastic vocation. Merton's text, at this point, runs to italics and exclamation points. It may remind us of certain freshman essays dotting the "i's" with circles or hearts. It's likely that, with the agenda of a young monk in the 1950s, Merton was not being quite fair to Descartes. Yet, all that aside, what I hear in his sentence is a fierce defense of true being and the possibility of experiencing its mystery. Two concepts which may be problematic in the modern academy. Like voice.

Later in professional life, Merton got a bit hyper-sophisticated, and the zeitgeist changed. This is a predictable passage of adult life, and most of us go through it. If we come to college with anything like what is so mechanistically called a belief system, we are certain to find it under assault by Thanksgiving of freshman year. Further along in the process, as young academics with real jobs, we encounter a critique of everything we learned in graduate school. We may be opposed by older colleagues with a case of speaking optimistically—second order naiveite—or by younger colleagues with a new set of unassailable ideas incompatible with our own. The playground of school, from first grade to last, is a landscape for the believing game.

People who play the believing game are people interested in truth, but belief and truth tend to interact with each other like figures in the Feast of Fools, described by Eiseley in "The Star Thrower." Somewhere between my first and second order naiveite, I had a conversation with one of those Yoda-figures who enter our lives now and again. To Yoda I confided, in the manner of earnest assistant professors everywhere, that I had no interest in any consoling philosophy which wasn't based on truth. Yoda, smiling in that inscrutable Yoda way, told me that I held two strings in my hand; if I followed the thread of doubt it would lead to despair, and, if I followed the thread of belief, I would be guided by helpful animals and talking trees and other folkloric figures familiar to the journeys of young simpletons.

Yoda was perhaps echoing William Blake:

I give you the end of a golden string  
                   Only wind it into a ball:  
 It will wind you in at Heavens gate  
                   Built in Jerusalem's wall. (231)

When I sat down to write this paper, I put a teapot on the stove. I wrote for about two hours and, after a while, my border collie began to pace the room, trying to tell me the pot had burned down to the grate and the kitchen was ready to catch fire. I am a person who pays attention to talking animals only just in time. In practice, I have held both threads in my hand and tugged now one, now the other. But perhaps this is just as well. It is, anyway, an attitude common to humanities professors of my generation. E. M. Forster puts it best: "The business man who assumes that this life is everything, and the mystic who asserts that it is nothing, fail, on this side and on that, to hit the truth." Truth is not, he goes on to say, somewhere "halfway between . . . No; truth, being alive, was not half way

between anything. It was only to be found by constant excursions into either realm, and though proportion is the final secret, to espouse it at the outset is to insure sterility." Forster believes we must earn the middle way, the path of moderation. "Don't begin with proportion," says one of the characters in *Howards End*; "Only prigs do that" (73).

Loren Eiseley—returning now to "The Star Thrower"—habitually followed the thread of methodic doubt. He was a scientist, and doubt works well in science. It brings him to a condition he describes this way:

[I was] an inhumanly stripped skeleton without voice. I was devoid of pity, because pity implies hope. There was, in this desiccated skull, only an eye, like a pharos light, a beacon, a search beam revolving endlessly in sunless noonday or black night. Ideas like swarms of insects rose to the beam, but the light consumed them. Upon that shore meaning had ceased. There were only the dead skull and the revolving eye. With such an eye, some have said, science looks upon the world. I do not know. I know only that I was the skull of emptiness and the endlessly revolving light without pity. (170)

It is possible to turn out students in this condition, but I am not going to say the predictable thing: that it is our fault. Nor is it the fault of science, or the fault, even, of the misuse of scientific method by ham-handed professors. Eiseley's analysis is far more complicated. I encourage you to find any excuse to assign "The Star Thrower," because it is such a nuanced examination of grief and recovery. Early in the story, Eiseley postulates that Darwin and Freud have driven him to despair. But later he interrogates the condition of his own soul, which has allowed Darwin and Freud to damage him. His personal despair comes from his family and its tragic experience.

When Eiseley—at last—achieves something like a statement of belief, it is hard won. Most of us want to skip the journey and rip off the moral: "Be kind," says the Dalai Lama. When people quote that to me, I want to find a moveable object to hit them with. An aside: I used to teach "The Star Thrower" to a class of M.A. candidates in nonfiction, and I was accustomed to having them come to class bleary-eyed, having been unable to work their way through the dense prose—until the advent of the internet, when students suddenly started coming in with perfect confidence. "Oh, it says, 'be kind.'" Because, if you google *star thrower*, you will find hundreds of distilled stories roughly plagiarizing Eiseley's, while stripping off every bit of intellectual complexity. This is America.

Let's go back to France, to Simone Weil. Weil's quandary was, specifically, the quandary of modernism: *belief* seemed to her inevitably specious because she was so thoroughly trained in *methodic doubt*. But her experience had brought her—raised as a secular Jew—to long for baptism in the Catholic church. A moral quandary. In 1930, she had earned her diploma from the prestigious Ecole Normale Supéri with a dissertation on Descartes, so she was well-grounded in Cartesian methodology when she began to depart from it in her writings of the early 1940s. Her essay, usually printed with the title "Spiritual Autobiography," is another I often find an excuse to teach because it is such a closely reasoned, humble, and polite *refusal* of what other late modernists called the "leap of faith." What fascinates me is less her conclusion than her method, and—to shift the context slightly—

what she has to say about belief within a *system of language*. This is always a comfortable space for rhetoricians to hang out.

Here is how Weil puts it, explaining with painful conscientiousness to her evangelical friend, Father Perrin, how carefully she has examined the postulates he has put before her and why she feels compelled to reject them: “I felt that after having said to myself for so many years simply, ‘Perhaps all that is not true,’ I ought, without ceasing to say it very often now—to join it to the opposite formula, namely: ‘Perhaps all that is true,’ and to make them alternate” (73). She has learned to put beside the Cartesian formula of methodic doubt a formula of methodic belief.

Ultimately, Weil’s problem with Catholicism—as she gently implies—is that it does not play sufficiently with doubt. This is, for her, an issue of intellectual honesty. Weil wants to call home the grain of truth inherent in every error, every fallacy, every heresy. She can’t get enough of truth, and in this quest she believes that God is on her side. Even Christ is on her side. She writes, “one can never wrestle enough with God if one does so out of pure regard for the truth. Christ likes us to prefer truth to him because, before being Christ, he is truth. If one turns aside from him to go toward the truth, one will not go far before falling into his arms” (69).

What she can’t stomach in Father Perrin’s position is the totalitarianism of the church’s control of dogma, “the use of the two little words”—as she puts it—“*anathema sit*” (77).

Weil positions herself, though with grave diffidence, on the moral high ground claimed by philosophers like Karl Jung: issues of *belief* are irrelevant because *she knows*. She rejects French education because it refuses to play with belief and Catholicism because it refuses to play with doubt, though Weil would never have *played* with either.

Weil wrote outside the context of American fundamentalism, but her insights on scriptural language bear repeating for those of us who have to thread our way among the various religious discourses impinging on the modern academy. As circumstances demand, she says, the “Spirit of truth” may use collective language. This she calls “the language of the marketplace;” or Spirit may use personal language, “the language of the nuptial chamber” (79-80). “The word of God is the secret word,” she states. “He who has not heard this word, even if he adheres to all the dogmas taught by the Church, has no contact with truth” (80).

Weil did not always express herself with perfect coherence. What I’ve quoted here was tossed off in short letters and essays carried from house to house as she bolted from France to America to England in the last two years of her life. We cannot look to them for a coherent philosophy.

What do I look to them for? For koan. For paradox. For space.

Parker Palmer often speaks of how “to teach is to create a space.” This is a phrase which captivated me throughout my teaching career, although I didn’t always know what I wanted to create a space for, and I worried about what might rush in. The doubting/believing game creates a space. To teach, to think, and finally to live out of a process model protects a space. *Protects* is now the word I would use. Since I spent time in a Buddhist monastery, and more time studying the Christian ascetic tradition, I’ve come to think of this as space as essentially *contemplative*.

But “contemplative” is a word in danger of being debased, ready to pass into

the realm of spa language, so I want to frame it rather carefully. Lately I've been re-reading the inimitable Allen Ginsberg. It was Ginsberg, Kerouac, and their fellows who began, at least in America, to reinterpret the tradition of Western poetics in terms of a kind of contemplative critique. In his essay "Meditation and Poetics," Ginsberg talked about a "deconditioning of rigidity and unyieldingness" which he said was

parallel with traditional Buddhist ideas of renunciation—renunciation of hand-me-down conditioned conceptions of mind. It's the meditative practice of "letting go of thoughts"—neither pushing them away nor inviting them in, but, as you sit meditating, watching the procession of thought forms pass by, rising, flowering and dissolving, and disowning them, so to speak: you're not responsible any more than you're responsible for the weather, because you can't tell in advance what you're going to think next. Otherwise you'd be able to predict every thought, and that would be sad for you. There are some people whose thoughts are all predictable. (150)

What an interesting cloud of witness we can gather around this idea of protecting contemplative space. I love to imagine Weil on the same bus with Kerouac and Ginsberg. She would haul one of her favorite heretics, Meister Eckhardt, on board. I would nominate Gerard Manley Hopkins. People always scold us process people for never arriving. And this is an honest criticism. We don't want to sit there forever, like *Bartleby the Scrivener*, saying "I prefer not to."

Most of us teachers, by the time we reach emeritus status, *have* decided to prefer something: it's just that our conclusions are likely not yours and aren't relevant to the central discussion. And it's important for any of us, as teachers, not to allow our beliefs to influence the contemplative space of our students' struggle. Our job is to *protect* the space.

Belief is one of the scariest concepts in the modern academy, but I have lately felt some softening within myself of my fear of the word. I had a conversation with my friend Yoda about it, and he sent me a citation from the Harvard theologian Diana Eck. Eck recalls for us the derivation of the word "belief" from the Anglo-Saxon *beleofan*. *Leofan* means "to love" and the prefix *be* is a kind of intensifier, indicating a prolonged and thorough engagement with the next verb, a construction we see in words like bewitch, bewilder, bewail, betray. In the modern academy, Eck writes, "The word 'believe' has gradually changed its meaning from conveying certainty so deep that I commit my life to it, to conveying uncertainty so unstable that only the 'credulous' would rely on it."

A few weeks later, Yoda, who was reading Marcus Borg, sent this to me:

prior to the year 1600, the verb 'believe' had a very different meaning within Christianity as well as in popular usage. It did not mean believing statements to be true; the object of the verb 'believe' was always a person, not a statement. . . . believing meant believing in and thus a relationship of trust, loyalty, and love. Most simply, to believe meant to believe. (20)

It seems important that we retrieve this concept for our students, to return them confidently to scholarship as a *beloving game*. The contemplative space we

must hold for them—and for ourselves—is not one of *credo*. It is a space of imaginative transformation. The question that resonates in this space is: *What would it be like to give yourself to this idea?* Much is at stake, for them, for us. As Ginsberg does, we, as teachers, model a “deconditioning of rigidity and unyieldingness.” As I return to the situation of my student who resisted Rogerian rhetoric, I wish I had been able to give him this gift, though he would not have seen it as a gift. Like the little boy in the famous *New Yorker* cartoon, he might have said, “I say it’s spinach and I say the hell with it.” Well, we might have liked to protect the space in which he could say that.

If this is a game, it is a game of the kind Lorca spoke of in his essay “Play and the Theory of the Duende,” performed upon liminal, threshold space, a classroom where *anything can happen*. “Through the empty archway a [wind of the spirit] enters, blowing relentlessly over the heads of the dead, in search of new landscapes and unknown accents . . . announcing the constant baptism of newly created things” (53). ☹

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# Faith-Based Worldviews as a Challenge to the Believing Game

Patricia Bizzell

Peter Elbow's believing game is, I think, one of his most original contributions to our intellectual life. It is a disciplined method designed specifically to counteract the weaknesses that Elbow perceives in the preferred academic method of radical skepticism, which he characterizes as the doubting game. Whereas skepticism requires the extirpation of self-interest, the believing game acknowledges that self-interest is ineradicable, and so, as Elbow explains, "you are given constant practice in trying to get the feel of your own self-interest and to adopt the self-interest of as many other people as possible" (172). Whereas skepticism attempts to remove all effects of "projection" of already held beliefs and practices onto newly encountered material, the believing game treats projection not only as inevitable, but as a valuable intellectual tool, whereby one learns to articulate the new with one's current mental categories, not distorting the one but enlarging the other. Elbow would like to see both intellectual methods employed in the academy, but only the doubting game still prevails, in spite of all post-modern anti-foundationalism can do to dislodge it.

Imagine, then, a hypothetical academic. I flipped a coin to determine his gender. The academic is a highly specialized creature, expert at using reason to solve problems. Logical argument is his trade, and he has been trained to be extremely difficult to convince—indeed, the more difficult, the more rigorous and intellectually respectable he is. He is the master of the doubting game. For the skeptical academic, emotions are comparable to grit interfering with the operation of a delicate machine. They are to be kept out of academic argument to the highest degree possible. Ditto, therefore, those aspects of human experience that tend to give rise to emotions, such as one's gender, sexual orientation, physical condition, family situation, race, ethnicity, and religion as these are socially constructed.

The academic can play the believing game up to a point. He can understand the concept of accepting the fundamental premises of a position and then tracing how logical consequences flow from them. For example, he can temporarily inhabit the discourse of a theoretical position with which he disagrees; indeed, he must have the ability to do so in order to argue against it effectively, as rhetoricians have always known since the ancient Greek Sophists promulgated their *dissoi logoi*. But what if he is asked to inhabit a position that arouses emotion in him? This is disturbing, by the very fact that emotion of any kind is being aroused—emotion is taboo—but even more so if the emotion is repugnance or fear. Yet the

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*Patricia Bizzell is Professor of English at the College of the Holy Cross, and a student in the Masters in Jewish Liberal Studies Program at Hebrew College. Among her publications are Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness (1992) and The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical to Contemporary Times (2nd ed., 2001). Her recent scholarship has focused on the functions in religious persuasion of rationality and emotion, in work by nineteenth-century American women activists and by medieval and modern Jewish disputants.*

believing game asks him to go forward in spite of these emotions, indeed to open himself to them, to remain—in Peter Elbow’s terms—“flexible,” “yielding,” “more encompassing,” “cooperative,” “supportive,” and “nonviolent” (178-79).

I submit that this challenging iteration of the believing game confronts our professional skeptic acutely when he encounters a position of religious faith. Perhaps he will try to keep religious students’ religious arguments out of the classroom by arguing that they are inappropriate to the audience—a pragmatic argument—religious arguments won’t work because not everyone is born again. This strategy is problematic for several reasons, however. For one thing, a rather large number of the audience members in a particular classroom may in fact be born again, or for other reasons quite amenable to faith-based arguments. And there’s the additional problem that this line of argument clearly valorizes some kinds of thinking that resists the mainstream over others. Certainly traditional academic skepticism is not a mainstream view and does not immediately appeal to many audience members—whether students or other adults—but we usually tend to defend it and dignify it with the adjective “critical.”

Trying to use Elbow’s believing game to deal with religious faiths in the classroom may be the method’s greatest test. As Shannon Carter observes:

Teaching writing in the Bible Belt for the past five years has taught me . . . the limits of my own tolerance for difference. In fact, the evangelical Christianity with which a number of my students most identify functions—rhetorically, ideologically, practically—in ways that appear completely and irreconcilably at odds with my pedagogical and scholarly goals. (572)

Carter summarizes these goals in good academic-skeptical fashion as encouraging critical distance on one’s life situation, whereas she senses that evangelicals have accepted a conversion process that works in the other direction, to remove doubt and alienation and to immerse them in a world where the good and the true are known with certainty.

Carter is smarter than our hypothetical academic, though. He might frame this problem as one of reason contesting against unreason—certainly, a tempting position to take, not only in light of our own professional formation but also in response to the heinous crimes being committed around the world today in the name of religion. Carter, however, understands that this confrontation between her worldview and that of the fundamentalists reveals that emotion plays a very large part in her adherence to her unimpeachably academic attitudes and goals—that there are, indeed, what she calls “ironic parallels” between how she adheres to her beliefs and how they adhere to theirs (572).

I think the most important parallel is the role played by emotion in cementing adherence. Emotion is presently under-theorized in our study of rhetoric. As Daniel Gross has pointed out, even when rhetoric is approached as constitutive or epistemic, emotion tends to be treated merely as a device the author or orator can manipulate to influence the audience (9-10). Gross argues that a culturally enriched, “psychosocial” conception of emotion, which he derives from Aristotle, was snuffed out in the Enlightenment, although traces of it linger, and his history of how this came about in the early modern period contributes to understanding emotion as other contemporary theorists are taking it up—an enriched understanding that we must have in order to test the scope of the believing game. Therefore,

I want to spend some time here exploring the complexities of emotion in relation to rhetoric.

Some important work on emotion has been done in feminist theory by Lynn Worsham, who defines “emotion” thusly: “the tight braid of affect and judgment that is socially and historically constructed and bodily lived” (105). Worsham questions the identification of emotion with the feminine insofar as this has worked to marginalize emotion. She explicitly contests the view that emotion is “reason’s other,” and, like Gross, she faults contemporary rhetorical studies for focusing “much attention on logos in an attempt to show that reason is rhetorical and that knowledge is politically interested, while . . . [ignoring] pathos, or emotion and emotional appeal, altogether” (105).

In contrast with this view, Worsham argues that all ideologies “are properly understood, at least in part, as ideologies of emotion” that “provide the conditions in which a primary affective mapping of the individual psyche occurs, one that sets the stage for all subsequent socialization” (105). For example, “racism is not only the result of ‘incorrect’ [or illogical] thinking that can be remedied through, say, multicultural education; rather, racism is first and foremost a profound fear and loathing of the racialized other” (105). Affect is so tightly braided with judgment that the mere production of logical counter-arguments cannot dislodge the links. Incidentally, this analysis suggests why our hypothetical academic is likely to be disappointed if he thinks his skeptical logic can dislodge what he regards as students’ unreasoning prejudices.

Sharon Crowley has explained in detail how Worsham’s “tight braid” of affect and judgment works, drawing particularly on the work of Chantal Mouffe. Crowley says, “While persuasion can of course be effected by means of reasoned argument, I posit that ideology, fantasy and emotion are primary motivators of belief and action” (59). Crowley morphs the term “ideology” into “ideologic” to describe the over-arching structure whereby emotions, including those emotional yearnings she terms “fantasies,” are organized into a belief system. Following her sources, she uses the term “moment” interchangeably with “position,” understanding that these terms refer not only to cognitive content but also to affective valence attached to belief. Here is Crowley on how the system works (I’m going to quote her helpful analysis at length):

For example, a worker who defends capitalism has taken up a position, has articulated (in the sense of “formulated”) a discursive moment. . . . He or she can then deploy a familiar ideologic, articulating (in the sense of “connecting”) this moment with others. A common move in the defense of free-market capitalism, for instance, is to connect belief in it to the belief that poor people are so because they are lazy. . . . (60)

It will be seen that the activity of “articulation”—both formulating and connecting—is important in Crowley’s analysis, and she explains it further in this way:

The moves I designate as “articulations” are not equivalent to what liberals mean by “reason.” Liberal reasoning is grounded on observations or perceptions. Moments of ideology, on the other hand, occur as beliefs, while moments of desire are staged as fantasies. . . . One difference between ideologic and reason,

then, has to do with the sources from which its positions (moments) are drawn—belief, passion, values, desires—rather than empirical evidence. (61)

Another way of phrasing this point would be to say that Crowley’s account of “articulations” considers the many factors involved in human decision-making and motivation, not only rational argument—indeed, a full range of factors that rhetoric has traditionally considered via attention to ethos and pathos as well as logos. Crowley also understands that articulated positions connect to one another via many means, not necessarily logical links. As she says:

ideologic also entails more means of making connections than are acknowledged in liberal accounts of reason. For one thing, an appeal to a belief can stimulate an emotional response that in turn can activate other, closely related beliefs. For another, ideologic means of connection include webs of analogous and/or metonymic historical associations (that is, articulations) built up over time. (61)

Furthermore, Crowley explains that as chains of articulations are assembled, the positions tend to reinforce and intensify one another. She calls this phenomenon “resonance.” Its power varies across ideologies or belief systems depending upon the degree to which a system is totalizing, that is, the degree to which a belief system attempts to fully account for every aspect of its adherent’s experience. Some ideologies are more “tightly woven,” to use Crowley’s metaphor, than others. For example:

a skeptic need not necessarily abandon her skeptical worldview (or her friends and family) when she changes her mind about a religious or political issue [because her ideologic is less tightly woven]. Unlike skepticism, a densely articulated ideologic “explains everything,” and so its disarticulation is very costly to a believer. Many other beliefs must be given up, and others rearranged, in order to abandon one. (79)

The particular “densely articulated ideologic” that Crowley’s interested in here is fundamentalist Christianity.

Thus Crowley’s complicated argument helps us not only because it advances our rhetorical understanding of emotion but also because it brings the analysis to bear precisely on my test case, the application of the believing game to religion. It seems to follow that to enter fully into a religious worldview, one must do much more than perform a skeptical thought experiment in which consequences are deduced from premises. One must employ the full emotional and imaginative resources that Elbow calls into play for the believing game. One must even, perhaps, engage oneself in a powerful web that seeks to impact every aspect of one’s life. As Crowley says, perhaps a skeptic can “change her mind” about “a religious or political issue” without having to abandon her worldview, but fully inhabiting the worldview of the religious believer involves much more than the rational assessment of a single ideological position.

Furthermore, both Crowley and Worsham will not allow us to view the believer in a densely articulated ideologic simply as a person in need of psychiatric

attention. Worsham condemns our contemporary “therapeutic culture,” as she terms it, for “depoliticiz[ing]” all emotional commitments (107). Also, like Crowley, drawing on Chantal Mouffe, Worsham argues that “passion is what moves people to act in politics” (110). This is important to her because she wants to figure out how to harness the rage of those afflicted by social injustice in the service of progressive social and political change. Crowley is certainly sympathetic to this goal and devotes the final chapter of the book from which I have been quoting, entitled *Toward a Civil Discourse*, to devising strategies for intervening in the ideologics of fundamentalist Christians who, she fears, are advancing pernicious political and social agendas. Worsham and Crowley both want to figure out, not how to evacuate emotion from political discourse, but how to use it to forward political goals they support. To solve this problem, they need to understand the emotional lives of the folks they are trying to persuade—a complicated task, as they have shown, and one in which one might imagine that the believing game could be helpful—if and only if it is up to the task.

Worsham and Crowley help us see, however, just how daunting that task is. Is it really possible for the academic skeptic to inhabit a densely articulated web of belief that initially seems diametrically opposed to his most cherished intellectual values? Do religious worldviews stymie the believing game? Before I draw that conclusion, I want to return to the exemplary work of Shannon Carter. Carter is well acquainted with the emerging scholarship on dealing with religion in the composition classroom, and she has also noticed that many of the recommended approaches, however tactful, tend to seek to convert students from their fundamentalist faith to academic skepticism, therefore—naturally!—tending to generate responses “more defensive than reflective” (574).

Carter advocates instead the cultivation of what she calls “rhetorical dexterity,” which has the avowed goal of allowing students to maintain “both their faith-based and their academic literacies without being required to substitute one for the other” (574). Carter’s approach encourages a view of literacy—in line with the work of Brian Street and others—“as a matter of reading and negotiating various contextualized forces that are deeply embedded in identity formation, political affiliations, material and social conditions, and ideological frameworks”—and emotions, she should add (579)! As Carter notes, this approach “flattens hierarchies among literacies” so that one is not valued over another but all are assessed in terms of appropriateness to the given rhetorical situation (579). The outcome for evangelical students may well be that they cannot use their Bible-based knowledge in their academic work because it is inappropriate to the academic context, not because it represents “false consciousness” or downright “ignorance,” as some of her students have been told by other professors (579-80).

What impresses me most about Carter’s analysis, I think, is that she manages not to offer her discursive solution in a patronizing way. She has taken the trouble to discover that religious people themselves are aware of the potential conflicts between the faith-based worldview and the academic one, and they have devoted serious thought to working out a *modus operandi* between these worldviews; she cites helpful sources on this. She also tells about visiting an evangelical worship service, where she was willing to open herself to an experience that made her feel “uncomfortable” and “utterly aware of my lack of belonging” (589). In a recent discussion of the believing game, Elbow says that students can be assisted to practice it by writing a story or poem about or from the perspective of some-

one who believes the worldview they are trying to enter: “where doubting thrives on logic, assenting or believing thrives on the imagination and the ability to experience” (“Bringing” 395). It seems that Carter has demonstrated a willingness to try to imagine and experience the religious life of her evangelical students, and thus comes pretty close to employing the believing game for the sake of understanding and helping them.

I say “pretty close,” but not, I think, more than that. Ultimately, much as I respect Carter’s work, I don’t think it entirely solves for us the dilemma religious faith poses for the believing game, and for academic work generally. Carter’s own religious faith, or lack thereof, is never brought into play in her analysis (she informs us only in an endnote that she is a “fallen-away Catholic” [592] ; and while I’m on the subject, I’ll just mention that Crowley, in her brilliant book analyzing the fundamentalist world view, says nothing at all about her own religious life). It seems to me that full immersion in that dense braid of affect and judgment that Worsham names and Crowley articulates is not risked here; and without full immersion, can the believing game be said to be practiced in good faith?

Looking at the trend of Carter’s argument for how believers should handle their faith while in the academy—basically, to bracket it as inappropriate in most academic situations—I’m reminded of the kinds of arguments that were made about “students’ right to their own language.” We composition scholars were careful, once upon a time, to argue that no one form of English was essentially better than any other; instead, we urged students who did not know the form favored in the academy to learn it so that they could use it with us while reserving their native forms for other fora. You will recall what happened to these arguments about appropriateness: they came to seem inadequate. For one thing, students quickly caught on that a language they were not allowed to use in school was not valued by school, no matter what polite words the teacher said about it. This was not empowering. For another thing, both students and teachers discovered that there was intellectual work to be done that could be done only if a wider range of languages was employed than Standard Edited English. Gradually, we have seen the emergence, at least in published scholarship, of a range of effective Englishes—for example, in the work of Geneva Smitherman, Keith Gilyard, Suresh Canagarajah, and Victor Villanueva. Most likely, such a wide range is not yet accepted in undergraduate work at most schools, but at least it is theoretically acceptable.

To advance this theory, Kristine Hansen has put forward a more philosophically sophisticated set of considerations for dealing with faith-based discourses in the classroom. She argues that students should be permitted to experiment with these discourses within expository writing for four reasons. One, they have a constitutional right to do so (the right to free speech). Two, we now understand the theoretical inadequacy of philosophical liberalism and liberal monism, which guarantees only the right to free speech; instead, says Hansen, “we have to take seriously not just people’s *right* to assert their *beliefs*. We must also take seriously their beliefs” (30; emphasis in original). Three, we should acknowledge that faith-based arguments have served progressive political and social causes throughout American history, for example in the nineteenth-century movement to abolish slavery and the twentieth-century movement to guarantee civil rights to people of color (and I might add, are still doing so, witness religious opposition to the war in Iraq). Fourth and finally, religious discourses are still operating

powerfully on the political and social scene today, witness Reverend Huckabee's quite viable, if ultimately unsuccessful, campaign for the Republican presidential nomination, and so it behooves us to help students learn to deal with them if we claim to prepare them to be effective citizens.

As we are trying to do with diverse forms of academic discourse, will we be able to accommodate the faith-based discourses that mean so much to so many of our students—and if truth be told, to many of us as well? What if there is intellectual work to be done that can only be done by what Carter calls the “Christian mind”—or Jewish, Moslem, or Buddhist mind? Permitting such a development will require academic discourse to come to terms with emotion yet again, big-time, as we are still struggling to do when other emotionally charged topics come up, such as those relating to race and gender. We haven't figured it out yet. But that's not surprising. Believing, after a certain point, is not a game—but Peter Elbow's imaginatively, emotionally engaged believing game may assist us in this task. ☺

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# Lessons with the Mystics: Refreshing Our Vision in Mid/Late Career

Gina Briefs-Elgin

*“You are empty reeds, / but you can become sugarcane again.”*  
(Rumi, Essential Rumi 242)

So here we are, in our forties, fifties, sixties. Only yesterday, we picked up chalk and wrote our name and course number on the board, then turned to face our first students. We were new, scared, exhilarated. When we entered the field, teaching was the most exciting thing in the world to us. And, when we think of it in the abstract, it still is. Teaching, scholarship, service—our evaluation criteria—are words we resonate to, words that make us feel privileged. But now, 20,000-plus student essays later! We may sometimes fear that as more years pass, we may simply burn out like Wendy Bishop’s “rocket ships crashing to desert dunes due to physical and emotional exhaustion” (329).<sup>1</sup> We may have thought we could save the world, or a tiny part of it; now we may sometimes feel as if we’re just trying to save ourselves, to get through the day, to get through until we can retire. We’ve accomplished only some of our heartfelt goals, and we find ourselves, in the workday pressure, frequently failing to live up to the standards we set for ourselves. We may feel that, in some ways, we are failures. We may feel that we should simply accept this dull ache, this perhaps universal humiliation as part of the human condition, and attribute this acceptance to the wisdom of age.

But, if despite such fears, teaching is our mission, and we know we need energy and joy for it (and for ourselves and loved ones), what do we do? It’s not going to be enough just to attend conferences or to catch up on the journals stacked in the bathroom. Something radical—refreshment at the root—is called for. So how can we sail free of mid/late-career doldrums and give ourselves new heart for the voyage?<sup>2</sup>

When I teach developmental English, I sometimes have my freshmen respond to a selection of writings on happiness by career counselors, psychologists, and Eastern and Western mystics. One of my favorites is a story Rabbi David Cooper tells in *God is a Verb*, his extraordinary book about Kabbalah, the mystical branch of Judaism.

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*Gina Briefs-Elgins is a professor at New Mexico Highlands University in Las Vegas, New Mexico. She teaches composition and creative nonfiction and directs the Writing Center. She wants to research mysticism, to write about and hang out around the places where poetry, visual beauty, and spirit intersect. Her joys are her artist husband and son, teaching, traveling, riding the train, cooking, fishing, and reading Dickens. She is fascinated by the early translators of Eastern scriptures—often merchants or military men who fell in love with the ancient texts, taught themselves Sanskrit, etc., and made the first translations. Her dream is to spend a month each year in India, tutoring street teens with a Railway Children program.*

<sup>1</sup>In their article “Preparing Future Teachers to Respond to Stress: Sources and Solutions,” Brown and Nagel review the literature on causes of burnout and on ways it may be alleviated.

<sup>2</sup>Just as an effective approach to physical health includes many different strategies—diet, exercise, rest, and so forth—so an effective approach to teacher burnout should address the physical as well as mental/spiritual domains.

“The Snuffbox” concerns a rich man who neglects to offer a pinch of snuff to a poor, burdened man, a schlepper, fasting and praying in the back of the synagogue. This pinch of snuff would have given the laborer the strength to continue in his prayers, which were just about to open the gates of heaven for him. The rich man’s fate, for withholding this refreshing pinch of snuff, is to change places with the schlepper. He is told that his position will be restored only if a time ever comes when the now-wealthy schlepper, in his turn, refuses *him* a pinch of snuff. And so, in rags, he taps the former schlepper on his shoulder at the most inopportune times he can think of: as the man settles happily into a steaming bath, as he hurries home to his wife, arms piled high with groceries so his wife can finish cooking for the Sabbath, and finally just as he takes his daughter into his arms for a dance at her wedding. And each time the schlepper smiles, sets aside his own agenda, takes out and proffers his box of snuff. The rich man learns his lesson, his riches are restored, and the two men become best friends, famous in the city for their generosity to the poor.

This story of the snuffbox illustrates a fundamental belief of mystical Judaism: that every request from another human being, no matter how unappealing that human being might appear (the homeless panhandler, the annoying student) and how bad his or her timing, should be responded to with respectful kindness, with the gift of one’s self and one’s attention. And that the universe takes notes when we fail to make ourselves open to the importunities of our fellow human beings. Or, better, that the universe rewards us with the riches of happiness and contentment when we do. The discovery of this small story buoyed me in my relations with students precisely at the time, when, rounding fifty, and with increasing pressures at home and school, I found myself often feeling exasperated and invaded by people’s sometimes inopportune needs. Now, when a student accosts me at a bad time, I try to think of the snuffbox story and instead of perceiving the encounter as an *interruption* of what I’m supposed to be doing, grading papers, preparing a class, administering the Writing Center, to perceive it as *central* to what I’m supposed to be doing. This lesson from the Hasidic mystics of eighteenth-century Eastern Europe gave my attitude a needed tweak, so that at least in this one particular area, the area of inopportune interruptions, I feel that I’m acting from a place of newness, not burnout.

I began to wonder what other wisdom applicable to potential mid/late career dol-drums I could find in the writings of the mystics, which I had begun reading avidly—particularly the eastern mystics—for a number of years. It seemed to me that there might be many lessons to be learned from the mystics that could apply directly to my daily life as a teacher. The lessons I am learning address what I see as the two besetting ills of mid/late career. These ills are a sense of failure—no great thing accomplished and time running out—and a sense of the unimportance, even triviality, of our daily tasks and encounters.

All mystical traditions East or West have much to say about the frequency of failure and the puzzling triviality of daily life. Although my own path is based on Christianity and Hinduism, this paper does not explore solutions to the sense of failure and triviality found in the rich treasury of Christian mysticism.<sup>3</sup> This is for an unremarkable reason: ultimately because it was Hinduism, Sufism, Zen, and

<sup>3</sup>Excellent introductions to Christian mysticism appear in Smith, Harvey, and Flinders. A fascinating in-depth study of the subject is Underhill’s *Mysticism*. Christian mystics address both problems my paper explores: for example, Brother Lawrence and Therese of Lisieux model superb responses to the problem of the triviality, and St. Paul and the nineteenth-century Russian peasant who wrote *The Way of a Pilgrim*, to the problem of failure.

Kabbalah that happened to be the traditions unfolding for me and delighting me during the same years that I struggled to deal with a dawning concern that I might be burning out.<sup>4</sup> In fact, during this time I first taught a new course I had developed, Eastern Spiritual Classics as Literature.

My plan is to showcase each ill—a sense of failure and a sense of triviality—in the traditions above that foreground it or that present it in the most unforgettable and transformatory language and images.

### Failure: What Hinduism and Sufism Have to Say

*“The blue sky opens out farther and farther, the daily sense of failure goes away, the damage I have done to myself fades, a million suns come forward with light, when I sit firmly in that world.”*  
(Kabir, qtd. in Fisher 26)<sup>5</sup>

*“He falls into a hole. / But down in that hole he finds something shining, worth more than any amount of money or power.”*  
(Rumi, Essential Rumi 8)

*“Others may be saying, Oh no, but you will be opening out like a rose / losing itself petal by petal. Someone once asked a great sheikh / what sufism was. “The feeling of joy / when sudden disappointment comes.”*  
(Rumi, Essential Rumi 171)

In the course of our teaching lives, most of us have accumulated a certain number of failures, two flavors: the “it didn’t work out” kind and the “I let someone down” kind. The first is the failure we all sometimes encounter despite our deepest dedication: the rejection slips or the lovingly designed new course that doesn’t make. The second is the way we let our students, colleagues, families, friends, and self down with things done poorly or left undone. Of our letting-people-down failures, again two kinds: first, the times we let ourselves or others down with little or no excuse: we accumulated half-written articles in our files year after year, we didn’t volunteer for orientation but let the tenure-track folks do it, we got papers back to our students late because we chose to watch reruns of *Sex in the City*. Second, the inevitable kinds that result from having multiple priorities. As the years go by and administrative duties accumulate, we have less and less time to accomplish more and more, to multi-task more and more ineffectually until it feels as if we’re doing a half-baked job on every front. We’re short-changing family, friends, students, and administrative duties. Several times I’ve caught myself, before I fall asleep at night, literally asking myself, “Whom have

<sup>4</sup>The message of the Christian mystics is basically identical to the message of the eastern mystics in content, but also, surprisingly, in images and language. As the Russian archeologist and philosopher Nicholas Roerich and others discovered, credible evidence suggests that Jesus spent his mysterious “lost years”—the gap in the Gospels from his mid-teens until his thirties—studying and teaching in the East, predominantly in India (qtd. in Prophet 296-300).

<sup>5</sup>India’s fifteenth-century weaver-saint Kabir is claimed by both Hindus and Muslims.

I failed today?” These failures are not our fault, but they’re a constant dull ache: in a society that honors multi-tasking, they make us feel incompetent, not up to the mark.

Mainstream Western education and popular psychology encourage us to have a strong sense of ourselves as successes. We are told that, with the proper will power, self-esteem-building, and, perhaps, coaching, each of us has the potential to become a personal and career success. There is real value to such a can-do, success mentality, and, mostly, I’m a believer. However, success is only one side of the coin—sometimes the side we rarely see—and beliefs about success need to be complemented by wisdom about failure. Surprisingly, but for reasons that will become clear as we continue, failure is a major topic in the literature of mysticism. As Mary Rose O’Reilly puts it, “All great spiritual traditions advise us, one way and another, to screw up” (11). Every wisdom tradition offers insights that can help us not only reconcile ourselves to, but actually embrace, the inevitable failures we experience in our teaching lives.

Two mystical traditions have a great deal to say about failure. The first, mystical Hinduism, dismisses the concepts of failure and success as being completely irrelevant. The second, Sufism, enthusiastically embraces failure as a powerful ally on the path to enlightenment.<sup>6</sup>

## Hinduism and Failure

We’ll begin by looking at what Hinduism recommends as an attitude towards failure. A central text of Hinduism, the *Bhagavad Gita* (between 400 B.C.E. and 400 C.E.) explores *karma yoga*, the path of work. The *Gita* offers many insights related to work, in fact, a whole philosophy of work. And yet the one thing that most of us take for granted as a motivation to work—the desire to succeed at whatever we’re attempting, that is, the desire to avoid failure—appears to be absent. The *Gita* dismisses the whole problem of failure in a startlingly simple way: by regarding attachment to success or anxiety about failure as mere egotism. It sees work not as a way to achieve success and prestige but merely as an inevitable—perhaps even regrettable—feature of the human condition: “Not even for a moment can a man be without action,” says the *Gita*. “Helplessly, all are driven to action by the forces born of Nature” (3:5). Or, we might add, by the forces born of assessment. But work can be a source of joy if we approach it with the right philosophy.

Vedanta teacher Pravrajika Vrajaprana points out that as humans we normally fuel every action—cooking dinner, cleaning the yard, writing an article—with the expectation of some reward such as love, admiration, a promotion, or financial success (25-26). But the *Gita* cautions us to work without attaching ourselves to outcomes: “How poor those who work for a reward!” (2:49). Instead, if we’re wise, our undertakings are “free from anxious desire and fanciful thought” (4:19), the grasping desire to succeed and egotistical daydreams about success.

The *Bhagavad Gita* cautions us also against worrying about failure. Freedom from such worry will take the wise person beyond the duality of good and bad: “In this wisdom a man goes beyond what is well done and what is not well

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<sup>6</sup>*Sanatana Dharma* (eternal religion) is the preferred term today, but I will use *Hinduism* for its familiarity.

done” (2:50); “in success or in failure he is one: his works bind him not” (4:22). I was dubious when I first read this. Isn’t it a good thing to worry about doing a good job? And, when we fail, isn’t feeling guilt or shame a sign of character? But the *Gita* dismisses worrying about success or failure as an example of “selfish desires”: “Do thy work in the peace of Yoga, and, free from selfish desires, be not moved in success or in failure” (2:48). The *Gita* seems to be saying that it’s not virtue at all, but selfishness being thwarted and ego being humiliated that give failure its sting.

Instead of holding on to the outcomes of their work, clinging to their successes and suffering from their failures, people who are wise, says the *Bhagavad Gita*, offer the fruits of their work to the universe. And they trust the value of this offering, even if they’re such a failure in terms of the world’s values that they have nothing to offer but a leaf: “He who offers to me with devotion only a leaf, or a flower, or a fruit, or even a little water, this I accept from that yearning soul, because with a pure heart it was offered with love” (9:26). Offering up our outcomes seems to me a key component in Hinduism’s philosophy of work. A philosophy of no rewards, no worry, no guilt could leave us human beings with little motivation to perfect our work. What will keep us honest when we abandon the reward-and-guilt work ethic is approaching our work as a gift of love to the universe. And when we have offered our work in this way, we know that even if we have bad outcomes, we ourselves are not failures. Every religion has a tradition of offering up the (work)day. I find my morning commute a perfect opportunity for this practice. Rather than starting the day with the bad news from Iraq, I leave the radio off, try to center myself in the beauty of the landscape, and say a morning prayer, which begins by offering up the day.

I find these teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita* about failure a great relief. When I get to the end of my school day, now, if I haven’t finished all the work on my desk, I no longer beat myself up. I used to count the day’s worth according to whether or not I got all my work done; now I count the day’s worth as to whether or not I have made time for spirit. I now know that it’s an empty victory if all I’ve gotten when I’ve gotten through the chores of the day is gotten through the chores of the day. The train I’m on has moved off the success/failure track and onto a quite different track, on which it’s not so much the destination that counts as the companionship of spirit, mile by mile. I am constantly cheered, too, by the words of the *Bhagavad Gita*: “If you meditate, the Lord supplies your deficiencies and makes permanent your gains” (9:22). For me, these words take the worry out of failure.

Another feature of Hinduism that applies directly to our topic of mid/late career sense of failure appears in the ancient practice of the ashramas, the four stages of the human life. Hinduism explicitly incorporates “failure” into the third and fourth stages.

Ideally, a man’s life (the ashramas were only for upper-caste men) was divided into four stages or ashramas: student stage, householder stage, forest hermit stage, and wandering ascetic stage.<sup>7</sup> One spent the first 25 years of one’s life as a student acquiring knowledge and the second 25 as a “householder,” securing one’s successful place in the world. So far, just like the mainstream Western model. But then a psychologically brilliant shift in values. In mainstream Western culture, the successful career person may dread growing older as a time of decreasing power and prestige. The

<sup>7</sup>Sexism and remnants of the caste system are two major flaws in Hinduism.

retiring CEO may fear becoming a nobody, an object of pity. But in the traditional Hindu model, loss of power and social prominence were built right into the plan: in the third stage of life, traditionally set at the graying of one's hair or the birth of one's first grandchild, one abandoned one's job and comfortable house and went off to live in a hut as a forest hermit (often with one's wife), beginning to detach from worldly success. Then, in the fourth stage of life, in one's old age, one gave up everything and lived as a wandering ascetic, with no possessions but God and a begging bowl. The last two stages—forest dweller and wandering ascetic—entail the powerlessness, possessionlessness, humbling, that to the mainstream Western mind are marks of failure. It's true that even in ancient times, the ashramas were an ideal, not universally practiced, and that today, as Mary Pat Fisher points out, "the majority of contemporary Hindu males do not follow this path to its sannyasin conclusion in old age"<sup>8</sup> however, this ancient practice invites us, in mid/late career, to reframe our awareness of failure.<sup>9</sup> It may be that part of our job as we grow older is to bless the inevitable ways in which failure enters our lives and to find in its humbling a doorway to a deeper, freer mode of being.

Suggestions that failure may be a crucial stage in our journey as humans are the examples we often see of people in mid/late career who abruptly jettison their success mode. Sometimes the universe does it for them: Christopher Reeves thrown by his horse, Michael J. Fox by his Parkinson's. We can read the accumulating physical and intellectual failures of our later lives as signs that we are falling apart, or we can read them as signs of the ego-self's departure, making room for our real Self to manifest. It may be that in order for us to grow as we are meant, we need to begin to see ourselves as full of failings—in some cases, as actual ruins—as the years go by.

The ideal of the *ashramas* has affected my life as a teacher in mid/late career. Many of us as we age are increasingly drawn to matters of the spirit, but our mainstream culture may make us feel as if we're losing our focus if we shift our gaze away from achievement and success. The *ashrama* model does the opposite: watch in hand, it says, "Okay, time to shift your mission." With this encouragement, I've found myself exploring spirituality without stealth. I've found myself actively looking about for spiritual role models. A dear friend spends the first hour of every morning in spiritual reading and contemplation. A swimmer prays for a different student or friend during each lap. Another says the rosary during her morning job. Another is exploring mystical Judaism. A cousin goes on ten-day Jesuit retreats. A chance acquaintance shares her plan of moving to an ashram. These women inspire me to contemplate my own "forest dwelling." Meanwhile, I feel my yoga/meditation practice becoming more central to my life, like a boat that I'm now sailing around the lake but one I can envision taking out to sea in the near future.

During a person's working years, then, Hinduism considers failure a non-issue. During retirement, Hinduism considers what in the mainstream West would

<sup>8</sup>Fisher notes, however, that today "many Hindus still become *sannyasins*" (98).

<sup>9</sup>I find that I'm not alone in suggesting that we look to the *ashrama* model as we address issues of aging. Leder, for example, turns to the ashramas when he suggests that the West adopt a more spiritual model of aging. Rose explores the four stages as they apply to her own life as a university professor; she writes eloquently about her current life in the "forest dweller stage" and her understanding of the challenges and blessings awaiting her in the "beggar" stage.

be called a lifestyle of failure as the greatest ideal. Sufism, the second mystical tradition we will explore for its take on failure, goes even further: in its teaching stories and poetry, it actively celebrates failure. Failure is the ally of the Sufi because it is the natural enemy of ego. In order to understand why Sufis value failure, we must first understand the obstructive role of ego on the mystical path; to do so, we'll linger a moment longer with Hinduism.

Mainstream Western culture celebrates the ego and the success of its projects in every possible way. Mysticism, Eastern or Western, does the opposite. Central to all the wisdom traditions is the teaching that it is the ego that prevents illumination. We are absolutely *not* on earth, they say, in order to build the ego up, to push the ego to achieve its greatest possible potential. On the contrary, the wisdom traditions teach that the whole reason we're on earth is to break free of our egos. As mystics of all traditions point out, our egos are not our real Selves. Our egos are made up of our ephemeral cravings, preferences, likes and dislikes, quirks, bad habits, self-centerednesses, and, to get to our point, smugnesses and insecurities due to our successes and failures. The ego's mantra is "It's all about me."

As teachers in mid/late career, we can visualize our ego-self as a sort of grotesque pinata, a papier-mache effigy of our self. Our true Self is stifled, not only by our everyday cravings, likes and dislikes, habits, etc., but also because it's stuck all over with the psychological paperwork of the academic success/failure model: degrees, vitas, articles finished and unfinished, evaluations, awards, accumulated emails, rejection slips, publications, memos, journals read and unread, letters written and unwritten, complaints and compliments. We're so papered over we can't see clearly out of our eyes or hear clearly through our ears. The voice of our heart is muffled.

Now, imagine the opposite: egolessness. As an image of egolessness, Hindu mystics offer "pure water raining on pure water" (*Upanishads*, "Katha," part 4). Sufi mystics—to whom we'll turn in a minute—like the image of sugar melted into water, or, more colorfully, the image of a snake molting. Sufi mystic Bayazid says happily that he came out of his Bayazid-ness the way a snake comes out of its tight old skin (Fadiman and Frager 250). Rumi wants to be as lost as "gnats inside the wind," or—marvelously graphic image—a donkey so dead that it's melting back into the salt flat (*Essential Rumi* 124).

In shrinking the ego down to zero, we are not giving up our efficacy or our self-worth. We are simply moving the locus of our power and self-worth from the self with a small s—the self-willed ego with its baggage of preoccupations and desires—to the Self with a big S, our indwelling portion of the divine, our true personality, radiant and unique. (This true Self is that indefinable thing we can't put our finger on but that makes, for example, a beloved friend so uniquely wonderful.) Gandhi explains how the confluence of this Self with the divine makes the individual so effective: "There comes a time when an individual becomes irresistible and his action becomes all-pervasive in its effect. This comes when he reduces himself to zero" (qtd. in Easwaran, *Life* 44). Many mystics have demonstrated in their own lives the truth of Gandhi's paradox. Extraordinary successes are possible with minimum resources for those who break out of the egoselves and align their projects with the divine will. We see examples in St. Francis of Assisi, Mother Teresa, and the contemporary Hindu mystic Amma. So it makes sense that failure, by breaking down the constrictive seawall of the ego and open-

ing us to the ocean of divine power, can ultimately make us not less but more effective human beings.

## Sufism and Failure

The mystical tradition that explores most strikingly the benefits that are to be found in failure is Sufism, a path, as Andrew Harvey tells us, “of the sacred heart, a path of direct experience through abandon to God” (138). Rumi, the best-selling poet in the United States (Barks and Bly), is the quintessential mystic poet, so it is to him we will chiefly turn for examples of Sufism’s embrace of failure. As Coleman Barks tells us, Jelaluddin Rumi was born in 1207 in Persia, the son of a famous teacher and theologian. On his father’s death, Rumi succeeded him as head of a dervish learning community in Konya, the Western end of the Silk Road and thus a melting pot of Islamic, Judeo-Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist cultures. When Rumi was thirty-seven, he was shaken out of his daily life as a brilliant scholar and theology teacher by a meeting with a stranger, Shams I Tabriz. Shams was a dervish, probably in his sixties, who had wandered all through the Middle East seeking a spiritual soul mate. He was guided to Rumi, and the two spent three years almost constantly together in *sohbet*, spiritual conversation (“Introduction,” *Branching*) until the night of December 5, 1248, which Barks describes: “As Rumi and Shams were talking, Shams was called to the back door. He went out, never to be seen again, probably murdered with the connivance of Rumi’s son Alladin” (“Introduction,” *Essential Rumi*). After Shams’s disappearance/murder, Rumi felt that Shams was writing the mysterious and striking poetry that began flowing from him and which was eventually collected into the 42,000 verses of the “works of Shams of Tabriz,” the *Divani Shamsi Tabriz*. He also composed six volumes of spiritual couplets, the *Mathnawi* or “branching moments” (“Introduction,” *Branching*).

Vanquishing the self is so central to this mystical tradition that Sufism is defined as the discouragement, even death, of the ego. The eleventh-century Sufi Hujwiri notes, “The follower of Sufism is he who seeks to reach the rank of being dead to self. . . . He who has reached this end is called a Sufi” (Shah 49). “If you could get rid / Of yourself just once, / The secret of secrets / Would open to you,” promises Rumi (Fadiman and Frager 244), and he relates how when “someone once asked a great sheikh / what sufism was,” the sheikh responded, “‘The feeling of joy / when sudden disappointment comes’” (*Essential Rumi* 171). The mystic Abu Sa’id recounts how when he returned from extended travels and expressed regret to his sheikh that he’d missed so many of his lectures, his sheikh told him that even if he were to miss ten years’ worth of lectures, he’d have no need to worry because the teaching is always one thing, and “that one thing can be written on a fingernail: ‘Sacrifice your ego; nothing more’” (Fadiman and Frager 158).

James Fadiman and Robert Frager describe the complete overhauling of the self that the Sufi seeks: “Most of us believe that we are basically all right as we are. We just need a little more money, a little more love, a little more free time—then we will be just fine. The Sufis believe that this is far from the truth. We all need fundamental change; we need to hatch into a whole new level of being” (243). Sufi teachers see the shedding of the ego as a process with seven levels. Examples of the advanced levels are “the Contented Self” (“the self can now

begin to ‘disintegrate’ and let go of all previous concern with self-boundaries and then begin to ‘reintegrate’ as an aspect of the universal self”) and the appealingly named “Pleased Self” at which stage the individual has abandoned almost all ego and welcomes even painful trials that the universe permits (Fadiman and Frager 22).

To illuminate these levels of transformation, Fadiman and Frager use the image of the caterpillar becoming a butterfly. Their description may resonate with many of us in mid/late career.

At a certain point the caterpillar feels impelled to wrap itself in a cocoon. Immobile, it begins to dissolve. There is no sense of a marvelous new life that is coming; there is only the dissolving of the old, and the deep fears that accompany this. The caterpillar literally turns into a kind of goo. (244)

Mid/late career can be a time when everything seems turning to goo, not only in our teaching careers where we may feel increasingly overextended and inefficient, but also in our personal lives. We can’t help but feel that structures are failing as our parents die, our children leave home, some marriages dissolve, and our bodies age. The cumulative effect of these career and personal “failures” may be that we experience downhearted exhaustion, move into survival mode, and believe our teaching mission irrevocably lost.

And so we don’t need a sheikh to lead us through the seven levels. Everyday life helps us dismantle our egos. Rumi says, “This being human is a guest house, / Every morning a new arrival. // A joy, a depression, a meanness, / some momentary awareness comes / as an unexpected visitor. // Welcome and entertain them all! / Even if they’re a crowd of sorrows, / who violently sweep your house / empty of its furniture” (*Essential Rumi* 109). These guests tend to cross our threshold more and more frequently as we grow older.

Mainstream thinking expends itself keeping these guests out with security systems, insurance policies, antidepressants. But not Sufi wisdom: “Even if they’re a crowd of sorrows, / who violently sweep your house / empty of its furniture / treat each guest honorably,” says Rumi. “He may be clearing you out / for some new delight” (*Essential Rumi* 109). Rumi’s images seem uncannily pertinent to us as teachers—but, of course, he too was a teacher transformed in the middle of his career: “The Absolute works with nothing. / The workshop, the materials are what does not exist. // Try and be a sheet of paper with nothing on it. / Be a spot of ground where nothing is growing” (15). He offers us a whole new attitude towards failure. Only from this emptiness, he says, can something new emerge, “where nothing is growing, / where something might be planted, / a seed, possibly, from the Absolute” (15).

Repeatedly in Sufi writings we encounter this paradox of failure being the site from which the greatest possible good fortune can emerge. This concept culminates in the Sufi image of the *tavern of ruin*. In his *Paradise of the Sufis*, Javad Nurbakhsh, a master of the Nimatullahi Order of Sufis, explains this mysterious image: “At the end of the Path, the disciple is emptied of the attributes of the self and adorned by the Divine Attributes. . . . As Hafez has expressed it, ‘Purify thyself, and then proceed / to the “Tavern of Ruin”’. . . The ‘Tavern of Ruin’ represents the ‘passing away of the self in God’” (15). Having through suffering and failure grown out of the small self and into the greater Self, the

Sufi has arrived at the Tavern of Ruin, which is, at the same time, the tavern of happiness: “Vanish,” says Rumi, “and He’ll make you shine like the sun” (qtd. in Schiller 345).

### Triviality: What Zen and Kabbalah Have to Say

*“The great gate is wide open to bestow alms  
And no crowd is blocking the way.”  
(Cheng-tao Ke, qtd. in Watts 145)*

*“The guard of one of the gates is the notion you have that trivial matters  
are trivial. That little things are unimportant.”  
(Kushner 130)*

Less dramatic than the awareness of the ways we may have failed, but, I think, more debilitating—because so pervasive—may be our sense of the apparent triviality of much of our workday, its routine tasks and interactions. For example, in mid/late career, we may begin to lose our tolerance for the administrative tasks we’ve performed year after year and which may now be proliferating. *Such tasks may begin to seem to us not only dry but actively pernicious, as if they’re subtracting from us soul hours that can never be restored.* So, even, may administrative encounters with colleagues and students: we may feel as if they’re taking us away from our “real” work: teaching, mentoring, tutoring.

And yet all wisdom literature assures us that seemingly trivial actions and encounters have a tremendous hidden importance. I’ve chosen Zen and Kabbalah in which to trace this idea because it is foregrounded in them. Zen shows us that we may find “the garden of Eden” (D. T. Suzuki 45) by total absorption in even the most routine tasks, and Kabbalah, that each such task, each encounter, approached with the proper intention, is a unique opportunity to “raise the sparks,” to participate in *Tikkun olam*, the repair of the universe.

### Zen and Triviality

To continue finding meaning in our work lives, we need permission to engage with, even to enjoy, our small, routine chores as we may have done in the thrill of our first years of teaching. Zen gives us that permission. In fact, it is the mystical tradition that most powerfully validates the everyday routine.

If anybody ever needed their routine validated, I did. For too many years, I’ve happily hurled myself through the routine parts of my day, multi-tasking in my hurry to get to the “meaningful” work. Instead of treating objects with dignity, I’ve assaulted them. I’ve jerked, flung, yanked, slammed my way through my trivial tasks. At home, my headlong rush has left dings in our tub, countertop, and stove. At school, I’ve knocked bits of plaster off the projecting hall corner with my rolling briefcase. My mantra was “Let’s get it over with so we can get to the real stuff.”

Exploring Zen mysticism for my new Eastern Spiritual Classics as Literature course helped open my eyes: this was the real stuff.

Originating in sixth-century China from an amalgam of Indian Buddhism and Taoism, Zen migrated to Japan in the twelfth century and was brought to the

United States in the first decade of the twentieth by D. T. Suzuki. Among Buddhists, Zen Buddhists are the meditators; the word Zen goes back to the Sanskrit word *dhyana*, meditation (Tanahashi and Schneider xii-xiii). At the heart of Zen practice is sitting zazen—quieting the mind, dropping from it all concepts, expectations, memories, opinions, categories, plans. Zen meditators seek to encounter what each new task brings without the expectations and labels that separate them from the riches of the living moment.

Zen's path is the path of the ordinary, the undramatic; we could say, the trivial. The famous definition of the Zen path is *wu-shih*: “nothing special” (Watts 126). “Zen is not some kind of excitement,” writes Zen master Shunryu Suzuki, “but concentration on our usual everyday routine” (57).

Zen practitioners seek a purity of focus, an ability to see what is before them without the intermediary of abstractions such as labels, opinions, fantasies, expectations, likes, and dislikes. “Zen,” writes Alan Watts, “is seeing reality directly. . . . It is simply a quiet awareness, without comment, of whatever happens to be here and now” (155). “Our teaching is just to live, always in reality, in its exact sense,” says Shunryu Suzuki (89). But paying attention to reality isn't easy, as Zen master Charlotte Joko Beck explains: “The reason we don't want to pay attention is because it's not always pleasant. It doesn't suit us” (10). Instead of paying attention to what is unpleasant—for example, boring or trivial—we spin off into a mental web of fantasies. “This goes on constantly: spinning, spinning, spinning, always trying to create life in a way that will be pleasant” says Beck. “But when we do that we never see this right-here-now, this very moment. . . . So the crux of zazen [sitting meditation] is this: all we must do is constantly to create a little shift from the spinning world we've got in our heads to the right-here-now.” (11). When we master this practice, life can be, says Beck, “luminous and ordinary at the same time” (189).

Value judgments are irrelevant. From the Zen perspective, there is no such thing as a “trivial” task. There is simply the flow of life to live in and the next indicated thing to do, with complete attention and with no fanfare: “To make our effort, moment after moment, is our way” (Shunryu Suzuki 89). Beck notes that this same commitment to the next task was what impressed her in watching a documentary about Mother Teresa: “What I found most remarkable was that she was just doing the next thing and the next thing and then next thing, totally absorbing herself in each task—which is what we need to learn. Her life is her work, doing each task wholeheartedly, moment after moment, [experiencing] the joy of doing what needs to be done with no thought of *I want*” (201).

When we let whatever task the moment brings us—chopping wood, carrying water, grading papers, writing reports—fill the scope of our consciousness and absorb our full attention, the payoff of this single-pointed, nonjudgmental concentration on our everyday routine can be enormous. “As we practice life steadily becomes more fulfilling, more satisfactory, better for us, better for other people,” says Beck (14). “More and more I can be who I truly am: a no-self [no-ego], an open and spacious response to life” (19).

Zen changed my mantra. My new mantra is “Don't let's get it over with: this is the real stuff.” Yes, it's scary to think of giving a routine, trivial action room to breathe, to expand without a time-boundary. What if my teeth-brushing, my spreadsheet-data-entering goes on forever? On the other hand, if I learn to give each small action a chance to breathe and be itself, my whole day will have more personality, be more alive.

I'm making progress. One morning recently, I had regressed into multi-tasking. Half-dressed, with the bed half-made, my commuter bag half-packed, I was flinging things about and thinking how much of daily life is simply getting ready—that apparently meaningless series of trivial actions: teeth, shower, hair, make-up, bags. Suddenly I realized I was breaking my resolution to be one-pointed, to do each small action of my routine with quiet mindfulness. I screeched to a stop, like Roadrunner digging in his heels. At that second, these words came to my mind: “This might be the most important part of your day.” And this thought struck me as deeply true—for the first time, I understood what Zen was trying to say, not just in my head, but in my heart. The words “This might be the most important part of my day” have changed the whole way I perceive my morning routine.

I can think of at least five overlapping approaches to mindfulness, to being present when we have “trivial” actions or tasks to perform. First, we can keep our five senses alert to enjoy the task. Second, we can repeat a mantram while performing the task (the anonymous author of *The Way of a Pilgrim* notes that because mind and heart [and body] are not the same, human beings can attentively perform at least three distinct actions at once (23). The mantram enriches the performance of the task rather than distracting from it). Third, we can turn the task into a symbolic mini-ceremony. Fourth, we can “practice the presence,” the companionship of spirit while we perform the task. Finally, we can offer the task up.

From these approaches have come some daily practices that help me appreciate, value, and stay focused in routine actions and tasks. Most are consistent with Zen practice, some are less purely experiential, and some are just plain silly:

- Setting my home clocks a luxurious twenty minutes fast
- Using ceremony to slow me down to mindfulness. “Be mindful 24 hours a day,” says Thich Nhat Hanh (24)
- Enjoying the cool water in the tub, the cool rain from the shower. No divided mind, just pure pleasure (I imagine bathing in the sacred Ganges—something which, having recently looked at the Ganges, I would not actually do)
- Laying out my clothes on the bed and admiring them before putting them on
- Keeping the radio off on the commute to work, making time for a morning offering and contemplation
- Keeping my five senses alert for small pleasures: the heft and glide of good chalk, the smell of dispenser soap, the gentle clicking of dozens of hands at their keyboards, the taste of adventure when black coffee comes in a Styrofoam cup
- De-trivializing routine action—filling the coffee pot, erasing the board—by seeing their symbolic potential
- After my students leave, lingering in the classroom to enjoy the silence, the hum of a quiet room
- Practicing gratitude for routine actions, the drink at the water cooler, the quick lunch at my desk

- Choosing computer passwords that remind me of lessons from the mystics; collecting quotations from the mystics inside the covers of my pocket calendar; keeping images of spiritual teachers on my office desk, computer, daily calendar
- Noticing sunlight speckled on walks or walls: using it as a reminder that radiance is present behind the everyday routine, a reminder to recognize all the little places it breaks through
- Realizing how beautiful most sounds are: distant plane, tires going by, wind in the elms, truck's back-up beep, whirl of the fan, someone's footsteps
- Abandoning the rushed, half-articulated, trailing-off handwriting with which I used to jot memos to myself
- Making signing my name a moment of centering, of commitment to being who I really want to be. Seeing my name as me and shaping it mindfully as I write it
- Walking mindfully as if planting a lotus at every step (O'Reilly 35).

Reading about Zen mysticism has helped me put a different face on chores I used to judge trivial and psychically empty—chores that I used to feel were actually *injurious* to me, as if they were using up some of my allotted soul-energy. It's not that I no longer dread certain routine chores—transcriptions of classroom observations, for example, or the Writing Center Annual Report that eats up a quarter of every summer. It's that instead of seeing them in jailhouse gray, I can now see that I can see them in color. I'm not there yet, but Zen shows me an astonishing possibility: that I can judge tasks valuable for other criteria than direct service to students or intellectual or creative draw. Zen offers us a whole different measuring stick. According to Zen, the most precious work in the world is the work that we need to do right now, whatever it is. What's immediately before our noses to complete, the next indicated thing, is where we can find paradise. This is an extraordinary and beautiful claim that rings true to me, that seems sometimes out of my grasp but always worth reaching for: that routine duties can be luminous places, can be the abode of the Buddha.

### Kabbalah and Triviality

Some years ago a news item appeared about a Gulf Coast man who threw a big party for his buddies while his wife was away. When she was due home, the party was going strong. To delay her arrival, this enterprising man dragged two sandbags out of the nearby levee and laid them across his road. A trivial act. But the Mississippi River pushed through the tiny gap and burst the levee; as a result, hundreds of homes were swept away, and explosions burned thousands of acres of homes and wilderness. This story could be a tale told by the Hasidim, eighteenth-century followers of Kabbalah, the mystical branch of Judaism which emerged in Judaism in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Provence and Spain. One of the most important beliefs of Kabbalah is that every action, no matter how tiny, creates good or evil repercussions (“angels” or “demons”), and that the tiniest act may have enormous repercussions (Cooper 134).

There are two schools of Kabbalah, the first based on lifelong studies of the mysteries with a teacher, and the second based on a teacherless path of meditation and kavvannah, mindful action (Cooper 11). Those of us not in the position to undertake a lifelong assault on the Kabbalah's mysteries can learn lessons with Kabbalists of the second kind: "Kabbalah," writes Rabbi David Cooper, "is a way of life and a way of looking at things. One becomes a Kabbalist by bringing a new level of awareness to every act, every word that flows out of one's mouth, and every thought that arises in the mind" (5).

In mid/late career, routine duties began to seem trivial to me, nitpicking and insignificant to what I saw as meaningful work with students and their writing. But—worryingly—there were also beginning to be times when my encounters with students seemed trivial, in a been-there-done-that sort of way. And this is when the snuffbox/Kabbalah came to my rescue.

In Kabbalah, we find the same solution to the problem of triviality that Zen proposes, that is, a wholehearted engagement with every task or encounter that arises, no matter how trivial it appears in our eyes. There is, however, an interesting difference in the ways these two mystical traditions perceive routine action. In the Zen ideal, triviality is a non-issue. The present moment is the only game in town. What is before you to do, you do, directly, and with a childlike purity, your mind unclouded by value judgments ("trivial" or "important") and other abstractions.

In Kabbalah, on the other hand, the seeming "triviality" of small actions is a big issue, enormously relevant and important to ponder. In fact, Kabbalah attaches a value label—"Important! Important!"—to every single action or encounter. I find the source of this attitude in three interrelated and marvelously curious teachings of Kabbalah: the teaching of the levels of reality, the teaching of the holy sparks, and the teaching of the *lamed-vav tzaddikim*. Each of these teachings can provide an inspirational model for our approach to seemingly trivial tasks and encounters. The first of the three teachings concerns interconnected levels of reality. According to the central text of Kabbalah, the thirteenth-century *Zohar* or *Book of Light* compiled by the Spaniard Moses de Leon, "The Holy One has disposed of all things in such a way that everything in this world should be a replica of something in the world above" (Cooper 36). The universe is not a done deal, like a clock set ticking. Instead, it's "an ongoing creative emanation" (64). In the view of Kabbalah, human beings through free will are co-creators of the universe, minute by minute. The universe is constantly balanced upon a symbiotic relationship of Creator and creation, which "defines and nurtures each moment" (64). "Things are more than we think they are," writes Cooper (6). Our physical world mirrors and affects the spiritual realms. Thus, "when a thing below bestirs itself, the result is a simultaneous stimulation of its likeness above. The two realms form one interconnected whole" (36). Even the smallest action or encounter could have cosmic consequences, just as in chaos theory a butterfly's wing beat can cause a distant typhoon (132).

Kabbalah takes a further extraordinary step. Cooper quotes the *Zohar*: "It is said: 'Sometimes it happens that the world is exactly balanced between people whose good deeds bring life and those whose evil deeds bring death. Then, one righteous person can turn the scale and the world is saved'" (198). Thus, the *Zohar* advises, "A person should always imagine that the fate of the whole world depends upon his or her actions" (198). "Everything," says Cooper, "can turn on a word" (118).

This principle that even the most trivial-seeming action has potentially far-reaching repercussions is embodied in a second teaching of the Kabbalah: the mysterious and compelling cosmology of the holy sparks. Sixteenth-century Kabbalist Isaac Luria, who was born in Jerusalem and lived for ten years in retreat on a river island in Egypt, proposed a cosmology in which God, like an artisan pouring liquid gold, poured the golden light of divinity into molds to create a nexus of ultimate awareness (Matt 15). But the divine light proved too powerful, shattering the molds. Cooper describes what happens next:

The gold spreads . . . the flecks themselves split apart until untold numbers of gold atoms are scattered across creation, each one surrounded by a shell of dust that hides it. The gold drifts everywhere. . . . The gold represents the light of divine consciousness, and each atom a spark of holiness. If gathered together into one place—not a physical place, but symbolically the center of the universe—all the sparks combined would radiate ultimate awareness. (28)

According to Kabbalah, everything in existence contains within its shell a spark of the divine. Our job as human beings is to restore the body of the divine by freeing or “raising” these sparks. We raise these sparks by performing acts of “lovingkindness” (as opposed to merely “kind” deeds which can be done without love), by living harmoniously with the universe and by developing our spiritual consciousness (29). Cooper suggests the “enormous” “ramifications” of this teaching:

In each moment of existence we have the potential to raise holy sparks. . . . Our opportunities to raise sparks are boundless. The choices we make for our activities, the interactions we have with our family, friends, neighbors, business associates, and even strangers . . . the books we read, the television we watch, the way we relate to food, everything in daily life presents sparks locked in husks awaiting release. (29)

This raising of the sparks is related in a wonderful way to the teaching of the levels of reality. As Cooper tells us, since our personal world and the world of the divine are intricately interconnected, it’s impossible for our actions to benefit only one and not the other. Thus each spark we raise to contribute to the mending of the world (*tikkun ha-olam*) also contributes to the mending of our own souls (*tikkun ha-nefesh*) (179).

For us as academics in mid/late career, dispirited by the seeming triviality of many of our routine tasks and encounters, this teaching of the sparks can provide a powerful restorative. What if we resolved to encounter each triviality—each action item in our department mailbox, each routine faculty meeting, each errand to the bookstore or business office—as an opportunity to raise a spark, to participate in rebuilding our soul and rebuilding the body of God? And when a project is stressful—the memo to the dean we don’t want to write, the awkward phone call we want to postpone—what if we offered up our dread and imagined this offering raising a particularly vigorous spark? Kabbalah has helped me approach routine tasks with more cheer, no longer fearing them as psychically debilitating. I remind myself that far from siphoning off soul energy, these routine tasks are *generating* it—raising sparks.

Some tasks that are clearly *not* trivial, commenting on papers, for example, may *appear* to us trivial after many years. We know how many papers we've already graded since we began our careers, and we know how many thousands more we face before we can retire. No human could look at this prospect with relish, but what if we could at least *value* the very enormity of the number of those papers remaining for us to grade—5,000, 15,000, 20,000—because each paper represented a spark to be raised? In other words—in the Jewish-Zen poet Miriam Sagan's words—what if we perceived every trivial action and encounter as “part of the endless / Preservation of the world”? (qtd. in Tanahashi and Schneider 40).

A third important teaching of Kabbalah is the mysterious teaching of the *lamed-vav tzaddikim* or thirty-six hidden saints. According to Kabbalah, the world contains, at all times, thirty-six hidden saints who work to keep the universe in balance (Cooper 123). These hidden saints are catalysts whose quiet actions shift destinies and prevent disasters so that the world's suffering does not become unbearable. “Sometimes we think we are having a casual conversation with a stranger,” writes Cooper, “but in fact this other person is helping us avoid a serious tragedy” (125). Sometimes we ourselves are unwittingly acting as *lamed-vav tzaddikim* (125). Another teacher of Kabbalah, Lawrence Kushner, tells us, “People chosen to be messengers of the Most High rarely even know that they are His messengers” (68).

The Hasidic revival movement in eighteenth-century Europe was the source of wonderful tales of mystics and mystical encounters, which Martin Buber collected in *Tales of the Hasidim*. Over and over in these tales the figure of the pest, the beggar, the social outcast appears—a figure of unimportance, someone despised, even—who turns out to be a *lamed-vav tzaddik*. Cooper notes that “the person giving us the hardest time actually may be saving our lives” (242). It's easy to see how this teaching of the thirty-six hidden saints could be useful in our daily lives. The interrupting student who's always in a minor crisis, the janitor who bends our ear when we're trying to work late in the office, the dean who stops us in the hall as we're finally hurrying out the door to the car and asks, “Do you have a minute?”—what if we could see these people as possible *lamed-vav tzaddikim* sent to us as an opportunity for an act of “lovingkindness” that will help us raise the sparks? Or perhaps even as a distraction that will preserve us from some misfortune? Kabbalah can help us respond from a new place to inopportune requests by colleagues or students—seeing them no longer as meaningless interruptions of our real work but as moments of opportunity that may prove to be unexpectedly valuable in the great scheme of things.

I've recently realized that as teachers we are sometimes so busy working for our students that we forget to make time for them. We may not even notice we're giving the student in the hall a brush off; we think what we're doing is being very busy taking care of their needs. Recently, I've had a series of encounters with students in which I have been shown (slow learner) the same lesson again and again. An apparently cheerful student asks me whether I have a minute, and I say, “I've got to get ready for class. Can we talk later?” But then I remember that I'm supposed to be giving each student a fully attentive ear, so I sit them down. In every case, it's emerged that the student was actually not serene at all, but in the throes of serious decision-making or despondency, and I've listened appalled to think that I wanted to give them the brush-off.

So my goal is to learn to be the kind of listener Brenda Ueland describes in “Tell Me More: The Fine Art of Listening.” Each of us, she says, has a “little creative fountain” in us, “the spirit, or the intelligence, or the imagination” (39). When people “have not been listened to in the right way—with affection and a kind of jolly excitement . . . their creative fountain has been blocked. Only superficial talk comes out—what is prissy or gushing or merely nervous. No one has called out of them, by wonderful listening, what is true and alive” (40). Ueland writes: “When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand. Ideas actually begin to grow within us and come to life. . . . It makes people happy and free when they are listened to” (39). Her description of how to listen sounds Zen-like: “With quiet fascinated attention” (40); not critically, not self-assertively (44), but like this: “suddenly you begin to hear not only what people are saying, but what they are trying to say, and you sense the whole truth about them. And you sense existence, not piecemeal, not this object and that, but as a translucent whole” (44).

With its teachings of the interconnected levels of reality, the raising of the sparks, and the thirty-six hidden saints, Kabbalah can disabuse us of the notion that our everyday tasks and encounters are routine and unimportant. According to Kabbalah, nothing is trivial, no task, no encounter. Cooper writes, “More than we realize, our lives hinge on little things: one telephone call, a letter, a thoughtful gesture, even a nod or smile at just the right moment” (xiii). This makes sense to us, experientially. We remember small kind acts that changed the course of our own lives. We know already that a trivial, kind interaction with a student—a warm smile in the hall, a few words of encouragement at the end of a paper—may prevent that student from despondency, who knows, binge drinking, dropping out, from, perhaps even, despair. (An engaging contemporary exploration of this theme is Phil Hay and Matt Manfredi’s movie *Bug*, whose entire plot is the concatenation of effects that result when a large black beetle gets stepped on. “Every step counts” is the movie’s moral. Our tiniest actions can have enormous consequences.) Kushner writes this: “The guard of one of the gates [to the higher worlds] is the notion you have that trivial matters are trivial. That little things are unimportant” (130). Wrong! says Kabbalah: “This is the way you will go to higher worlds. You will pay great attention to the most trivial matters” (129).

## Meditation

*“Don’t open a shop by yourself. Listen. Keep silent. . . . Try to be an ear.”*  
(Rumi, Essential Rumi 143)

*“Go up on the rooftop at night / in this city of the soul.”*  
(Rumi, Essential Rumi 103)

We’ve looked at four classes in the mystical curriculum, those addressing ills that can plague academics in mid/late career. We’ve examined what Hinduism and Sufism can teach us about failure, what Zen and Kabbalah can teach us about triviality. Before concluding, I’d like to consider one other course, one that could be a prerequisite if that weren’t completely contrary to the spirit of the thing: An Introduction to Meditation.

Let’s change the metaphor. Each of the practices we’ve examined is a ray of

color from a prism, restoring brightness to our work-lives threatened by disappointment and triviality. The light that animates that prism is meditation, stepping outside of time to center ourselves in the inexhaustible treasures of the universe and our own souls.

There are as many different ways to meditate as there are people. The great religions offer an extraordinary variety of meditation practices, for example, mantram, rosary, Jesus Prayer, mandala, zazen, contemplating a candle flame, whirling, recitation of the Name, watching the breath, walking, combining and permutating Hebrew letters. When we ask the universe for the right one, we stumble across it, the one that suits us like our own fingerprint, that makes us feel like we've come home. The teacher could be living or dead, a friend, an animal, a tree, a book.

It's true that the practice of meditation may start out badly, full of failure and triviality. Instead of centering peacefully, our monkey minds may be in a whirl. We spend our entire meditation dragging our thoughts back to center and then watching them escape again. During one of my meditations, I found myself thinking about pasta puttanesca, lampshades, and feral dogs. During another, the only thought I could successfully focus on was, "Should I throw those terrible stuffed mushrooms over the fence for the ravens?" Nothing happens, and we want to quit. But as Saint Francis de Sales notes, "Even if you did nothing during the whole of your hour but bring your mind back . . . , though it went away every time you brought it back, your hour would be very well employed" (qtd. in Easwaran, *Meditation* 37).

Every wisdom tradition tells us that in the very sitting, the not quitting, something invisibly begins to change, like a crystal taking imperceptible shape underground. We mustn't expect to feel results, but other people might mention a difference in us, and we might start to notice how an empty quiet room seems to fill up with a kind of peace that's like a physical presence. I like what Beck, describing the advantages of meditation, says: "Still, when we sit, everything else takes care of itself" (31).

## Conclusion

In one of his poems, Rumi contrasts two kinds of intelligence. There is academic intelligence which brings us promotion and earns us point on our annual evaluations—but despite which as we enter mid/late career we may feel a sense of failure, a sense of the triviality of our busy daily lives. Then there is another kind of intelligence that the mystics can help us rediscover, an intelligence deep inside ourselves. Rumi describes this intelligence, this "second knowing" that can refresh our vision in mid/late career:

With [academic] intelligence you rise in the world.  
 You get ranked ahead or behind others . . .  
 You stroll with this intelligence  
 in and out of fields of knowledge, getting always more  
 marks on your preserving tablets.

There is another kind of tablet, one  
 already completed and preserved inside you.

A spring overflowing its springbox. A freshness  
in the center of the chest. This other intelligence  
does not turn yellow or stagnate. . . .

This second knowing is a fountainhead  
from within you, moving out . . . (*Essential Rumi* 178) ☪

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# Creating Spaces for Listening, Learning, and Sustaining the Inner Lives of Students

Gesa E. Kirsch

This essay explores what it takes to “create a space in the classroom that allows students the freedom to nourish their inner lives,” an issue raised by Mary Rose O’Reilley in *Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice* (3). This question is profound and worthy of exploration for several reasons:

- it assumes that students *have* an inner life, a big leap of faith for many academics trained to be highly analytical and critical;
- it grants students agency to explore their inner lives, to reflect on and write about what moves them, what is meaningful to them, what engages them;
- it treats students as complex human beings with intellectual, spiritual, and emotional dimensions to their lives; and
- it encourages reflection, contemplation, and introspection, processes which can provide deep insight into lived experience, enhance intellectual development, and, in the best of cases, lead to civic engagement (as I have argued elsewhere).

These are strong claims. What would it take to create spaces in the classroom which allow students the freedom to nourish and sustain an inner life? It takes *vision*—an understanding that teaching is an honor and a privilege, that to work with students presents a unique moment in their life’s journey—and ours. It takes *depth and honesty* that we rarely achieve in the classroom, and even more rarely in our everyday lives, where competition and one-upmanship reign prominently, where we compare, measure, rank, and evaluate rather than welcome the diversity of gifts we bring to the table.<sup>1</sup> It takes *faith* that students are smart, engaged, and eager to learn. It takes a sense of *wonder* and curiosity to join students on a journey of discovery. It takes *courage* to face *not* knowing what we will encounter, courage to trust that students can—and will—honor their inner life, their inner teacher, the parts of themselves that are deep and meaningful to them. It takes meeting students with high expectations and enthusiasm, with an open heart and open mind to hear what they are saying—or are on the verge of saying—to attend “not to the stammer, but to the poem being born” (O’Reilley 21). It

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*Gesa E. Kirsch is Professor of English at Bentley College in Waltham, MA. She has written and edited a number of books on feminism and composition, ethics and representation, and research methodology. Recently, she edited Beyond the Archives: Research as a Lived Process (with Liz Rohan).*

<sup>1</sup> See Elbow’s “Ranking, Evaluating, and Liking: Sorting Out Three Forms of Judgment” for an insightful discussion of these different forms of judgment and their implications for teaching and writing.

takes *heart* to explore how we can create spaces in the classroom for appreciating silence, being present, attending to the presence of others, listening deeply, and fostering creativity and a sense of community.

This essay is my effort to take heart, to bring my whole self into the classroom, to invite students to do the same, to connect “mind, heart, body and soul” as Jacqueline Jones Royster urges us to do in *Traces of a Stream* (279). In her ground-breaking chapter, “A View from a Bridge,” Royster clearly articulates that it takes more than an analytic mind to achieve excellence in scholarship and teaching: “This approach [afrafeminist ideology] embodies the notion that the mind, heart, body, and soul operate collectively and requires intellectual work to include four sites of critical regard: *careful analysis, acknowledgment of passionate attachments, attention to ethical action, and commitment to social responsibility*” (279, emphasis in original). Royster illustrates how these principles inform both her scholarship and her teaching; she examines closely—and helps her students see—how scholarly work is always informed by our interests, our history, our connections to community, and importantly, our obligations to understand and honor those who came before us.

This essay is my attempt to articulate how I invite students to bring all of who they are into the classroom, into the learning process, into the “sacred space” of the classroom, as O’Reilly calls it (15). In recent years I have been exploring how to create spaces for nurturing an inner life—my own and my students—starting with the time when I decided to be vulnerable when introducing a new and what at the time felt like a very “suspect” writing assignment: a spiritual autobiography (a topic I have written about elsewhere). After attending a workshop on the writing of spiritual autobiography which used some drawing and storytelling exercises I found fascinating and fun, I decided to try this assignment once in one writing course. I felt vulnerable when introducing this assignment but decided to take a chance. Meeting my students with honesty (I told them why I thought this new assignment was worth trying and asked for their feedback) and vulnerability (I told them that I didn’t know what a spiritual autobiography would look like and asked them to help me define the genre), I was surprised—and pleased—to encounter students who were willing to take a chance, to be honest, and to be vulnerable themselves.

The decision to take a risk—the risk of being vulnerable, of potentially failing—started a shift in my teaching: it gave me courage to try new things, to set the parameters of my course as I see best fit (for instance, deciding not to grade every piece of writing despite pressure from students, colleagues, and administrators to do so), to talk with students about my pedagogy and course goals, not just the details of assignments.<sup>2</sup> Once I came to terms with my vulnerability, an ongoing process to be sure (more about this below), once I realized that I didn’t have to live up to the many images of teaching I carry within me (e.g., being funny, witty, and entertaining like some teachers I admire or, alternately, being challenging, demanding, and tough as other teachers I admire), I could bring all of myself into the classroom, be more fully present in the moment, attentive to others, engaged by the interactions among students and myself. Most importantly,

<sup>2</sup>Other factors which led to my willingness to take greater risks in my teaching, or, better put, to bring more of myself into the classroom, include attending a faculty workshop on contemplative pedagogy (offered by the Society for Contemplative Mind in Society) and reading work by Bishop; Daniell; Foehrer and Schiller; O’Reilly; and Palmer.

it shifted my attention to creating spaces for students and myself to nourish and sustain an inner life, by which I mean the rich dimensions of reflection, introspection, and contemplation which lead us to know and understand things beyond the analytical mind.<sup>3</sup>

Teaching was no longer a performance, no longer “a show” I put on, but became a part of who I am, emerged from my own inward journey, from a deep sense of self. Parker Palmer writes about the courage to teach (in his same-titled book), about integrity and identity, and about creating spaces where the “shy soul” can emerge (*Hidden Wholeness*). He explains, “if we want to develop the identity and integrity that good teaching requires, we must do something alien to academic culture: we must talk to each other about our inner lives—risky stuff in a profession that fears the personal and seeks safety in the technical, the distant, the abstract” (“Heart of the Teacher” 21). When I teach, I hope to bring some of these aspects—mind and body, heart and soul—to the classroom, to stretch myself and my students beyond the critical, analytical modes of academic discourse (which can easily lead to detachment and cynicism, I find). Instead, I hope to create in my classroom a space which can foster engaged students who go on to become civically-minded business leaders and thoughtful, engaged citizens. Lofty goals, I know, but worth pursuing I believe.

I now turn to describing a few attempts to create such spaces, but, like O’Reilly, I would like to caution that we must teach from the depth of our own being, from our own traditions, from what is in our heart: “when we talk about teaching within a contemplative frame of reference, I think we should keep our prescriptions to a minimum. I want to sketch the lines of a certain approach, but I don’t want to trespass into another teacher’s prayer hall” (14). With that caution in mind, I outline a few of the ways in which I try to create spaces for listening, learning, and sustaining an inner life.

From the first day of class, I introduce exploratory writing, trying to create an atmosphere where students can write without being judged, where they can explore what is at the edge of their consciousness, and where they can enjoy the discovery that comes with writing. As the instructor, I write with students, engage in the same process, share my surprise—and pleasure—at what emerges on the page, nourish my inner life, and discover what is at the edge of my own consciousness.

One goal I have for any writing course I teach (whether expository, persuasive, or creative nonfiction) is for students to enjoy writing as much as possible, to recognize writing as a powerful tool for learning and discovery, and to think of themselves as writers, thinkers, and intellectuals. I envision any writing course in these larger terms rather than as a “next step” for preparing students for the next writing course, for writing in their major, or for writing in their profession. I certainly want students to be successful in those future endeavors, and we talk a lot about genre, purpose, audience, ethos, and context, but I emphasize the deep pleasure and great discoveries that writing can foster.

*It is the first day of class, a sunny, cold Thursday in January. We are assembled for the first time for a creative nonfiction writing course; we have gone over the syllabus and just introduced ourselves. There are questions hanging in*

<sup>3</sup> Among composition scholars who have explored different aspects of this kind of knowing—with our body, heart, and spirit—are Bishop; Daniell; Elbow; Foehr and Schiller; Murray; O’Reilly; Perl as well as many authors published in this journal.

*the air, first impressions being formed, expectations for the course assessed. The high tension of uncertainty that comes with a new course is palpable. I dive right in and ask students to get out pen and paper, to listen, and to be ready to begin their first piece of writing (which will not be collected or graded). I read aloud a short essay by Terry Tempest Williams, "Why I Write." I read slowly, loudly, clearly; I find a rhythm, pause and look up at regular intervals. All eyes are on me; all heads turned my way; the tone has been set: listening, paying attention, matters in this class.*

*Next, we write together. I ask students to write for ten minutes non-stop about why they write, using the passage I read for inspiration, and I do the same. After ten minutes, we pause, reread, circle what surprised us, write for another ten minutes. We talk about the writing process, the difficulty of starting, of getting past the first few sentences, of continuing when it seems we are faltering, when words feel awkward and slow to come. We talk about what surprised us, what emerged on the page, what we didn't expect. We talk about what we learned about ourselves today, on the first day of class. A message has been sent: writing can offer surprises, insights, and discoveries; writing is serious business.*

As writing instructors, we can introduce the importance of paying attention to the world around us, of being present, of being observant, of being mindful. We can ask students to pay attention to the small, minute details of everyday life: a snow flake, a speck of dust, the shape and color of a blade of grass, the light and shadow a water bottle casts onto a desk.

*It is the second class meeting, and I read aloud a passage from creative writer Judy Reeves: "Be present as you go through your day, mindful of such details as the mist rising from the orange you peel, the ridges of pattern in the peel's color that fade to yellow near the green nub of stem, and the stem's starlike pattern" (63).*

*I tell students that although I try to be observant and mindful, attempt to be present in the moment and pay attention, I did not know the shape of the stem of an orange until I read this passage. The next time I peeled an orange, I was more fully present, paying attention to its color, observing the shape of its stem, tasting its sweet succulent flesh.*

We can tell students that paying attention, being mindful, is an ongoing, life-long process—and challenge. Whenever I ask students to pay attention and write about what they notice, I benefit just as much as they do: I become more aware of my environment, of living in the here and now, of listening deeply, attentively, of being present. I learn about what my students notice, what they pay attention to, what draws them in.

*It is the middle of the semester, and I arrive to class carrying a basket with seashells. My students smile; by this time in the semester, we have engaged in many kinds of exploratory writing; they know to expect the unexpected when we meet.*

*"Take out a piece of paper," I instruct. "We will begin the new essay with a free writing exercise. I will not collect or grade this writing; it is designed to give you a feel for the kind of essay you'll be writing next—a personal, reflective essay."*

*I pass around the basket, asking students to pick one object from the sea, one that appeals to their senses. They choose sea shells of different sizes and colors: sand dollars (some broken, some whole), razor clams, snails, pebbles*

*polished by the sea, the remnants of crab shell; a bit of dried seaweed. With their new possessions in front of them, I suggest: “For the first ten minutes, describe the object in front of you with as much detail as you can, capturing its size, color, shape, texture, smell—anything you notice and observe. After that, I will ask you to shift gears, moving from the description of the object to associations and memories that have been invoked for you.”*

*For the next ten minutes, students observe and write: they handle the object, turn it over, hold it to the ear, shake it, dislodge grains of sand that drift onto the seminar table, and return to the page. When the time is up, I ask students to pause: “Reread what you have written and circle any images, details, phrases that hold interest for you. Now explore these images by writing about ideas and associations that arise for you. Perhaps it is a memory of visiting the sea; perhaps it is a meditation on the color blue; perhaps it is about seeking shelter; or a reflection on beauty, on nature, on life. Write for ten minutes and see where your writing takes you.”*

*Our pens start moving again. I always enjoy the “seashell exercise,” as I have come to think of it, because it has invoked many different memories, reflections, and discoveries for me. After another ten minutes, we finish our writing and pause, jotting down further ideas, images, and associations we still might like to add.*

*Then comes the moment I anticipate most eagerly: we read paragraphs or pages aloud, bits of text that surprise us, delight us, reveal unexpected directions. There are reflections on scars—scars on the seashell and scars on the writer’s body, meditations on the depth and beauty of the ocean, reflections on grains of sand, on the life of a hermit crab; there are concerns about ocean pollution, the fragile state of the world, our role in all of this; there are memories of seaside trips, ocean swims, sandcastles, the seagull who stole lunch; there are memories of cousins, family, friends; there is humor, reflection, seriousness, laughter—there are glimpses of the rich inner landscape of the students assembled in front of me.*

As writing instructors, we can speak about the sacred nature of story-telling, the profound human need to express ourselves, to make sense of a seemingly chaotic world, of the need to be heard. I tell students that the process of story-telling, narration, imposing order on random events, is a very deep human need. Sometimes I read a passage from James Carroll:

The very act of story telling, of arranging memory and invention according to the structure of the narrative, is by definition holy. . . . We tell stories because we can’t help it. We tell stories because we love to entertain and hope to edify. We tell stories because they fill the silence death imposes. We tell stories because they save us (qtd. in Wakefield, front matter, n. p.).

Or I read the words of Gayl Walker: “We have the innate need to express ourselves, to discover who we are, to bring meaning to the situations in our lives, and to tell our stories. We want to respond to life and reflect on it” (108). The reflective, personal essay, I explain, is an invitation to do just that—to respond to life and reflect on it.

We can invite many different voices into our classroom: the voices of those present, the voices of those we read, the voices of those we remember, of those who have shared their insights and stories with us. We can create a space where

we hear written language spoken aloud, where we listen for meaning, rhythm, intonation (Elbow “Three Mysteries”). We can speak about the importance of reading texts out loud;<sup>4</sup> of language that is rich, inviting, moving, powerful; of creating a space where we can go about the serious business of “listen[ing each other] into existence” (O’Reilly 21, 29).

Such spaces matter profoundly because they nourish the soul, because they honor a sense of self, an inner teacher, an inner life. Such spaces matter because they allow students the freedom to listen and learn on their own terms, to move from small observations to complex topics, to tackle challenging issues, to discover who they are and what matters to them, to bring to voice what is at the edge of consciousness. I would not, could not, do not presume to know what voices—and visions—will emerge, what students will reveal of themselves. As teachers, perhaps all we can hope to do is create a space in the classroom for silence, attentiveness, and wonder. It takes great courage to create such spaces and great faith to wait patiently to see what will emerge, who feels moved to speak, what questions will arise, what challenges will be posed.

Some would say that this approach to teaching writing encourages navel-gazing and lacks focus and rigor. To that concern I respond by pointing out that deep engagement, serious thinking, and rigorous research most often emerge when we write about topics to which we have a strong, personal connection. Unless we create opportunities for students to write about topics in which they have a personal stake, we are likely to get papers in which the writer simply goes through the motions. As Jane Danielewicz argues in “Personal Genres, Public Voices,” there is a clear connection between the two: personal genres and public voices. In fact, one enables the other. Time and again, I find that students are more interested, more engaged, and more willing to do serious research when the topic is one they have selected, they have a stake in, they have claimed as their own. Danielewicz suggests that “action comes from commitment or a stake. Students need to have a stake in what they write in order for it to mean anything, either to themselves or to readers. The more that something is at stake, and the more what’s at stake is connected to the person, the more there are possibilities for energy. Once there is energy, there can be action, or it’s likely that action might happen” (personal correspondence).

*It is two months into the semester, and we are beginning another reflective essay. This time, I have asked students to keep an ongoing record of things they observe in daily life; things that make them pause, wonder, or puzzle; “small*

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<sup>4</sup> Reading texts aloud, and asking students to do the same, assumes that students are not hearing-impaired. This assumption does not always hold true as more students with disabilities enter college; in turn, many colleges now offer extensive support for students with disabilities. In my classrooms, I try to provide copies of the texts which are read aloud so that we can use the ear and the eye in responding to language. I also use drawing exercises (inspired by Dan Wakefield, *The Story of Your Life*) to enhance memory and writing, and I ask students to use all their senses for many writing assignments. In this way, I hope to heed the caution that Brueggemann and her colleagues make in “Becoming Visible: Lessons in Disability”: “When we expect all students—and ourselves—to think in oral, visual, and kinesthetic arenas, in addition to the ones that privilege written words, we learn from those who were previously excluded. What is more, when we disrupt our own comfort with writing as a way of knowing, we problematize our assumptions, tilt our perspectives, and recast our metaphors” (381).

*moment's that shape us in subtle ways.”<sup>5</sup> Mike reads his list of small moments aloud in class; one stands out for him: On a rainy day, he observed a fellow student walking slowly across campus, seemingly unbothered by the downpour, while everyone else was running quickly to seek shelter. Mike takes this small moment as the starting point for his essay, reflecting on what it means to be different, what it means to fit in (or fail to fit in). In a frank and personal essay, he explores moments when he himself has tried hard to fit in (as a newcomer to town when his family had moved) and moments when he did fit in but was himself perhaps not as welcoming to outsiders as he could have been (when, for instance, a new player joined his sports team). When Mike reads a draft of his essay to class, other students join in, offering their experiences of being in and excluded, of being different, of not fitting in. Without my prompting, we find ourselves in the midst of an important discussion: the complex identities which students negotiate in- and outside of college.*

I welcome such moments of introspection and reflection in my classrooms. I greatly admire students' willingness to look hard at themselves and the world around them. I consider topics like the one Mike introduced as rich venues for bringing complex issues to the center of the classroom. Because these topics grow out of the students' own experiences, they can be very powerful. I find myself drawn to a pedagogy that invites students to observe, reflect on, and bring their own topics to class, a pedagogy that encourages them to follow their pen and heart as new material emerges on the page. It's what is at the edge of consciousness that interests me because it can engage us deeply, can challenge and change us. What emerges from the hidden recesses of our memories, mind, and hearts often carries with it the depth of lived experience and the desire for understanding and change.

In my classes, I talk a lot about the importance of silence, of attending to what's inside you, not just on the outside, to listening and locating the places where creativity, insight, and intuition reside.

*It is a cold March morning when I take a group of students outside the classroom building, telling them that we will walk out in silence, stand still and listen to silence for about ten minutes, return to the classroom silently, and write about silence for the next ten minutes. That's a lot of silence—and risk—to put into a single class period. I cannot help but feel vulnerable, fearing that I will meet students' resistance—expressed with rolling eyes, bored expressions, hoods pulled deep over the face—and perhaps complaints: What does this have to do with writing?*

I try to address these concerns by being very clear about my purpose in conducting an exercise; I always debrief students by asking: “What was it like? What did you experience? What did it feel like? What showed up on the page as you wrote about the experience? What surprised you most? Why?” I find that the ensuing discussion is often rich, and that students will notice things I did not notice and vice versa; our debriefing enhances my own as well as their learning experience.

*Just as my students feel self-conscious when a friend or teacher walks by, I feel self-conscious when I see colleagues, or the dean, walking across the quad as we stand in silence. “Is she just unprepared today?” colleagues might won-*

<sup>5</sup>See Perl and Schwartz's *Writing True* for more details on keeping a notebook and capturing small moments (24-25).

der. “Did she forget her lesson plan? Or is she just pandering to students’ desire for a break, for going outside, for taking it easy?” Although I consider my colleagues innovative and supportive, I had no trouble conjuring up questions they might ask themselves as I stood still on the campus quad, surrounded by a group of students, standing equally still on a brisk March morning.

Institutional and peer pressure do not encourage much experimental—and experiential—teaching and learning. While we do have rich models for how service learning can be integrated into courses, how experiential learning can enhance students’ academic knowledge, we have few coherent models for using short experimental moments, in- and outside the classroom: they beg questions of effectiveness, relevance, assessment, of how student learning is enhanced. Ultimately, it calls into question the preparation and expertise of the instructor.

The awkwardness of standing in silence in a public place often has another effect: it heightens self-consciousness. (“My peers must think I’m weird,” students tell me they worry.) The heightened self-consciousness often generates fertile ground for writing and reflection: Why are we so self-conscious about being different? Why do we need/want to blend into the crowd? What does it mean to be different? Does it take courage, defiance, vision, or self-centeredness to stand out in the crowd? How do we treat others who don’t conform?

I also use humor, often self-deprecating humor, to put students at ease: I tell them that they now have evidence that their instructor has some “wild and wacky” ideas; that this is “not your average” writing course that they should be ready for more surprises in future class meeting. I also invite students to make their own suggestions for exercises which contribute to our course goals: to become keen observers of the world around us; to become thoughtful and attentive listeners; to develop fluency in different kinds of genres; to write with grace, clarity, and depth; to become thoughtful and engaged writers, thinkers, and intellectuals; to appreciate writing as a creative, enriching, and dynamic activity.

More often than not, experiencing silence becomes a favorite moment in the semester, a touch stone to which students return, reflecting on their need for silence, the lack of silence in our lives, the stares of those who observed us as we stood silently, the sense of community created by a class moving, standing, and writing in silence, and the sense of otherness experienced when one acts “weird,” standing silently on the campus quad.

The importance of silence, of pausing, of standing still, of attending to the moment, of being fully present, of listening deeply cannot be overstated in this day and age, and especially for a generation of students who are always wired, always multi-tasking. This kind of generative silence is in line with what a number of composition scholars suggest about the power of silence as a rhetorical tool: Elbow in “Silence: A Collage;” Pat Belanoff in “Silence: Reflection, Literacy, Learning, and Teaching;” and Cheryl Glenn in *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*. I try to create a number of such pauses—moments of silence—in the classroom: after we read an essay, after we complete a free-write, after we workshop an essay. I often invite a minute of silence so we can reread what we have read, reflect on what we have heard, jot down an image, thought, or idea that has been evoked for us. In these moments of silence, I hope to create space for words to form, thoughts to arise, images to surface. These moments of silence allow students to be ready to speak, write, and listen once class discussion begins.

This kind of generative silence stands in contrast to oppressive kinds of si-

lence which can make us feel small, stupid, unworthy. Those kinds of silences can easily be generated in a classroom when the instructor (or dominant students) always have the “right answer,” when debate is used to emphasize competition, when talk is used to dominate and few take the time to listen. Belanoff observes that this kind of dominating, oppressive silence can be particularly troubling for “marginalized groups such as the poor and women and other minority groups” (401). I try to be mindful of avoiding this oppressive kind of silence by varying my methods of instruction: I often ask everyone to jot down an idea or observation they’d like to share before calling on anyone. In this way, I do not have to rely only on the hands that go up first. Instead, I can go around in a circle or call on different students; everyone will have written something he or she can read or explain. This process tends to put students at ease, especially those who are shy, reticent, or have been silenced in the past; it invites everyone’s contribution and values everyone’s voice.

As writing teachers, we can invite introspection and reflection into our classrooms. We can point out that most of us rarely take the time to be fully present, to listen, to observe, to attend to others, to attend to what is inside us and around us. We can suggest how rich and nourishing it can be to move into a silent space, to listen to what’s inside, to honor who we are, to take time to be still and observant. Most importantly, we can invite students into this process of attending to their inner lives.<sup>6</sup> Take, for example, a student I call Melissa. She provides a glimpse of her inner life when she reflects on a moment when she traveled into nature and learned about herself and her family, about separation, connection, and finding peace. In her essay, “Growing in the Woods,” Melissa reveals her younger self and describes how, after being scolded by her mother for spilling salad dressing on her new Easter dress, she sought refuge in nature.<sup>7</sup>

Stepping into the undergrowth, I breathed deeply and wholly, absorbing all that I could. I took in the scene—drinking in the fresh, young smell of spring. I feasted my eyes on the sets of leafy green ferns that were growing all around me, and tried to find the biggest one for my hideout. As I crouched down beneath the bowed fronds of a cluster of cinnamon ferns, I felt an immense sense of peace in me. All of my anger had evaporated as soon as I set foot in the woods. I plunked myself down on my bottom, with my lower back against the central pedestal of the fern plant. The soft ferns arched perfectly over me, with their tips reaching over my head and ending just above my eyes. Peeking from behind my new “fern bangs,” I felt an understanding unlike anything I’d ever experienced.

The midday sun filtered through the leaves of the trees above me, and the rays glinted in my eyes and danced on my skin. I closed my eyes and smiled, my face glowing. I was showered with light and love from the forest, and I could feel

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<sup>6</sup>For specific suggestions for cultivating an inner life, see Jamison’s *Seeds of Awakening*; many of her suggestions go beyond writing. See also *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education: A Handbook of Classroom Practices* for suggestions for courses across the curriculum.

<sup>7</sup>All student excerpts are quoted by permission.

energy pulsing through my body radiating out of me. I felt beautiful, just sitting there underneath that fern plant, all alone yet completely surrounded with life.

From my secret hideout, I was one with the plants. I was a plant. I sat perfectly still, wondering what it would be like to stay in one place without moving for my entire life. The silence of the woods was overpowering. The woods were a quiet place, free from angry mothers and chores. *I could stay here forever*, I thought, as I sunk deeper into the earth, rooting myself to the spot (emphasis in original).

What I find remarkable about Melissa's essay is her strong connection to nature, her self-awareness of seeking refuge and finding peace, of identifying with the lush plants around her, and her ability to recall this peaceful, quiet moment more than a decade later.

In another essay, Bill takes us on a journey of discovery, a midnight skate, revealing his struggle to come to terms with a difficult decision. He describes what he calls a "moment of nothing" when he finds peace, feeling alone yet powerfully connected to the universe.

It was one in the morning, the temperature was ten degrees, the wind made it feel much colder. I wore only a hooded sweatshirt, jeans, and a knit hat. These few items were supposed to keep my twenty year old body warm, but my teeth chattered and a wind gust sent shivers up my spine. There was no one around, and that's the way I wanted it. The week had been difficult, my tests hadn't gone well, and, to make matters worse, I had more work than seemed accomplishable. My girlfriend was mad at me and the pressure from my parents to get better grades was starting to add weight on my shoulders. I was looking forward to the alone time, even if it was in the freezing winter air. The lights reflected off the ice, creating a scene I never tired of. I stepped onto the ice and glided around for a few minutes. There was no purpose to where I was going or what I was doing. Slowly and surely, the cold sharp wind didn't bother me anymore and my worries started to drift away. I was alone, just me and the ice. . . .

People describe moments when they reach peace, whether it be through prayer, meditation, a Red Sox World Series win, or any other thing. Peace has been achieved in their mind, and they rave about it. Peace is not something everyone achieves, and I don't believe that it lasts forever, but you know when it happens. It was that freezing cold night in February when every single breath was visible that I achieved my peace. . . .

I skated freely, stick handled and took shots on the empty net, everything worked so smoothly. The skates cut in the ice, kicking up chunks of ice. When I stopped, a wave of snow covered the ice in front of me. The stick clicked on the ice, the post rang when a slap shot when off of it. It's difficult to describe what it's like to just think about nothing. There was

no past, no future; I only lived in the present. I was totally at peace. I don't know how long I was out there, but, when I stepped off the ice to unlace my skates, I had forgiven how the game had treated me; my homework and my test were not as significant. It was something more satisfying than any game winning goal, any championship. I had lived in the moment, just the moment.

Here, Bill takes us into his life as a hockey player, revealing the pressure to perform, the challenges of competition, and the process of coming to terms with the fact that he will not be playing professionally, or even competitively, at the college level. What I admire about Bill's essay is that he reveals a dimension of his inner life that could easily remain hidden. Our culture does not encourage introspection, reflection, or a change of plan: we are taught to fight, carry on, pursue a goal single-mindedly, even if the process comes close to destroying us. Bill reveals that he has found a way to make peace with this turn of events at that same time that he recognizes that peace can be short-lived.

As writing instructors, we can run writing workshops that establish trust, focus on aspects of writing that work well, and invite more such writing. We can talk with students about writing that remains unfinished, that tests new waters, that dares to go places even the writer barely knows as part of his or her inner landscape. We can encourage students to take risks in their writing by not grading all writing; by giving them opportunities to revise, rethink, reinvent their work; by giving them choices about what to include in their course portfolio. If we bring a genuine interest to student writing, if we convey a sense of excitement that comes with exploration, reflection, and discovery on the page, if we invite humor, joy, and discovery into the classroom, then we have begun to create spaces for nourishing and sustaining the inner lives of students.

To create such spaces is to listen and wait, to invite wonder, silence, and wisdom into our lives. To create such spaces is to acknowledge that it takes a life time of learning, listening, and returning to the inner fountain that sustains us; that it takes faith to honor moments of silence, to foster mindfulness, to learn the art of being present. Creating such spaces—to hold and behold the presence of others—is a gift for teachers and students alike; it is the process of creating a community, of honoring those in our presence, of acknowledging each other's stories, dreams, hopes, and visions.<sup>8</sup> 

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<sup>8</sup>I wish to thank Kami Day, Kristie Fleckenstein, Rosaleen Greene-Smith, and Killian McCurry for their helpful feedback on this essay.

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# The Persuasiveness of Pleasure: Play, Reciprocity, and Persuasion in Online Discussions

Sue Hum

John begins his online discussion board post on the differences between speech and writing with:<sup>1</sup> “Writing is uh, well, more fluid than speech, you know, you don’t have the same, uh, disfluencies, that um—you do while talking. Writing also gives you the chance to pontificate by showcasing archaic nomenclatures and constructions that would get you slapped in everyday conversational use.”<sup>2</sup> John’s opening sentence both describes and performs the differences between speech and writing and, by so doing, persuades more effectively. In creative writing parlance, he shows rather than tells, deriving pleasure from both his performance and his expectation of interaction on an online stage. John’s opener above demonstrates how some students transform online academic spaces by resisting the traditional expository mode of academic discourse shaped within a print medium and by deploying rhetorical strategies that take advantage of the interactive, reciprocal medium of an online environment.

Many students, like John, derive enjoyment not only from their own literacy performances but also from the expectation that their performances will be read, acknowledged, answered, and sometimes resisted by others. John’s playful opener employs an approach many students consider a more effective invitation to dialogue than the simple thesis-driven, referential statement that is characteristic of expository writing. John’s humorous performance might yield authorial pleasure not only in the act of composing a clever post but especially in attracting classmates’ responses, including praise.<sup>3</sup> Jane compliments John: “I admire your be-

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*Sue Hum is Associate Professor of English, specializing in rhetoric and composition, at the University of Texas at San Antonio, where she teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in writing. Her most recent works include Relations, Locations, Positions: Composition Theory for Writing Teachers (co-edited with Peter Vandenberg and Jennifer Clary-Lemon, NCTE, 2006) and Ways of Seeing, Ways of Speaking: The Integration of Rhetoric and Vision in Constructing the Real (co-edited with Kristie S. Fleckenstein and Linda T. Calendrillo, Parlor, 2007).*

<sup>1</sup> A student enrolled in Theory and Practice of Composition, a writing intensive upper division course populated by English Education, Professional Writing, and Communications majors, John (and others) was participating in online discussion of the assigned reading, in response to specific instructor-assigned prompts. This prompt which yielded the quoted responses asked students to reflect on one difference between speaking and writing and to discuss which one they find more powerful. Online discussion board “chats” constituted 20 percent of a student’s grade and their performance was evaluated on the quality, quantity, and promptness of their participation.

<sup>2</sup> All students’ names are pseudonyms.

<sup>3</sup> Play involves cultural presuppositions, ranging between Derrida’s *différance* which defers meaning and closure and Bakhtin’s *carnival* which revolts against conventional and institutional norms. Its definition is contextually and temporally specific.

ginning sentence. It is a perfect attention grabber. It creatively makes your point that writing offers more opportunities to be polished and wordsmithed.” Katherine concurs: “I agree with Jane. You opening sentences certainly are attention grabbing. What fabulous diction. I need a dictionary. You proved your point that the written word is powerful.”<sup>4</sup> Jane’s and Katherine’s approval are two in a series of responses that highlight not only the interactivity of online discussion but also the reciprocity that yields pleasure for authors and readers. This pleasure of reciprocity—where users attend to each other responsively—explains partly why online social networking among teens and tweens has burgeoned on MySpace, Facebook, and other sites.<sup>5</sup>

The sheer pleasure inspired by online discussions is an under-explored but important phenomenon. Pleasure derived from verbal play possesses considerable pedagogical implications both for immediate classroom engagement and for rhetorical persuasion in academic discourse. Through play, students and teachers open themselves to multiple modes of thinking and ways of living, both of which invite new insights into persuasion that are downplayed by traditional academic approaches to analog argumentation. For instance, James Baumlin argues that persuasion becomes possible through play because play opens up alternative modes, ways, and worlds to the imagination of writers and readers. By prohibiting stability and closure, play opens up the possibility of persuasion: “Actual persuasion occurs not through combat with an audience but through collaboration (though collusion, foregrounding *lusus* or play, is perhaps the more accurate term)” (37). Imaginative play is the lubricant that creates the “realm of potentiality, and therefore of uncertainty” (38), a first step to achieving understanding, predicated on imagining “freely another’s experience” and acknowledging “its validity and truth and goodness” (39). Imaginative play not only fosters doubt but also nurtures the construction of alternative worlds, allowing for the imaginative transport out of a mode of thinking or a way of living: “Play creates order, is order. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection” (Huizinga, qtd. in Baumlin 39). A second step, then, is to rely on imaginative play for exploring alternatives, taking risks, and experimenting beyond the conventional: “the extent to which discourse invites such imaginative participation and mixing of worlds will determine its success or failure as persuasion” (41). Play both undermines closure and encourages experimentation. To take pleasure in any (inter)play is to engage speculatively and generatively in multiplicity.

<sup>4</sup> Students’ online texts have been reproduced “as is,” with the original format, style and spelling; typos are not indicated in the article with “sic.”

<sup>5</sup> I use *reciprocity* instead of *interactivity* to emphasize the give-and-take relationship among writers and readers in asynchronous online discussions. For a discussion of different kinds of interactivity see Gurak, who describes five features of online interactivity: access to the inner circle, the capacity to talk back, a two-way presence online, ecommerce connections, and privacy (44-46). Warnick outlines three perspectives of interactivity: features-based interactivity, which focuses on the function of a medium, i.e., hyperlinking and feedback forms (see RateMyProfessor.com); user-to-user interaction, which prioritizes message sequencing, i.e., email, chats and discussion boards; and artifactual interactivity, which examines how users process, experience, and perceive online communication (70-71). Estimates indicate that 80 percent of participants in social networking range between the ages of 15 and 21 years (Bernoff).

The fusion of pleasure and play in the writing process and product enlarges students' rhetorical repertoires for enacting persuasion. Asynchronous online discussions have enabled students to read, write, and learn with each other in dynamic and reciprocal ways. Thus, the more teachers can understand and exploit the characteristic of pleasurable reciprocity intrinsic to online discussion—and the potential for the dynamic of pleasure intrinsic to that reciprocity—the more fully we can understand, support, and even cultivate various modes of persuasion. This essay explores the role of pleasure in facilitating diverse modes of rhetorical participation in online discussion. I analyze three examples of how fusing pleasure and persuasion lays the groundwork for audience participation, focusing on students' playful rhetorical strategies that encourage resistance and provide alternative strategies to expository discourse. I conclude by highlighting online persuasion not as linear, thesis-driven, goal-directed exposition, but as unpredictable, pleasurable play.<sup>6</sup> I propose that teachers and students cultivate four attitudinal emphases—adaptability, curiosity, creativity, and risk-taking—to nurture the potential for pleasure through play in persuasion and to broaden our notions of rhetorical persuasion.

### Playful, Pleasurable Persuasion

Composition teachers tend to approach persuasion by foregrounding the author's ability to effect change in an audience—whether it is through rational deliberation (Aristotle), identification (Burke), common ground (Rogers; Spellmeyer), or claims and warrants (Toulmin).<sup>7</sup> Most accounts of persuasive strategies neglect the dynamic of pleasure, a subset of affect, defined as a collection of emotions, attitudes, and moods that are aligned less with the cognitive, rational, judging aspects of writing and more with the pathos-centered creativity.<sup>8</sup> John's opener accentuates how rhetors or orators historically generated “pleasure in the audience, first by making sure that it emanated from themselves during their own rhetorical performances . . . then spread [it] contagiously to the audience” (Johnson 2). In *Notes on the Heart*, Susan McLeod argues that affect, or the noncognitive aspects of mental activity, plays a large role in writing and learning to write. Her position echoes other calls to attend to the role of emotions in the writing process and in writing relationships (Bloom; Brand; Fleckenstein; Perl; Tobin). Despite the suspicion and marginalization of affect, Kia Jane Rich-

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<sup>6</sup>For a discussion of the lack of fun in the discipline's descriptions of the writing process and the importance of enjoyment, see Runciman. Elbow describes the limitations of academic discourse and its role in ignoring pleasure (136).

<sup>7</sup>Approaches to persuasion in pedagogy concentrate on the power of the author to motivate and move an audience. For example, teachers emphasize how authors might utilize Aristotle's three proofs or *pisteis*: through argument and reason or *logos*, the character of the speaker or *ethos*, and the disposition of the hearer or *pathos* (see Carey; Aristotle). An aesthetic approach to persuasion, or a better understanding of the dynamic linking pleasure and persuasion, can be located in Gorgias's definition of *peitho*, or the process of persuasion as the “art of awakening emotions” (Segal 108).

<sup>8</sup>The word *pleasure* encompasses a range of feelings and intensities, whether in positive forms such as ecstasy or bliss or in negative forms such as horror and revulsion; see Mission and Morgan chapter 8.

mond argues that “[e]motions are a vital component of the social fabric that we create through conversations and nonverbal exchanges in and out of the classroom” (6). Because online persuasion manifests through a reciprocal dialogue between writer and reader, composition teachers who seek to reignite pleasure in rhetorical persuasion can take lessons from students’ online discussions, examining the moments when pleasure and persuasion fuse, when pleasure fails to evolve, and when pleasure does evolve but persuasion does not follow. Because not all pleasure is persuasive nor is all persuasion pleasurable, I argue that playful, pleasurable persuasion in online discussions entails three separate, interrelated, and reciprocal processes: performance, negotiation, and recognition.

An act of persuasion in online discussions is not a universal but a contextualized, instantiated, reciprocal activity. To persuade and be persuaded, to please and be pleased, both writer and reader must interact reciprocally.<sup>9</sup> First, online persuasion begins with the performance of persuading, where the writer takes on the identity of the author and acts accordingly in coordination with the reader who takes on the identity and actions of an audience. If neither writer nor reader undertakes those identities and actions, then the act of persuasion cannot come into fruition. Second, author and audience negotiate with each other on the acceptability of each other’s roles and purposes in a continual, provisional, context-specific practice of give-and-take. Then, both author and audience must negotiate persuasion into existence. The act and action of persuasion—a reciprocal act—requires the collaboration of both parties, working in concert. Third, writer and reader recognize and are recognized by each other so that roles and action involve the participation and transaction of a community. According to sociolinguist James Paul Gee, “to be a particular who [writer or reader] and to pull off a particular what [persuasion] requires that we act, value, interact, and use language in sync with or in coordination with other people and with various objects (‘props’) in appropriate locations and at appropriate times” (*Situated* 23). In short, the work of performance, negotiation, and recognition involves the process and product of coordination between the author and the audience. Even then, pleasurable persuasion in online discussions may not follow, as is the case in two of the three examples discussed below, thus highlighting the unpredictable, time-specific, context-determined nature of playful, pleasurable persuasion.

### Author-Centered Pleasure

Some online performances, although pleasurable for the author, do not result in persuasion. Pleasure sputters and dies if an audience does not contribute to, negotiate with, and recognize its performance and if *kairos*, or the appropriateness of time and place, is not taken into consideration. The example below demonstrates author-centered pleasure, which is characterized by the lack of reciprocity between author and audience. Bryan, whose self-identified online persona is the “Mad Monk,” makes a jocular, witty reply to another student’s discussion board post which uses profanity as an illustration of different conversation

<sup>9</sup>This essay limits its scope to persuasion in online, asynchronous discussions. Although persuasion does not require pleasure, and persuasion does indeed occur without pleasure, I argue that pleasure extends a more effective invitation to dialogue; pleasure serves as a lubricant for a better relationship between author and audience. See Gee *Introduction* for a discussion of kinship (24).

rituals among various discourse communities:<sup>10</sup>

When someone brings up profanity, I feel like a little kid in a candy store. I am extremely fond of profanity, and profanity is fond of me. However, this helpful and joyous element of my speech cannot be transferred to my writing because it is socially unacceptable. That is to say, in the discourse communities of academia and the workplace, profanity does not fit the mood or the objective. Actually, a funny part of profanity is that it is self replicating. Because, if I did use profanity in my academic writings, I'm sure the professor would have some profanities waiting for me. Or not. Perhaps they have more to lose by making the mistake of using profanity in the academic world. See? Profanity makes the world turn.

Bryan's post, one of six that discuss conversation rituals, does not receive a direct response. Although two other responses tackled the issue of profanity and were posted after his, neither addressed Bryan, his point, and/or his playful (ir)reverence for profanity. In addition to his use of chiasmus and personification—"I am extremely fond of profanity, and profanity is fond of me"—Bryan jokes about the social unacceptability of its use in professional contexts, imagining the repercussions for professors who respond to his use of profanity with profanity. Such subversive playfulness is the source of authorial pleasure, as acknowledged in his end-of-the-semester online feedback: "I actually had a great time with these chats . . . I would also like to thank myself for being so clever throughout the semester in my electronic chats. I couldn't have done it without me." The author-centered nature of his stance, situated within a personal framework, highlights the lack of responsive reciprocity from his audience. His classmates' lack of response to his ideas or his wit, their lack of contribution and recognition of Bryan's performance limits it as simply that: a performance and a display, an author-centered pleasure, one that does not yield an interaction, let alone persuasion.<sup>11</sup> The dissonance Bryan highlights in his ludic performance remains unrecognized—and perhaps even unread—by his audience. Bryan's bid to create a subversive context fails without the participation—whether collusion or contestation—of an audience. Playful, pleasurable persuasion is a reciprocal, communal process and product.

Particularly crucial to the intersection of pleasure and persuasion are the intertwined processes of negotiation and recognition between the writer and reader. Not all participants derive pleasure from play, just as not all participants are persuaded through/by play. Depending on the audience's reception of a performance, joking and wordplay can backfire on an author, as Bryan acknowledges in his end-of-the-semester feedback:

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<sup>10</sup> Here, students are responding to an assigned prompt that asks them to consider how the concept of discourse communities provides a powerful tool for teaching and/or improving writing.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Weaver, in *Visions of Order*, argues that all language seeks to persuade: "We are all of us preachers in private and public capacities. We have no sooner uttered words than we have given impulse to other people to look at the world, or some small part of it, in our way" (69; see also *Language is Sermonic* 221-25).

Since I tend to always speak with extremely dry and cruel humor, my tone cannot express the fact that I am joking if you can't hear me speak. In summary, I have made many people very mad by simply joking around. In person, I don't necessarily please people all the time, but I definitely have a better chance of leaving the conversation at least mildly liked as opposed to hated.

In order for pleasure to facilitate persuasion and for persuasion to yield pleasure, the writer and reader must engage in a complex dance of performance, negotiation, and recognition. For pleasure to effect persuasion in online discussion, it cannot function as a top-down, linear phenomenon, in which the author acts on or even manipulates the audience. Instead, pleasurable persuasion requires the author and audience to act in concert.

### Pleasure Fused with Persuasion

Playful, pleasurable persuasion begins with a generative performance that promotes the potential for multiple responses and productive mixing. This next example highlights how pleasure and persuasion fuse as a writer and reader cultivate openness, enter together into uncertainty, forge an understanding, and collaborate together to construct a concept with greater complexity and potentiality than either could generate alone. Struck by the phrase, "nakedness of language," Spencer and Meredith dialogue about the meaning of this intriguing visual-verbal metaphor. They begin by jointly creating a context for ludic investigation and pleasurable joint discovery. Spencer extrapolates from his personal experiences about email to a general statement about the state of computer mediated communication:<sup>12</sup>

I've always noticed that in e-mails, even between professors and students, the traditional rules of grammar, syntax, and punctuation, especially, are thrown out. Admittedly formal responses are sometimes warranted, but overall, most e-mail correspondence I participate in is largely informal, pragmatic, and sometimes symbol filled (i.e., ?). Literacy in this context intermingles with new signs and acquires a fluid structure that can be highly idiosyncratic. Signs created with punctuation tools from the keyboard can register universally, as in a smiley face, or as an inside joke. I won't go there. . . . The consequences are

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<sup>12</sup> Spencer and Meredith were doctoral students in a graduate seminar on advanced composition theory. They were responding to the following instructor-assigned prompt: Student literacy and learning increasingly occurs in digital/electronic environments as more and more educational institutions embrace information and communication technologies as a way to deliver and mediate formal schooling, and as more and more teachers use networking technologies to host discussions in electronic spaces. With the increase of communication mediated by computer technology, educators must hypothesize about the nature, quality, and shape of language during what many consider as a technologically mediated revolution. Are our communication habits and rituals really so drastically changed with the advent of information and communication technologies? Share a story about your language use in an online setting (reading, "speaking," writing, image-ing). Use this story as a way to theorize about the relationship among technology, literacy, and learning.

interesting. Thinking of this hyperspace transformation as the modern day fall, in which we've picked the fruit of knowledge that we don't particularly understand, we've suddenly seen the *nakedness of our language*. It needs to be covered in symbols, informalities, and images. That this covering is largely restricted to hyperspace, or the computer screen, may suggest a larger transformation in the human psyche to accommodate the dichotomy between physical writing and literacy and literacy and writing that occurs in and through hyperspace. (emphasis added)

In this online discussion board post, Spencer blends the academic register with a conversational, "I won't go there," an aside that allows him to introduce a tantalizing tangent, the "insider joke," but not to discuss it in detail as would be expected in conventional, written exposition. Spencer's play, which Meredith recognizes as an invitation, leads to dialogue and negotiation. Both interlocutors must take on and then exchange the roles of writer and reader, persuader and persuadee, to create a context in which persuasion may occur.

Ideally, the reciprocity in an online discussion encourages writers to listen to, if not incorporate, readers' opinions, shifting their ideas to account for readers' responses, so that persuasion manifests through the interactions of writer and reader with a text. The persuasiveness of Spencer's post relies on its performative and aesthetic form of expression, the titillating tangent, the sexy analogy, and the humorous asides. Using Genesis as a metaphor for digital literacy, Spencer compares the limits of our understanding to the Edenic fall. That unrefined idea, clothed in the witty phrase, "nakedness of our language," ripe with intellectual and sensual incongruity, draws in Meredith, leading to a dialogue—and a negotiation—as they try to pin down the concept, its meanings, and possibilities.<sup>13</sup> Even though such aesthetic, sometimes irrational, phrases are generally treated with disdain in conventional exposition, and may even be considered as noisy, chaotic, and tangential in academic discourse, they should not be discounted or ignored. Meredith recognizes the context and the invitation by offering her own definition, followed by examples of how published writers may be influenced by the medium:

What exactly do you mean when you say that we now see the nakedness of our language? . . . is it that we see the bareness of our language or that we recognize its essential parts and its elasticity? And then those essential parts translate into sounds or emotions we can't convey with the rapidity of spoken or physical language. Within this hyperspace we hold entire relationships, so we morph our written language to convey a physical presence. Like your suggestion of Marianne Moore and form, we play with the form to give it different meaning. What would e.e. cummings do with email . . . :)

By remaining open to the potentiality in Spencer's idea and metaphor, Meredith engages in intellectual play and exploratory risk-taking. Both interrogate and nuance the ideas of "nakedness of language," transforming persuasion

<sup>13</sup>Schopenhauer's version of the Incongruity Theory of humor identifies play in the lack of fit between our abstract conceptions and our sensory experience, pleasure in the form of humor arising from a mismatch (Morreall 249).

from a one-sided or author-centered act to a collaborative affair, where understanding and meaning-making rely on reciprocal intellectual speculation. Meredith and Spencer make visible and recognize the roles, the act, and the action in a coordinated dance of whos and whats, persuader/persuadee and persuasion.

Just as persuasion occurs provisionally, continually, and sometimes even contentiously, pleasure manifests and is experienced in practice as a result of shared histories and ongoing dialogue. Both students participate in a similar academic discourse model that revels in theorizing in global and general terms, creating patterns out of specific phenomena. Their shared academic discourse model allows Spencer and Meredith to use accepted academic rules and procedures for “unpacking” the phrase, “nakedness of our language,” to develop what Gee calls, “situated meanings,” meanings that are “grounded in actual practices and experiences” (*Introduction* 51). Because both view the purpose of online discussion as exploration and inquiry, they share similar interactional goals. Just as Spencer finds in online discussions “an opportunity to enjoy seeing more dimensions to people’s thinking and writing style” (email), Meredith values dialogue: “As a student I will often probe my colleagues with ideas that I find complicated. This method really stimulates my own thinking, and I really enjoy hearing what my classmates have to say” (email). Their attempts at mutual understanding rest on the potential for persuasion: “in this state of sympathetic understanding we recognize both the multiplicity of world-views and our freedom to choose among them—either to retain our old or take a new” (Baumlin 36). Thus, their intellectual play melds “potential and hypothetical” (41). The fusion of pleasure and persuasion requires the reciprocal co-participation of Spencer and Meredith to create a context for that discovery, and negotiate actively to assemble meaning by using not an individualistic but a shared discourse model.

### Pleasure Devoid of Persuasion

Not all pleasure results in persuasion, nor is all persuasion pleasurable. The third example below foregrounds pleasure that manifests in conflict and hurt feelings. Three graduate students in a seminar on advanced composition theory—Maya, David, and Dina—discuss the implications of a podium in the classroom, a conversation that results from assigned readings on theories of location.<sup>14</sup> Disagreeing over the denotative and connotative meanings of a podium, Maya focuses on the functional advantages of using a podium within a high school, disagreeing with both David’s belief that a podium is an announcement and “safety zone” of teacherly authority and Dina’s feminist contention that the podium bolsters a young teacher’s control over the college classroom. Maya’s disagreement extends beyond the online discussions: into her high school classroom, a source of play and jokes for her and her students, and into the graduate seminar, a source of hurt feelings between her and another classmate. Here persuasion fails not because of the contested nature of their negotiation, but because of the limits of their recognition.<sup>15</sup> In response to David’s in-class comment about the podium, Maya begins

<sup>14</sup> Maya, David, and Dina responded to an instructor-assigned prompt that asked them to consider how space and place does or does not impinge upon their literacy, learning, and/or teaching.

<sup>15</sup> Gee describes the concept of recognition as the work people engage in “to make visible to others (and to themselves, as well) who they are and what they are doing” (*Introduction* 29).

an online discussion about the relationship between space and pedagogy with an illustration:

As I admitted on Wednesday [in class], I never thought about the classroom and its contents as holding a gender. I would have scoffed the very idea of it. But after reading several articles that declare that classroom objects which are arranged in certain ways, do carry and agenda, and further carry a pedagogy, I am now a believer. I walked into my classroom with fresh eyes and was startled at what I saw. I have a very, here's a shocker, feminine classroom. My chairs and desks are facing one another and while I do (forgive me David) have a podium; my classroom definitely holds a feministic pedagogy. Why is that always a bad thing?

David and Dina see Maya's example of the podium as an invitation to dialogue further about the idea of space and place as active. Despite their epistemological differences, David and Dina negotiate gently and supportively. David responds by using humor to mediate their disparity in perspectives: "LOL. No hard feelings here Maya about the podium. I only mentioned it as a reflection over how I view space from a student's perspective." Next, he recounts a discussion with a professor who advocates reorganizing a classroom space to encourage eye contact and discussion among students as an expression of a non-traditional, student-centered pedagogy. David addresses Maya, concluding: "The podium for me is a barrier (a safety zone) of authority. In your setting, probably acceptable. In my setting, probably not." David couches his beliefs in a conciliatory ethos and language, making room for Maya's beliefs by acknowledging their contextual validity. Despite such care, Maya mis-recognizes David's response as a challenge and remains un-persuaded (see Maya's rejoinder below).

In addition, author-centered pleasure does not result in audience persuasion. Although Dina assumes a feminist affinity with Maya, that connection is unrecognized by Maya, and Dina inadvertently offends. Dina's descriptions of her pedagogy and experiences as a teacher below are interpreted by Maya as a confrontation:

David is right, Maya. Your setting requires you to "announce" your authority in the classroom. I don't think this is a bad thing though—it's simply necessary. As for your classroom being feminist, again, I think it's necessary, to a certain degree. I have noticed that students respond differently with male and female teachers, still. I have encountered this a little bit, so I've had to alter my personality (be more authoritative) to reestablish my authority in the class. I'm not saying this is your case, but I definitely think students try to get away with more with female teachers. As a result, we structure our classroom (physical space, vibe of the class, etc.) so we are able to "control" the dynamics of the class as much as we can without getting in the way of their learning. Besides, there's nothing wrong with being a feminist.

Can I get a holla for Girl Power!!!

While Dina assumes a feminist affinity with Maya, Maya becomes so annoyed with the above response that she shares it with her family and reads it to her high school students.<sup>16</sup> In addition to her in-class comments that treat this disagreement as a joke, Maya also mocks the metaphorical understanding of a podium in her end-of-the-semester feedback: “The web chat that dealt with my podium in my classroom is still a common topic in my [high school] classroom. My students have now been made aware of the power of the podium, and they embrace it.” By couching her disagreement within a play(ful) framework, Maya represents this disagreement as nothing serious. However, she fails to recognize David’s and Dina’s negotiation as the habituated practices of academic discourse. At the same time, David and Dina fail to recognize Maya’s investment in the value of a podium in the high school classroom. Those failures limit negotiation, thus circumventing persuasion, as expressed in Maya’s rejoinder:

I do want to expand on the discussion over the podium. I do have a podium in my classroom. That podium does not serve to offer a safety zone or as an additive to my authority, rather that podium serves as a place to set my heavy books down. Rather than setting the book on a desk and having my head down, not looking at the class, my head is up and I am able to see the book and my students. Purely for a logistical reason, the podium does have a place in my classroom. I believe that what we discussed a couple weeks ago applies here, sometime a frog is just a frog, and a podium is just a podium—no other hidden messages.

By emphasizing the functional nature of the podium in her classroom, Maya closes herself to the possibilities suggested by David and Dina, thus shutting off any negotiation that might lead to persuasion. By underestimating Maya’s practical orientation, David and Dina offend. In the end, neither Maya nor David nor Dina is persuaded by each other’s interpretations of the podium and, implicitly, each other’s views on the effects of space on pedagogy.

Another unfortunate consequence follows the podium debate when Dina’s post is mistakenly attributed to another graduate student in the course, an outspoken feminist, who is then recognized as abrasive and impolite. Pleasure for Dina resulted in conflict between Maya and this other feminist student, who shares in an end-of-the-semester feedback:

I felt confused and sad when I found out near the end of the semester that one of my comments really offended a colleague. . . . So I did the lamest thing, I just avoided responding to her so as not to hurt her feelings intentionally. . . . Interestingly I wasn’t the one that had posted the response on feminism and

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<sup>16</sup> The connection Dina believes she forges with Maya continues through the end of the semester when she addresses Maya directly in her last post, saying: “I always appreciate your commentary because I know that you’re looking at the subject from a different standpoint—that of a high school teacher (which I commend you for). I definitely believe this discussion board has allowed us to consider other perspectives. This, in turn, has allowed us to become more of a community than just another class. Thanks for everything you’ve contributed.”

the podium, but I was mistakenly identified as the one who wrote it. . . . As a result, I think I held back because I wanted to be polite, let her feel unchallenged, and not worry about further complications.

Without the joint recognition that co-creates a context for dialogue, author-centered pleasure may not only yield persuasion but may also result in disagreements which have dire consequences for intellectual engagement and discussion, whether in a classroom or online. What seems appropriate for a writer may not be recognized as appropriate for the reader and vice versa. Pleasure is unpredictable, and persuasion may not follow.

This third example also points to the inescapably temporal, contextual nature of playful persuasion and dissuasion. What constitutes play, humor, and pleasure—the podium discussion endured repeated references in class discussions throughout the semester, testimony of the strong undercurrent of hurt feelings and epistemological disagreements among these graduate students—underscores the importance of time and timing. The temporal nature of pleasurable persuasion highlights how any change in the relationships of the participants effect a change in the potential for pleasure. The contextual nature of pleasurable persuasion demands that all elements act in sync or in coordination through the processes of performance, negotiation, and recognition to prevent closure and to forge a mutual understanding. Any slight misalignment—whether in context creation, negotiation purposes, recognition abilities of the interlocutors, their motives, or discourse models they utilize—and the potential for persuasion may be short-circuited. The unique characteristics of online discussions yield unconventional enactments of persuasion, ones that sometimes fuse pleasure and play, thus expanding the boundaries of those conventional approaches.<sup>17</sup> By understanding the interrelated processes of performance, negotiation, and recognition in pleasurable persuasion, teachers can develop an array of pedagogical strategies that encourage and invite pleasure in face-to-face and online discussions, and, by so doing, extend that pleasure into a repertoire of alternative approaches to persuasion.

### Pleasure Matters: Developing a Praxis of Play for the Classroom

Pleasure through play is neither a superficial nor an irrelevant activity; it represents rhetorical risk-taking, experimentation, and improvisation. The emotions, interwoven with pleasure, offer students crucial alternatives to approaching and effecting persuasion that should not be dismissed. To persuade is to appeal through both emotion and reason. As Laura R. Micciche reminds us, “the exclusion of emotion positions reason as the grounds of rhetorical action, ultimately failing to acknowledge the complex aims and desires necessary to incite and achieve action” (164).<sup>18</sup> Because much scholarship highlights the role of reason in persuasion, I emphasize, in this last section, the importance of four emotional attitudes—adaptability, curiosity, creativity, and risk-taking—in developing

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of the limits of persuasion, see Corder’s “Argument as Emergence, Rhetoric as Love.”

<sup>18</sup> See also Lakoff for a discussion of the inextricable reciprocity of *logos* and *ethos* in persuasion.

a pedagogy of pleasurable persuasion, one that involves the participation and input of both teachers and students. Not only are teachers the initiators or facilitators of an environment that welcomes playful expressions of pleasure, students also bear some responsibility in issuing invitations to pleasure and being responsive to the invitations issued by others. Because play and pleasure are contextualized, instantiated, reciprocal processes, teachers and students who do accept those invitations may not persuade or be persuaded. Thus, no specific heuristic or formulaic recipe can guarantee the manifestation of pleasurable persuasion.

Online discussions have created dynamic ways for students to read, write, and learn with each other. Unlike conventional reading and writing approaches in face-to-face classroom situations, online webchats involve a tangible, immediate audience to whom students can express their opinions, who will in turn recognize and negotiate with those opinions. Particularly crucial to active learning is an understanding among students that these online discussions should nurture uncertainty, tolerate chaos, and resist closure. Students can test out new, inchoate ideas on their classmates. The particular subject positions writers choose to inhabit—positions that are determined in part by writers' interpretations of that audience and the audience responses to that writer—must attend to a multiplicity of views, opinions, and beliefs. Gee maintains that “real learning is always associated with pleasure and is ultimately a form of play—a principle almost always dismissed by schools” (*Situated* 71). The better teachers understand the quality of play and the dynamic of pleasure, the better we become at inviting and cultivating that play and pleasure.

Pleasurable persuasion may not manifest through a rigidly structured, externally imposed, rule-governed, and tightly orchestrated approach. Rather, teachers and students must participate as active learners with four attitudes that keep the process and product of learning dynamic. These attitudes are neither measurable goals nor fixed outcomes, neither linear nor predictable. The first is adaptability and managing complexity, or

the ability to alter one's behavior, thinking process, or attitude to to [sic] better respond to the needs of diverse contexts and environments in both today's world and the future; the ability to handle multiple objectives, tasks, and inputs, while responding to constraints of time, resources, and organizational or technological systems. (Warshauer 135)

In the third example, Maya, David, and Dina demonstrate a lack of adaptability and an unwillingness to manage complexity. Their individual understanding of the connotative meaning of “podium” is based on their own experiences, a subjective orientation that fails to account for multiplicity in uses and meanings. Maya's resolute belief—“a podium is a podium is a podium”—shuts down persuasion and limits pleasure. To create an environment where pleasurable persuasion may occur, students must embrace complexity. This aptitude for complexity can be seen in Donald Murray's suggestion that “the writer is constantly learning from the writing what it intends to say. The writer listens for evolving meaning. . . . The writing itself helps the writer see the subject” (7). The reciprocity among the writer, the reader, the process, and the product encourages an adaptability that we also see in the second example, when Spencer and Meredith open them-

selves to the vague, undetermined complexity of “nakedness of our language.” Both enter the outskirts of reason and meaning, crafting and questioning even as they try to hammer out a meaning both find acceptable. That adaptable aptitude where complexity is valued as a process and a product is crucial to nurturing pleasurable persuasion.

The second attitudinal orientation is curiosity, or the desire for inquiry that leads to knowledge. When students are curious, they seek out answers, remaining open to multiple possibilities. Rather than engage in a cursory search, which closes off multiplicity, students must commit to intellectual inquiry as both Spencer and Meredith do. Even as the phrase, “nakedness of our language,” attracts both students into a dialogue, they wonder what Marianne Moore or e. e. cummings would do. By contrast, Bryan uses the online discussion to exhibit his witty use of language but fails to spark interest in his classmates, even though the topic seems particularly enticing. Curiosity involves what Gee calls “deep learning,” learning that occurs not through formal instruction but through habituated cultural processes. Students must cultivate an intellectual identity with its attendant habits of questioning, reflecting, and evaluating. Pleasure goes hand in hand with the habit of curiosity.

In addition to curiosity, teachers and students must engage in creativity, “the act of making something that is new and original, whether to an individual or to a broader culture or society” (Warshauer 135). While creativity can take many forms, let me focus on one manifestation that relates to online discussions. As students develop persuasive arguments and enter into dialogue with one another, they balance between two stances: “uneasily hovering between regularity and repeatability on the one hand—the effect of social stabilities and of regulations erected around text to keep them close to ‘convention’—and the dynamic for constant flux and change on the other hand” (Kress 102). Students who are too conservative intellectually may simply parrot or repeat information from the textbooks and lecture. Students who are too resistant may have valuable insights that cannot be understood by the rest of the class because those insights are too transformative. Perhaps this tension is true of example two above where Maya evinces a simple, practical understanding of “podium,” while David and Dina do not make room for Maya’s ontology in their ideological interpretation of the podium. Creativity in online discussions may involve recontextualization:

“Lifting” a genre from one context and putting it in another (lifting it out of its “proper” social context and inserting it in another) is an innovative act, an act of creativity. It changes not just the genre, not just my relation to the text, but it changes also the new context in which it occurs. (104)

Even as Spencer draws on Genesis for his analogy, he is recontextualizing that concept for communication in an electronic age. Because online discussions are “more public, visible, and collaborative” (Warshauer 77), students can avail themselves of “a greater diversity of genres and formats in the laptop classroom. . . . most of this diverse writing would have been very difficult to achieve without computers” (79). This diversity requires creativity, both rhetorically and intellectually.

The final attitudinal orientation is risk taking, which involves “the willingness to make mistakes, put forth uncommon or unpopular positions, or take on difficult problems without clear solutions, so that one’s personal growth, integ-

riety, or achievements are enhanced” (Warshauer 135). In the three examples described above, only Spencer and Meredith demonstrate a willingness to enter unchartered intellectual territory, thus culminating in pleasurable persuasion. When teachers outline their expectations for electronic discussion, they tend to emphasize two areas—edecorum and intellectual work (Yancey 113). However, these two areas may stymie students’ propensity for taking risks and traversing unknown intellectual lands. Just as teachers must remember that much learning can emerge from intellectual play, they must decide in dialogue with their students how much “playfulness” they are comfortable with. For example, would teachers be comfortable if students accepted Bryan’s invitation by not only discussing but also using profanity in their webchats? Rather than develop esoteric, generalized statements of what is acceptable play, teachers and students must take into consideration the situated, contextual nature of play.

To facilitate positive, productive, intellectually stimulating online discussions, teachers and students need to be less fanatically devoted to middle-class propriety and taste (Bloom). Rather teachers might learn that online discussions invite quick moving verbal exchanges that integrate play and work in positive ways. Instead of monitoring and controlling for inappropriate linguistic behaviors in one or two comments by individual students, teachers could focus instead of the work achieved by an entire group interaction. If teachers begin to recognize that the symbiotic, reciprocal relationship between play and work promises benefits for students, then they might become aware of how play and pleasure might influence the culture of literacy in a traditional classroom setting. Through an open-minded and reflective engagement with these students’ discourse, we might consider how play undergirds the pleasure of persuasion and persuasion through pleasure. ☐

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## REVIEWS

Davis, Robert L., and Mark F. Shadle. *Teaching Multiwriting: Researching and Composing with Multiple Genres, Media, Disciplines, and Cultures*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2007.

Brad E. Lucas, Texas Christian University

In *Teaching Multiwriting*, Robert L. Davis and Mark F. Shadle draw on over a decade of teaching their students through engaged, active learning. Their pedagogy crosses disciplines, encourages inquiry and expression, and promotes a broad notion of composition that embraces the experiential, the non-discursive. Conjuring up a blues motif that echoes throughout the book, they aim to situate readers at a rich “crossroads” of literary texts, pedagogical strategies, and unusual artifacts that compose their “multiwriting” pedagogy. They aim “to strike balance between the theory-heavy approach to ‘resistant writing’ of Derek Owens and the more practice-oriented work of other precursors, including Tom Romano and Bruce Ballenger” (9). The end result is something hard to pin down, a style that left me both struggling against and embracing the book. Ultimately, I realized that *Teaching Multiwriting* exemplifies the creative energies in rhetoric and composition, encouraging us to avoid disciplinary complacency and to take pedagogical risks.

I like their blues analogy for its legacy of combined tradition and innovation (7), and they’ve inspired me to comp on their blues riff by extending the analogy to explain the style of *Teaching Multiwriting*. For blues guitarists, slide or bottleneck style is an expected part of the musical soundscape: simply put, a glass or steel tube (the slide) is moved along the top of the guitar strings to produce continuous changes in pitch. Fifteen years ago, I learned how to play slide only because one very shrewd bluesman reprimanded me to loosen up and stop trying to hit the “right notes.” Now, in reviewing this book, I’m reminded of that moment when I learned to play between the notes. I’m reminded as well of James Moffett’s warning that when we strive to categorize, we “trade a loss of reality for a gain in control” (23). Inversely, perhaps, readers of *Teaching Multiwriting* will better understand the reality of multiwriting if they come to the book without trying to pin it down—trying, instead, to hear what’s driving the performance. And much to their credit, Shadle and Davis acknowledge that their particular style doesn’t suit all tastes: “Some readers enjoy this approach; others do not” (9).

The texture and style of *Teaching Multiwriting* emerges through an essayistic exploration that runs parallel to their aims in the classroom. In Chapter One, “A Crossroads in Space and Time,” the authors elaborate on the “crossroads discourse” that they define as “a broader set of discursive practices that emerge at the crossroads of disciplines, cultures, political practices, values, ethnicities, histories, and ways of being. . . . a symbolic setting where new cultural forms can emerge” (15). Multiwriting emerges from this discourse, and Davis and Shadle argue that their pedagogy generates particular outcomes: inspiring excitement about learning, improving student retention and stimulating further learning, making students “hungry for discourse,” de-mystifying academic prose, and encouraging students “to be self-directed”

(26). Throughout the rest of the chapter, the authors situate their pedagogy amidst the likes of Geoffrey Sirc, Derek Owens, Winston Weathers, Tom Romano, and others, but quickly we see that still more enter the crossroads: jazz musician Miles Davis, novelist Michael Ondaatje, self-taught Tuvan throat singer Paul Pena, and NBA basketball player Richard “Rip” Hamilton. At the end of all chapters in *Teaching Multiwriting*, the authors provide classroom assignments written directly to a student audience, allowing us to shift attention from our positions as readers to the more immediate experiences our students might have when confronted with multiwriting work. Chapter One provides assignments for a discourse diary, a daily inquiry exercise, and an “autobiography of a question” project that encourages students: envision yourself “as a mystery” and “trace a question of importance to you” (49). Finally, this chapter—like the others in the book—ends with a summary of relevant readings and films.

In Chapter Two, “Research Writing as a Key to the Highway,” Shadle and Davis revisit discussions regarding inquiry-based research projects that reach beyond academic discourse. Here, too, the authors provide examples of assigned readings and make references to works in architecture, photography, travel, and other areas that pay attention to form and discovery. More importantly, they showcase some of their student projects in detail. Here I think *Teaching Multiwriting* can be the most useful for new teachers (or seasoned faculty) who need a sense of student capabilities in producing non-traditional texts, blending their discursive work with unexpected means of delivery. For example, one student presented a project on astronaut Christa McAuliffe via a scale model of the *Challenger* that crashed to reveal origami figures. Another student represented her autobiography through a display basket of message-in-a-bottles, signifying how she envisioned her disposition and distant memories. These student examples run throughout the book, and they help us see the possibilities in multiwriting that we might otherwise have to imagine. In the remainder of the chapter, the authors take us on an extended exploration of how their pedagogy “relates to the current conditions and history of discourse and inquiry” and opens “the academic practice of research writing to the larger history of human inquiry” (66-67). They take on these lofty goals by addressing ancient and postmodern views of history, invoking Bakhtinian heteroglossia and emphasizing the roles of travel and place. During these moments in *Teaching Multiwriting*, I reminded myself of their aspirations to balance theory and practice, for their aim here is only to articulate a rationale for the pedagogy rather than engage in the complexities of history, discourse, and inquiry. The chapter-end student assignments focus on recalling a travel event, considering imagination and place, and imagining a transformative travel event, a “dream trip.”

While the earlier chapters might help readers understand the wandering approach to research promoted through a multiwriting pedagogy, Chapter Three, “The Loose Talk of Persuasion,” explains how the pedagogy serves to counterbalance contemporary forms of persuasion, the agonistic “rhetoric of certainty,” by offering what they call “loose talk”: quieter modes of dialogue and invitation that seek not to overpower, dominate, or win. Knowing their sense of “loose talk,” I came to a greater understanding of *Teaching Multiwriting* as a book that aims not to present an airtight argument but to persuade us through “changes and on-going conversations that leave room for responses, pauses, and questions. . . . an invitation to new thoughts, encounters, actions, and forms” (99). Loose talk, like bottleneck slide guitar, takes us away from focusing on staid forms, opening up our ears instead to sounds that are new. But clearly, Davis and Shadle aren’t

advocating for only one view of rhetoric. The authors end the chapter by showing us how commonplaces, dialogue, and conventional ideas about argumentation can work well within a multiwriting pedagogy, especially one that focuses on crucial issues like war, genocide, globalization, or water issues.

In Chapters Four (“The Essay as a Cabinet of Wonder”) and Five (“Multiwriting Blues”), the authors let loose with extended discussions of the essay and the blues, respectively. As they have it, Chapter Four casts “the essay as a primordial way of ordering a world with too much in it to be fully explained or contained” and Chapter Five describes the blues “as a running commentary on living that keeps people going through the continuing difficulties and surprising joys of life” (163). Both chapters are thick with references to literary works, popular press books, music, art, archeology, music, history, and much more. Readers familiar with the essay, or the blues, will likely find both chapters a pleasure to work through, but in these chapters the pedagogy is underplayed, taking its best form in the end-sections: Chapter Four offers discussions of interviewing, inventory-taking, and the collection of artifacts; and Chapter Five asks students to consider forms and genres, service learning work, and multimodal exhibits of their work.

All in all, *Teaching Multiwriting* is an exuberant book that promotes the kind of pedagogical practices that I wish were more widespread. At times, Davis and Shadle take too much pride in the adoption and circulation of their unique pedagogy (33, 66), and the authors seem to neglect digital/new media work in favor of more traditional material forms; given how much time our students spend online and engaged in telephonic exchanges, I can’t help but wonder if the authors see their pedagogy as a corrective to rapid technological advances (or if and how students resist their multiwriting pedagogy as “not writing” or “not English”). I was particularly disappointed to find that—at the time of this writing—a companion website <http://www.mysteryhorn.org> was no longer in service, since it was apparently designed to facilitate the ongoing exchange of ideas and examples stemming from this book. Taking their cue, I was ready to explore, travel, and engage with others in loose talk about their mysteries and dream trips—and perhaps add a few of my own. Fortunately, I don’t need to go online to get started. ☹

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Moffett, James. *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*. 1968. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983

Beaufort, Anne. *College Writing and Beyond: A New Framework for University Writing Instruction*. Logan: Utah State UP, 2007.

Heidi Estrem, Boise State University

Anne Beaufort’s *College Writing and Beyond: A New Framework for University Writing Instruction* is another important piece in the mosaic of rich, contextualized studies of college writers over time. Along with Lee Ann Carroll’s *Rehearsing New Roles*, Ann Herrington and Marcia Curtis’s *Persons in Process*, and Marilyn Sternglass’s *Time to Know Them*, as well as ongoing studies at Harvard and Stanford, Beaufort’s book peels back another layer of understanding about the student writers that populate university classrooms. Unlike these

other studies, though, Beaufort's book focuses on only one writer in college and in the first few years in the workplace. Beaufort also goes beyond a solely descriptive naturalistic study to offer some conclusions and proposals for college writing instruction—a framework that challenges the prevailing models and extends our thinking about how people learn in purposeful ways. These two “stories” of the book—that is, the individual student in a writing class and curricular reform on an institutional level—are tales that many of us are intimately familiar with in our own institutions, and they raise pointed questions for those of us in composition (5).

The first and last chapters of the book center on the second story, the argument that a “more robust theory of writing instruction” would enhance students' experiences in first-year writing courses, in the Writing Center, and in writing-across-the-curriculum programs (16). These chapters point me toward a hopeful future for our field, one ripe with promises and challenges. Reading this as a writing program administrator, I feel again that familiar pull of paralysis: there is a lot to do; time is short; universities change slowly. What to do first, and where to start? Still, Beaufort's ideas push back at me to continue to work locally to enhance writing and writing instruction for students.

In the first chapter, “The Question of University Writing Instruction,” Beaufort addresses the challenges of writing instruction throughout the university. Because first-year writing is often taught as a “general skills” kind of course, Beaufort claims that students are “ill-prepared to examine, question, or understand the literacy standards of discourse communities they are encountering in other disciplines, in the work world, or in other social spheres they participate in” (11). Then, she discusses the challenges faced in discipline-based writing tasks: even though these courses have an intellectual content and frame, assignments in these courses too often focus on reading recall, and expert communicators have an especially hard time “making overt the knowledge about writing standards they have learned from a slow acculturation process, rather than by direct instruction” (15).

Beaufort then explores a conceptual model for writing expertise that gives her a framework for both analyzing her case study writer's experiences and for a reconceptualization of writing curricula in higher education. Expert writers, she claims, draw from five knowledge domains: writing process, subject matter, rhetorical knowledge, and genre knowledge; and all four of these are encompassed by discourse community knowledge, the fifth domain. All five domains are captured in a useful diagram in Chapter One (19). The framework of these knowledge domains leads to the book's hypothesis: “If we can articulate these knowledge domains and apply them to shaping curriculum, we can then contextualize writing instruction more fully and have a basis for teaching for transfer, i.e., equipping students with a mental schema for learning writing skills in new genres in new discourse communities they will encounter throughout life” (17). Articulating and integrating all of the knowledge domains and directly affecting curriculum across a university is a huge task she sets for the field and for herself, and it's one that I very much admire while simultaneously finding myself again breathless at the scope of the task.

The middle of the book (Chapters Two-Five) traces the writing experiences of Tim, an undergraduate Beaufort first met while conducting the research for another study on students learning to write in multiple contexts (27). In Chapter Two, “The Dilemmas of Freshman Writing,” Beaufort focuses on Tim's two con-

secutive first-year writing courses. Working through each knowledge domain outlined above, Beaufort demonstrates how these first-year writing courses—courses that Tim enjoyed and in which he did well—leave “un-named” so much of what was informing the course (42). Chapter Three, “Freshman Writing and First Year History Courses” documents and analyzes the writing that Tim did in his first major courses for history—during the same semesters he took freshman writing courses. Through a careful analysis of the comments Tim received on his work in history, Beaufort notes how the “epistemological expectations of the discourse communities of history and norms for genres and those of freshman writing differed greatly” (63). The expectations for writing in one course were significantly different from those in the other, and Tim lacked the specific tools to go about addressing these differences. The disservice to students like Tim, then, is that he was “not primed by teachers in either discourse community to understand different values and community purposes as they would affect writing goals, content, structure, language choice, rhetorical situation, etc.” (68).

Beaufort then moves into two chapters that focus on Tim’s writing experiences in two disciplines and three varying contexts: his coursework as a history major, his coursework as an engineering major, and his on-the-job writing experiences in an engineering firm. “Learning to Write History” (Chapter Four) explores the ways in which Tim sometimes mis-reads the conventions of the discourse community of history. As he worked through additional courses, his interviews began to reveal moments where he understood that he was “at least attempting to write within and against the discourse community of historians” (76). “Switching Gears: From History Writing to Engineering” (Chapter Five) traces Tim’s move from history course work to mechanical engineering course work and then workplace writing. As he moved into math and science courses, he didn’t lack just a “knowledge of these subjects,” but he also “needed to change his habits of thinking” (119). In the workplace, the context changed even more, and his purposes for writing—and the kinds of writing he did—also changed.

Chapter Six, “New Directions For University Writing Instruction,” draws from both the previous case study chapters and Beaufort’s own pedagogies to further the discussion of the nature of writing instruction in a university. This application and extension make it the central chapter of the book, and the one with the most serious implications for those of us who teach in universities. First, she asserts that a “developmental model for understanding writers’ growth [and] for designing curriculum . . . needs to encompass the five knowledge and skill domains used here to frame the analysis of a writer’s growth” (142). This model, which Beaufort has just used extensively as analytical framework, is then also her framework for curricular development. Despite Tim’s relative success with various writing contexts, she argues that novice writers “would probably produce writing at a much more expert level, more quickly, if they are explicitly taught genres in relation to social contexts in which they function” (146).

The second argument of this chapter is that universities need to do a better job planning and sequencing curricula and that “teachers in all disciplines should employ techniques that aid transfer of learning for writers” (149). For composition specifically, we should “teach those broad concepts (discourse community, genre, rhetorical tools, etc.) which will give writers the tools to analyze similarities and differences among writing situations they encounter” (149). We need to think more broadly in our curricula, this chapter argues, and we need to give up

the notion that teaching is an individual enterprise. She writes: “teacher autonomy should not be the primary criterion for curricular decisions when students’ developmental progress is at stake” (155). The enormity of sequencing and scaffolding writing instruction at the college level is real, and I appreciate Beaufort raising this issue. Still, I wonder what tight sequencing of courses might look like at a university like mine. Students change majors; they take courses out of sequence; they make decisions that challenge our best attempts to provide cohesion and consistency. Can we take on the ideal of teaching for transfer (151)? Absolutely. Does it require an incredible amount of patient, ongoing professional development, and realistic support from deans and others? Undoubtedly.

At the end of the book are two crucial pieces, depending on which “story” of the book intrigues you most. The epilogue (“Ten Years Later”) is an extended dialogue between Beaufort and “Carla,” the instructor of Tim’s two first-year writing courses. As a researcher, seeing these glimpses into how a research “subject” responds to the portrayal of her in the project is useful and insightful. And, finally, the first appendix outlines, in detail, the kinds of assignments Beaufort uses in her teaching of first-year writing, along with the rationale for how she aims to teach for transfer. This section will help instructors envision the curriculum—the “explicit” curriculum, based on these knowledge domains—that Beaufort mentions throughout the book. It also leaves the reader wanting more and wishing that we were ten years down the road, reading about students who have experienced a more explicit, more sequenced writing curriculum in college. As a writing program administrator and teacher of first-year writing, I appreciate the conversation that Beaufort’s book initiates and extends. If we’re listening, we should hear a lot of rich and unsettling questions about first-year writing, writing across the curriculum, and instruction in higher education. ☺

Mao, LuMing. *Reading Chinese Fortune Cookie: The Making of Chinese American Rhetoric*. Logan: Utah State UP, 2006.

Yufeng Zhang, Millersville University of Pennsylvania

As an English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) writing teacher in the United States, I have taught college composition to international students for about eight years now, and, during this time, I have worked with students from very diverse backgrounds. My teaching experience allows me to see that learning to write in a new language encompasses more than just the ability to correctly use grammar and vocabulary in that language; a more challenging aspect of writing is that the values and conventions of literacy can vary across cultures and contexts. What should students do when cultural conflicts arise in writing instruction, and what suggestions should we teachers provide? Should students preserve the discursive values and conventions of their home cultures and thus run the risk of being devalued and disadvantaged, or should they, in order to survive and succeed in America, completely embrace the “norm” of English writing (if that can be defined!) without question? The answer might lie in students’ own needs and life goals, but, as a teacher, I found LuMing Mao’s, *Reading Chinese Fortune Cookie: The Making of Chinese American Rhetoric* an enlightening and

insightful resource for addressing these complex questions. Mao proposes that border residents, including ESL students, should not constrain themselves to either the discourse of assimilation or the discourse of deficiency or difference (142); instead, they should construct a new rhetoric by negotiating between and reflecting upon various rhetorical differences.

To start, how is the Chinese fortune cookie related to the making of Chinese American rhetoric? What does this process involve? What is the significance of the making of Chinese American rhetoric? Mao addresses these fundamental questions in both the introduction and the first chapter. First, Mao explains that the making of Chinese American rhetoric is analogous to the birth of the Chinese fortune cookie in that they both invoke different traditions: the Chinese fortune cookie, for example, is an integration of a Chinese tradition of using message-stuffed pastry as a means of communication and a European American tradition of serving dessert at the end of a meal (4); similarly, Chinese American rhetoric “selects and invents from both Chinese rhetorical tradition and European American rhetorical tradition” (22). As a hybrid discourse, Chinese American rhetoric is born of not only the experiences of Chinese Americans, but also the interactions between Chinese Americans and European Americans.

Very often, emergent discourses establish and distinguish themselves by underscoring their unique discursive features in relation to other more dominant or recognized discourses. This, as Mao asserts, only reinforces the existing hierarchy, which is exactly what emergent discourses set out to challenge in the first place. Therefore, the making of Chinese American rhetoric should take a different path: instead of demonstrating any internally coherent, distinctive, or fixed characteristics, it is a process of “adjusting and becoming” (17). Mao further emphasizes the “togetherness-in-difference” nature of the Chinese American rhetoric, that is, when different rhetorical practices intertwine and coexist with each other. On the one hand, in a world that is becoming increasingly interdependent and interconnected, this hybrid ethnic rhetoric blurs the boundary between Chinese and European American rhetorical practices, empowers its users at rhetorical borderlands by providing “the potential for positive change and transformation,” and thus allows border residents to represent their experiences with their own voices; on the other hand, not immune from the influence of asymmetrical relations of power, the emergent Chinese American rhetoric “entails necessary perils, too—perils of misunderstanding, misrepresentation, and outright rejection” (3), or perils of being simply ignored.

Throughout the rest of the book, Mao specifies the encounters and conflicts between Chinese rhetoric and European American rhetoric at the borderlands, and illustrates how awarenesses of and reflections on the differences between the two rhetorics contribute to the making of Chinese American rhetoric. With reference to Chinese culture, language, history, and philosophy, he clarifies some common misconceptions about Chinese rhetoric; in doing so, he reiterates the significance of the rhetoric of togetherness-in-difference: without it, it is hard for different discourses to “face each other without prejudice and without the ‘othering’ impulse” (59). More specifically, in Chapter Two, Mao shows how the concept of face, “a regularly invoked discursive construct in Chinese rhetorical repertoire” (27) that has been misconstrued and misrepresented by Western scholars, has impacted Chinese rhetoric and the making of Chinese American rhetoric. Consisting of two aspects, *lian* and *mianzi*, Chinese face puts a great emphasis on the interconnectedness between self and community. According to Mao, Chi-

nese and Chinese American writers' discursive practices—such as preferences for proverbs, literary citations, and canonical precedents—can be explained by the concept of Chinese face, as they are rhetorical strategies that help writers establish their authority and demonstrate their “membership and conviction in this larger social-cultural environment” (41). Just as Chinese face practices should not be replaced by European American “common sense” (36), these rhetorical practices should not be viewed as inadequate or subordinate.

In Chapter Three, Mao focuses on the indirection in Chinese rhetoric, a visible communication style that has been taken out of its cultural context and thus greatly under appreciated. Drawing upon fundamental features of Chinese culture and language, the author argues that Chinese indirection, instead of simply being regarded as nontransparent, indecisive, or incoherent, should be reevaluated (73). First, in terms of correlative thinking, a notion that characterizes Chinese culture, Chinese indirection should not be viewed as an opposition to American directness; just like yin and yang (an example of correlative thinking), these two communication styles are actually complementary to each other. Second, Chinese indirection can be accounted for by the contextualized nature of the Chinese language: there is a tendency in Chinese “to cluster initially a range of conditions as causes for a particular event that follows, or to provide a frame of reference that precedes the presentation of facts or events” (72). In addition, because of the “discursive interdependence” of the Chinese language, that is, the meaning of a word highly depends on other words it is associated with, discursive contextualization is especially important in Chinese (73). Therefore, rhetorical moves in Chinese discourses, such as the use of analogies, allusions, and anecdotes which might seem irrelevant to a writer's major argument, can actually be meaning-making strategies that guide readers to interpret the text. With reference to both his personal experience and other discursive examples, Mao further illustrates how Chinese indirection and American directness can complement each other and achieve togetherness—in difference.

Along the same line of argument, in Chapter Four, Mao responds to the common characterization of Chinese rhetoric as lacking originality and individualism. He points out that this accusation is biased and problematic because it attempts to understand Chinese rhetoric in terms that are non-Chinese and neglects the large sociocultural context that shapes this discourse. According to Mao, the ideology of individualism is not universal or locally Chinese; first introduced into the Chinese language at the turn of the twentieth century, the word “individualism” carries a negative connotation of self-centeredness in Chinese, which may explain why it is not strongly promoted in Chinese discourses. More importantly, as Mao emphasizes, individualism is not the only way to realize original or individual expression; the discourse of *shu* or reciprocity, which “puts individuals in connection with each other” and “calls on individuals to situate their discursive performances” within the large social, cultural context, is capable of developing creativity and originality as well (114). In an effort to do justice to Chinese rhetoric by understanding it on its own terms and in its own context, the development of the discourse of *shu* also means to initiate and engage a dialogue to “interrogate the ideology of individualism” (121). Once again, reflections and encounters like this are part of the making of Chinese American rhetoric.

In Chapter Five, the author moves the setting for the creation of Chinese American rhetoric from classroom discussions to the street. By presenting and analyzing

real written texts produced by Chinese Americans in response to offensive racist remarks against the Chinese community in Cincinnati, Mao shows how Chinese American rhetoric helps its users claim their agency and effect change in the contact zones. Through his thorough analysis, Mao successfully connects and illustrates the concepts and theories mapped out in the previous chapters, which strengthens his argument for the rhetoric of togetherness-in-difference. For instance, he demonstrates how the writers of the sample texts negotiate between Chinese face and European American face, employ the strategies of both directness and indirection, and practice the discourse of *shu* by connecting to the people and city leaders of Cincinnati with this new, hybrid Chinese American rhetoric. In the next concluding chapter, Mao returns to the topic of the Chinese fortune cookie again, but this time, he highlights its differences from the making of Chinese American rhetoric; for instance, Chinese American rhetoric is not as “easily identifiable” as the Chinese fortune cookie (145). In doing so, the author signifies the implications and challenges for making this, or any other, ethnic rhetoric.

As a native Chinese now living in the United States, I am quite familiar with the features Mao details in this book concerning Chinese and American rhetorics, cultures, histories, philosophies, and languages. However, what I have found inspiring and eye-opening is the convincing way he integrates and connects all of these elements to make a strong case for the making of Chinese American rhetoric. In a world that is getting more and more multicultural at every level, anyone can benefit from reading this book, especially from its message of mutual understanding, respect, and coexistence. ☺

Reynolds, Nedra. *Geographies of Writing: Inhabiting Places and Encountering Difference*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2004.

William FitzGerald, Rutgers University/Camden

I write this review sitting in the library of Haverford College, my alma mater. In a vaulted wing housing a collection of art books, surrounded by panels of oak and portraits in oil, I can look up from my work—as I too frequently do—and gaze through high arched windows on an improbably perfect landscape of academe: nineteenth-century buildings of honey-hued stone, venerable trees, lush lawn on which, this lovely day in May, various students recline, readying for finals. Indeed, ever since career opportunities brought me to live within walking distance of my old undergraduate haunt, this library is a site away from home to which I retreat for serious writing. At times, when I enter this space, the twenty-odd years that have elapsed since my student days are elided through the force of memory, and I am transported by familiar sights, sounds, and smells to another time. This is surely one reason I come: to experience a palpable connection to a place that has shaped me, even as I have journeyed onward to and through other places. The writing I do here now is marked by that journey as well as it is anchored by experiences, including memories, of this place. It is fitting, I think, that such experiences of place come into sharp focus in reading Nedra Reynolds’s *Geographies of Writing*, a book that has much to tell about the insufficiently explored, yet profound, connections between writing and place. Reynolds breaks

new ground here by applying perspectives drawn from the discipline of geography to composition studies. The result is an ambitious, if occasionally strained, effort that both orients and challenges the field of composition to see activities of writing in quintessentially spatial terms.

Reynolds frames this task in an “Introduction” that instructively recounts Plato’s *Phaedrus* and its prescient concerns with the relationship between discourse and place. Breaking with habit by walking with Phaedrus beyond Athenian walls, Socrates exposes himself both to risks that come with boundary-crossing and, stopping to engage in dialogue at a site rich in mythological import, to inspiration borne of the locale. This iconic scene serves Reynolds in her intentions to consider “spatial practices of the everyday” and their effects on writing; conceived in terms of “walking, mapping and dwelling,” each activity becomes a focus of later chapters (2). Her first chapter, “Between Metaphor and Materiality,” offers a boundary-crossing survey of postmodern theory on space with particular emphasis on the work of Edward W. Soja, whose *Thirdspace*—building on Henri LeFebvre’s *The Production of Space*—articulates a “trialectics of spatiality,” a rejection of binaries involving space and time in favor of an understanding that space is simultaneously perceived, conceived, and lived (16). Doing so allows Reynolds to critique composition’s “imagined geographies,” those spatial metaphors, such as discourse communities and conceptions of writing as travel, that may ignore material dimensions of literacies, including matters of privilege, access, and difference (27).

In Chapter Two, Reynolds examines the discipline of geography, specifically cultural geography, for what the field’s “visual epistemology” might contribute to composition’s own ways of seeing (51). Here begins a series of ethnographic accounts of geography’s lived realities as an academic discipline that Reynolds bases upon her experiences as a participant observer in a department of geography at the University of Leeds in Great Britain, where, unlike in the United States, geography remains a popular field of study. Her profile of the research and teaching activities she encountered at Leeds are among the most engaging elements of her project. In this initial account, Reynolds recognizes the singular importance of cartography in representing geographic knowledge and offers the activities involved in “reading landscapes” (60) as an analogue to composition’s increasingly visual practices. Reynolds would also have us recognize the immersive activity of walking as a spatially conceived way of seeing and offers the modernist figure of the *flâneur*, or urban rambler (69), who both walks and writes the city landscape he typically traverses. Rather than view *flanerie* merely in historical terms, Reynolds seeks to rescue this figure as one who “embodies method” through “an approach to street life, a way of moving through the world, collecting, arranging, and remembering, dependent on seeing” (70). Indeed, following Reynolds, one might think of the contemporary blogger as a virtual *flâneur*, navigating the labyrinthine paths of cyberspace.

Chapters Three and Four can be considered in tandem, for each is rooted in Reynolds’s research sabbatical in Leeds. Chapter Three focuses on mapping, especially the kinds of mental maps we construct and follow in daily living through the “habitual pathways” we take routinely and the “contested places” we lay claim to or often avoid in fear (78). Reynolds illustrates these concepts through extensive interviews with geography students at Leeds, who share their experiences with the city’s neighborhoods, parks, and transportation arteries. What stands out in these interviews is the juxtaposition of richly detailed familiarity with parts of the city and relative ignorance of others, often in surprising proximity. This contrast is further examined

in the following chapter, where Reynolds introduces the notion of “streetwork”—a variant on fieldwork—to describe how geographies of difference are experienced at close range in urban environments. Contrasting images of a sanitized, Disneyfied “mainstreet” with the more chaotic street life of many cultures, Reynolds frames the street as that “realandimagined space” where difference is encountered (93). Her own fieldwork here describes the research activities of geography students engaging in ethnographic streetwork in various communities in and around Leeds, an activity, she observes, whose methodology holds lessons for service learning initiatives in composition, initiatives which may underestimate forces of resistance in place when negotiating difference.

In a final, compelling chapter, “Learning to Dwell,” Reynolds turns from the spatiality of movement and vision to that of “habitation and embodiment” (140). For Reynolds, dwelling, conceived as “a set of practices as well as a sense of place,” has much in common with spatial practices related to textual production (140). She thus underscores that writing, too, is a mode of habitation; we inhabit discourses as well as assemble various habits that “go with us” in navigating other textual domains (140). Reynolds further emphasizes the degree to which our embodied practices, including acts of writing, necessitate encounters with difference, of gender, race, class, and ability, among others—not always protective or comforting—whenever we leave our homes and venture out, materially or metaphorically. With this insight, Reynolds identifies various practices within university culture illuminated by concepts of habitation and geographies of difference. She stresses the attendant difficulties of navigating across borders by offering the example of first-generation college students surveying the alien terrain of the academy and characterizes inhabiting contested spaces like the discourses of current composition studies as a conversation among theorists “from different neighborhoods” (164). She closes this chapter by briefly examining spatial practices of textual production both in material terms, such as the composition of texts in “crowded computer labs” (168) and the challenges of collaborative writing, and in more metaphorical spaces involving the canon of arrangement and the use of electronic slideware.

These snapshots demonstrate an effort, if one not entirely successful, to close the circle between theory and practice in an otherwise intriguing, highly significant study. One concludes *Geographies of Writing* with a sense of the deep connection between the social construction of space and the enactment of those constructions in discourse. What to do with that perception remains, no doubt by design, work yet to be performed both by Reynolds and by her readers in the multiple contexts in which composition and its instruction take place. In many respects, her book enacts the very methods—of walking, mapping, and dwelling—it articulates. That is, Reynolds emerges as something of a *flâneur* herself, navigating vibrant streets and busy intersections and recording impressions in something of the manner, one comes to realize, of a collage. If readers expect a resolute linear model of exposition and juxtaposition of diverse elements into a potentially coherent whole, some of *Geographies of Writing* may prove disorienting. However, as Reynolds eloquently insists, resisting that easy binary is her challenge—and ours. ☐

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# Connecting: Exponential Complexity

## Section Editor's Message

Is history speeding up, or are we doing the speeding? Picture yourself in a little bumper car with an infinitely complex overhead grid in interconnected rooms with multiple layers of floors and, of course, other shiny bumper cars everywhere. Six degrees of separation seems a good way to view not just your relationship with Kevin Bacon but with everything animal, vegetable, or mineral. In the February 29, 2008, issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Russell Jacoby satirized “the new academic tongue” for its heavy sprinkling of “complicates, multiplicities,” and “complexifies.” Academe may overdo the verbiage, but the sentiment makes sense to me.

We get regular validation of physics's fairly new theory of complementarity on the nightly news. There are the melting arctic glaciers affecting trans-hemispheric hurricanes, tsunamis, and droughts. Policies for illegal immigrants crossing the Mexican-U.S. border affect my hometown's unemployment statistics. And the most omnipresent connection of everything under the sun, the internet, is even called “the web.” This layer upon layer of complexity is our daily experience, our life truth.

This is what I like about the narratives for this issue: they speak of this truth. They recognize that what happens among our students and us, in and outside of our classrooms, inside and outside of ourselves, is quite the complicated process, all part of a widening and deepening teaching/learning process. For me, these narratives illustrate the beauty of this new interdependence, this dynamic back-and-forth flow of energy that engages more of our humanity than ever before.

Our students' writing processes are far more complicated than, perhaps, we can ever understand, although we must try to. They involve their emotional, social, and spiritual intelligences as well as their reason. And, what is even more complex, their continually dynamic processes are interwoven with our own processes as we engage in theirs.

We surely want to come to grips with our students and ourselves as whole human beings, and this time in history seems to be rooting for us. We have likely spent far too much energy far too long keeping parts of our whole isolated. There is a lot to learn, so let's think of these stories as gentle teachers. One small event at a time. Stories of someone else's struggles—of survival, since each one lived to tell the tale, which means we will likely survive as well.

Louise Morgan shows how involved our egos can get with our students, how special the moments are when we get free. She also shows us the widening parameters of the “classroom.” Danielle Sahn presents a light-hearted look at the complex issue of societal roles, which some of our writing students as well as some of us contend with in the search for identity. Laurence Musgrove writes of his realizations about emotions in the mix. Rae Ann DeRosse's narrative reminds us that some problems are so complicated that deeper questions are their legacy. Joonna Smitherman Trapp makes it clear that students can be our best teachers, and Beverly Faxon “complicates” the notion of what writing instruction can be. All gentle reminders that, although this teaching life is one big demanding endeavor, we, along with Laurence Musgrove, can applaud the “celebration and laughter, the crazy enthusiasm and embrace of the privilege to teach and to meet semester after semester new souls, minds, bodies, hearts, passions, and pains.”

# Email about the Ego

Louise Morgan

Dear Helen,

What does the ego have to do with teaching? Plenty. I am watching Eckart Tolle talk to Oprah tonight on Webcast about the ego construction. The purpose of the ego is to have a “place” for thoughts . . . an identification of the one having the thoughts with the thoughts themselves. I construct this thought, this role: teacher. But time and time again my students “spit” on that role. They have no construct as student that tells them to honor my role as teacher. In fact, truth be told, they may have labeled teacher as oppressor. White oppressor. Is this why they don’t see me? Because they have me labeled? Or because I have labeled myself? I don’t know. I do know there is something I want to shed about this label. My students say, “I don’t like how teachers get all up in your face.” I don’t want to be in their faces. I want to be in their hearts. How do I do it?

I feel close to doing it in occasional, very small “feeling tones”: one sunshiny day, Jamisha asks to run the track. She races around, and I decide to simply join in the oval and walk my own pace. Soon, she says, “Hey, Ms. Morgan.” And she catches up to me.

I am struck by her beauty, her muscled grace, and I tell her, “You are so beautiful.”

She smiles and turns a cartwheel. “You know, I am trying to hold it together.” She goes through a litany of her desires: “I want to quit smoking, I want to go to college, I want to take care of myself.” We talk a bit about her identity. Her latest issue is dating a much older woman. Her mother is furious. Jamisha wants to move out. She says her mother is dating a crack head; why should she listen to her anyway?

The conversation goes beyond my ability to grasp. The complications baffle me. I am not Aisha, the social worker who sorts through teenage drama finding the meaning and motives for actions and reactions. It all spirals into some kind of mishmash to me. I do better staying present. “Jamisha, you are so athletic. Are you comfortable in your own skin? With your sexual identity?” I go there with her because it is a present moment, not rehashing the past.

She walks with a lilt, “Yeah, I feel like a woman. I don’t want to hide that. It’s who I am.”

So here we are walking the track. Who are we—really? A white teacher, a black student? A heterosexual, a homosexual? We breathe and walk, breathe and walk.

I don’t know if I am being a teacher. I know that I want to be present at this moment for Jamisha. I appreciate my students today. I appreciate Jamisha now, in these moments when my ego is vanquished. ☹️

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*Louise Morgan teaches in an inner city school in Harrisburg, PA, writes plays, and is finishing up a second master’s in education. She hikes the Appalachian Trail and currently performs Theatre for Personal Transformation-New Life Scripts.*

# The Poet Rewritten

Danielle Sahn

With a few variations, the encyclopedia article generally begins when fate takes the young poet (born in such-and-such a year, dead three decades later), and sets him aside from the rest of humanity. Dark skies glower over his birthplace and the rumble of thunder announces his arrival to the world. A careful observer might, if he or she looked closely, see the mark of genius glowing surreally on the baby's smooth, ivory brow.

In the second paragraph, the article will usually inform us that, soon after his birth, one or both of his parents died in tragic disasters or wasting illnesses. And, unfortunately, any surviving parents are completely incapable of understanding the poet's true nature. The father, if he lives, has inevitably made his fortune in some business or other and will insist that his son follow in his profitable and practical footsteps. If the poet complies, he is miserable; if he rebels, he is disowned. On the other hand, if the mother survives to raise her child, she often hires a governess to keep the boy out of her way. While she and her friends laugh and sip champagne in their vivid swaying evening gowns, the poet stays in his poorly-lit playroom, taking no interest in his toys and trying to remember what his father looked like.

More often than not, the encyclopedia article will tell us that the great poet only has room in his heart for one true romance, and that woman is inevitably either forbidden by law or fatally ill. Either way, he cannot have her, and the passionate but unrequited desire eats at him until he becomes incapable of loving at all. After that first and only romance, he ruins woman after woman with his despair and infidelity. Sometimes he marries one of these women in a desperate attempt to avoid a lifetime of loneliness, but they never make each other happy. And even on his honeymoon, the silver light of the moon pouring through the half-shuttered windows makes him think not of his love, but of the coldness of his approaching death.

Toward the end, the encyclopedia article waxes eloquent on the poet's tragically short life, which ends in a sinking ship or in the unfamiliar bed of a foreign hotel. And then, in the thin white space between the end of the poet's biography and the beginning of the next article, the encyclopedia whispers to its readers, "If you want to be great, then pay attention because this is what makes a great poet."

So, taking its advice, we gather up our knowledge. We have learned from this and other sources that the great poets were plagued by either their poverty or their wealth; their parents were either dead, dying, or heartless; and they wrote from the very center of their despair, in the anguished cry of their hurting souls. Suffering followed them like a shadow, like a storm cloud, like a perpetually falling evening.

For some of us who want to produce great work, this formula presents a problem. We were born in hospitals on sunny days. We played games with other children, went to summer camp, and didn't learn to read until we were five. Our

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*Danielle Sahn is a senior English major at Messiah College. Her poetry and prose have been accepted by The Minnemingo Review, The Best of First Year Seminar, and the Writing Lab Newsletter. She enjoys traveling and bird watching and is currently working on her first novel.*

parents are living members of the working middle class who anxiously read Dr. Spock to find out how long they should breast feed. And we do not, except on rare occasions, feel anything approaching despair. There are no monsters in our heads, no tragedies trailing us, and no desperate motives driving us.

The tradition of great writers traces the progression of isolation, despair, death. It asks us to struggle against our good health and happiness, and to embrace darkness instead of light.

But some, as they stare at the empty page or blank screen and desperately want to fill it with the rich texture of their lives, realize that the poet of genius does not need to be a man pursued by melancholy and despair. In fact, the poet doesn't need to be a man at all. The poet can be a woman, young and inexperienced, who wants to remind the blind and wandering world of the incredible, inviolate goodness of life.

Perhaps someday the encyclopedia will be filled with articles like this:

In her youth, she played in the sun, in the water, in the dirt, with her friends. Not even a careful observer would have suspected any genius. Her parents, both kind and loving, encouraged her to do whatever she wanted as long as it made her happy. They sent her to a public school where she gained no particular distinctions, and, when she declared her intention of becoming a writer, they asked only that she dedicate one of her books to them. Eventually, she fell in love with a clever, loyal man who, she suspected, loved her for the whole of her being. And she wrote when she had time, and when she had something to say, and even when she didn't have time or anything to say.

And life went on from there. It wasn't always easy; no life ever is. But even when times were a little tough—when she was between jobs, or received a rejection letter in the mail—she was always essentially, unalterably happy, and what she wrote flowed out of her happiness like green growth from dark, heavy soil. ☺

## People, Get Ready

Laurence Musgrove

Like many faculty members, I'm starting to get ready for the fall semester. I'm preparing syllabi, and I'm sending my textbook orders to the campus bookstore. I'm putting some resources on Blackboard, I'm waiting to hear where my classes will be located, and I've incorporated my school's academic calendar into my own: general faculty meetings, Labor Day, Thanksgiving break, finals week, and so forth.<sup>1</sup>

Also, I'm getting myself ready for the emotional demands of teaching. In the past, I never made my students' emotional needs a priority. When they came to my office with this or that teary-eyed story about why the paper would be late, I

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*Laurence Musgrove is an associate professor of English and director of the general education program at Saint Xavier University in Chicago. He is also the treasurer and membership chair of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning.*

<sup>1</sup> This article is reprinted with permission from *Inside Higher Ed*, July 23, 2007. <[www.insidehighered.com/views/2007/07/23/musgrove](http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2007/07/23/musgrove)>.

just waved them off. I'd say, "No reason to explain. Just get it to me as soon as you can." No tissue box in my office. No time for tears. See you later, alligator.

I also told my writing students to change all instances of "I feel" to "I think" in their papers. They were there to learn how to be critical thinkers, not to share feelings. After all, how were they going to provide clear and verifiable evidence for those kinds of claims? Focus on what's up there in your head, no. . . uh, you know, wherever your feelings happen to come from.

Sad to say, that's been my story. Not that I'm a cold fish. I've learned over time that my feelings about my family, children, students, and colleagues are pretty much an open book; in other words, I'd never make it to the final table of the World Series of Poker. My wife can easily tell the crabby Laurence from the sad Laurence from the confused Laurence. Marcel Marceau I ain't; still, my face is a pretty accurate map of my emotional life. And it's a life I've tried to ignore, especially on the job.

Why? Well, I think I'm beginning to arrive at some answers. Earlier this summer, I was attending a conference at the YMCA of the Rockies in Estes Park, Colorado, sponsored by the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning, an affiliate of the National Council of Teachers of English. The organizers of this conference selected the topic "The Emotional Life of Teachers," and they invited Peter Elbow, author of *Writing Without Teachers*, to be one of the featured speakers.

During a morning plenary session, he asked us to reflect upon the emotional logic of our teaching, to play "the believing game" when it came to the feelings we have about our students and our work. According to Elbow, the believing game is refraining from doubt, and, in this case, purposefully accepting the truth of those feelings to better understand them. In other words, he asked us to commit to the idea that our feelings made sense and to identify why the emotions we have are the emotions we have.

As you can imagine—that is, if you know anything about Elbow's work—we also engaged in quite a bit of freewriting about this topic. And as I was writing along, opening myself to whatever came my way, two very simple things struck me. First, emotions take time. Second, we probably need reminding which emotions got us into teaching in the first place.

Emotions demand a different kind of schedule. They put the brakes on the frantic rush of our daily lives. Thus, feelings get swept aside because they slow us down, they make us late for class, they spill out in a mess, and they produce unnecessary conflicts. They simply interfere with the clockwork of teaching and learning. They have no place in the faculty meeting because they aren't on the agenda. They have no place in the classroom because they can't be tested or multiple-choice'd. And in this age of setting and measuring outcomes, what can't be assessed certainly shouldn't be included.

Emotions also reveal how unprepared we are for them. Sure, some of us stand more at the ready than others, but emotional readiness as a topic of study in education scholarship focuses almost exclusively on the emotions of pre-school and elementary students, not college teachers. In addition, the emotions we generally think of or encounter are negative or hurtful, like fear, anger, and sadness. When we characterize colleagues or students as emotional, they are overly dramatic, out of control, or just can't be reasoned with. We say, "Why can't they get a grip? Can't they see how much time they're wasting?"

In an effort to do a better job of accepting the emotional reality of my pro-

fession, I made an important decision this summer. In the past, when a student or colleague came into my office with a look of concern, I always asked, “What’s on your mind?” I now realize this question is sorely insufficient. If I really want to get to “the heart of the matter,” I have to take the extra time to ask questions that explore the emotional dimensions of that concern. I also have to take the extra time to explore and express my own, to dignify the full humanity of that concern and that person.

Finally, and especially as we approach the new school year, I feel we need to recall the emotional logic of choosing our careers in the first place.

Wasn’t it the joy of learning? And wasn’t it the joy of teaching? Wasn’t it the passion-filled hallelujah of the miracle of our students’ lives? The celebration and laughter, the crazy enthusiasm and embrace of the privilege to teach and to meet semester after semester new souls, minds, bodies, hearts, passions, and pains?

Who else gets to do what we do? Who else gets the glorious privilege to teach what we teach? Who else gets to read what we read? Who else gets to live in the continually increasing variety and wealth of ideas? Who else gets to see and recognize and argue for the gifts our students don’t even see in themselves? Who else recognized the joy we felt at the joy our teachers felt in seeing our futures for us? Who else heard the honest soul-piercing *yes* that affirmed us? Who else gets to join the choir?

Who sings this? I mean, who lifts their voices in song about this miracle? Who bows before it? Who recognizes the undeserved grace of this joy? Which of us thanks our students for coming into our lives? Who says “Amen” to the love we receive from this joy? In all creation, sky to earth, ocean to ocean, man, woman, parent, child, teacher, student, animal, plant, rock, and soul, in all creation: why us? Why this joy?

I say, people, get ready, there’s a train a-coming. ☺

## Authority Issues

Rae Ann DeRosse

During our first conference—in which we discussed his first essay about alcoholism—Sam told me that he “wanted to experiment,” and so he got drunk while he wrote the essay. “Is that a problem? Am I going to get in trouble?”

I laughingly responded, “I’m not your mother; you’re not going to get in trouble with me.”

At first, I thought nothing of Sam’s behavior in my classroom: the way he would compliment me, his implicitly sexual body language, and his continual disrespect of my “authority.” Since authority is something I already had difficulty assuming in the classroom because it seems to run counter to my desire for a democratic learning space, when Sam would talk while I was talking, I blew it off.

When he came to me during free-writing time, however, to ask me if I would

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*Rae Ann DeRosse is a Ph.D. student and Graduate Teaching Assistant at the University of North Carolina in Greensboro. Her primary research interests are postcolonial studies, composition studies, and Caribbean literature. She currently teaches composition and introductory literature courses.*

read his “story” because he was thinking of putting it in his portfolio and it might be “too mature,” my heart fell. I knew I did not want to read the piece, but as his teacher I felt manipulated into doing so; what kind of writing teacher refuses to read her student’s work?

I tried to tell myself it would be fine, that his version of “mature” probably meant drug and alcohol abuse. Instead, his paper contained the sordid details of a tumultuous sexual relationship and all of the resulting violent sexual fantasies. Here was Sam in the full embodiment of his male aggression, and I was frightened. I was angry too because he certainly had manipulated me into reading this writing.

Had I encouraged him in some way? Should I have coldly shut him down when he complimented me? Sternly admonished him for talking while I was talking? Refused to read his work? I still don’t know what I should have done, but I eventually did have to assert my authority when he ignored my request not to attend class until we could meet with the composition director. After our eventual meeting, at which he “apologized” very unapologetically, Sam voluntarily dropped my course.

Although I was relieved, the situation with him has made an indelible impact on me. When I walk around campus, I look over my shoulder. I wonder if I’ll pass him in the halls, and, if I do, how I will react. The worst part, though, is how this situation has affected my relationship with my other students. I am now slightly colder, a little more distant, especially with the males. I wonder if they realize it and whether it hurts my effectiveness in the classroom. I am also trying to use my authority issue with Sam to be more thoughtful and creative in establishing democracy in the classroom. Learning is, after all, what teaching is about. ☹

## The Importance of Being Ernie

Joanna Smitherman Trapp

Ernie was not a particularly good student. He was one of those guys who show up in my college writing class every semester because they have to, one of those whose name I forget a couple of semesters later, a typical Midwestern student—too polite, too eager to please, too earnest.

Overly tall, lanky, bright red hair, his face a field of freckles, Ernie seemed to be a favorite of his classmates. I quickly discovered why. He loved people; his thin frame became waving hands and nodding head in the presence of others. And his smile struck me as amazingly genuine. He loved people much more than he did writing or reading. Oh, I was fond of him, but I quickly wrote him off as a writer. No need to invest in him. No need to pay much attention. It was the common attitude I developed with such students. An okay student. He will do fine—high C or low B. He won’t need special help to survive, and he certainly will not warrant any extra mentoring.

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*Joanna Smitherman Trapp is Associate Professor at Northwestern College, a small private Iowan college in the liberal arts tradition where she teaches rhetoric, writing, film, and literature. Her current research projects include M. Night Shyamalan, antebellum Southern oratory, and the American gothic.*

At mid-semester I read his portfolio. No real surprises. Some progress. Some effort. B minus.

But one of his papers kept nagging at me. In this paper, Ernie talked about wrestling—why he did it, what it gave him, and why he stopped doing it. The paper was a standard essay, nothing especially noteworthy for my attention as a writing instructor. But running in and out and underneath the positive narrative was this feeling of regret, and I couldn't stop thinking about how sad and final that attitude felt in his writing. The sense of regret kept haunting me primarily because I didn't believe that Ernie consciously intended to show any regret in having quit wrestling. In fact, I wasn't even sure that he knew he felt regret. But it was there. I had to talk to him—not about writing but about why he left wrestling. I asked him to stop by.

He was nervous as I handed him his portfolio. "Is there a problem? I know I'm not a very good writer, Mrs. Trapp."

"There's nothing wrong with your writing." I saw him visibly relax. "It's about wrestling in general." I began then to ask him a series of questions about why he had quit wrestling. As the story unfolded, it became clear that he felt forced by his own physical limitations to give up something he loved. Tears glistened in his eyes as he talked. I finally just blurted out my opinion. "I don't think you are done with wrestling yet. You should think about it." We had some more conversation and a quick hug, and he left.

I took note some time later that he had indeed rejoined the wrestling team. Good deed for the week, I thought, even though it felt strange to need to talk to a student about wrestling. I was glad I said something. Move on.

The awkward Ernie, much loved, was voted President of the Student Government Association his senior year. I was baffled. Ernie? When it was his turn to speak at graduation as the representative of the student body, I was a little embarrassed by his talk. Was this the best we had to show to parents and guests? I wished Ernie had sent me a copy of his talk to preview. I wished he had valued his social life less and his education more.

Ernie graduated, and I stopped thinking of him unless he stopped by to say hello or took the time to write a quick email. I always noticed in his emails that he still wasn't a wonderful writer. Ever the writing teacher.

One day in the summer, Ernie showed up in my office, sweating from the heat of the Iowa sun. I was annoyed. How was I ever going to get this book finished if students kept interrupting me, even in the summer? I greeted him, fed him some chocolates, and invited him to talk. Talk he did.

He was excited about his move to the Czech Republic. He wanted to thank me. I was clueless. He reminded me that I had challenged him to rethink his decision to stop wrestling. I could barely remember the incident. He said that he had listened and decided to join our wrestling team. As a result he had traveled to the Czech Republic with the team and connected to an organization that worked with troubled youth in the capital city through sporting activities. They had offered the friendly redhead a position as a mentor and wrestling coach. He was leaving the next day and just wanted to thank me for taking the time to care about him. We hugged, and I wished him well. As a committed evangelical, Ernie left convinced that God had directed his teacher to show him the way into helping others. Now it was my turn to be embarrassed by my own inadequacies because I knew I hadn't been the thoughtful or caring teacher as he believed.

Ernie wrote to me often of his experiences overseas. Sometimes he was euphoric because a young boy was doing better and staying off the streets. Sometimes he was despondent because of failure and the loss of some kid in whom he had invested. He stopped by again a couple of years later to tell me of his decision to stay in the Czech Republic permanently. His face was radiant. He gave me a homemade CD of his kids singing. It was a beautiful thing. I remarked that it was good that he was able to keep doing what he loved.

“It’s all because of you,” he replied. This time we both cried, but not for the same reasons. After he left, I began to weep with abandon. I felt small in the presence in such self-sacrifice mingled with such joy.

I have come to believe that teachers teach all the time, in ways we don’t expect. We stand in the way of the students—not to block them in the conventional sense of the phrase, but rather we stand in the way they are going. We can’t be The Way, as Jesus says He is, but we can be a part of the journey our students are traveling. We push, prod, provoke, challenge, cajole, encourage, discourage, bewilder, and yes, even bedazzle them at times. More than that, though, the ways we are going get all jumbled up with the ways they are going. Intentionally or not, they direct our paths even as we direct theirs. Maybe Ernie is in the Czech Republic because of me and because of something ineffable that came out of hiding inside of him. Maybe. But, because of him, I have become more aware of my placement in a student’s way as a teacher.

Since Ernie, I have become a more intentional mentor to my students. I look for opportunities to talk to them, not just about their writing but about their loves and passions. I think now that my best teaching, the teaching that makes me feel connected to all teachers everywhere and to the perfect teacher of fishermen and tax collectors, is always outside the classroom. My best teaching is not planned, occurring in school vans, in the cafeteria line, at the local coffee shop, at a play rehearsal, by the soft drink machine. That teaching is terrifyingly beautiful, and I think I live for those moments, thirsting for them to happen again and again.

Someday, I need to share with Ernie stories of other students, students he doesn’t know—Sarah and her nearly complete PhD, Allison and her book chapter, David and his scholarship—because, you see, Ernie is responsible for all these events. He stood in my way and taught me that all Ernies in my classes have value. He reminded me of what it means to be a mentor in earnest just as I urged him to do what he loved in earnest. Both of us learned the importance of being Ernie. ☺

## Why I Read Them Poetry

Beverly Faxon

When I started teaching English 101, a more experienced instructor offered a solution for students who came in late. He made the students read poetry out loud to the class. The implication was that the threat of poetry, or the reading

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*Beverly Faxon teaches English 101 at Western Washington University in Bellingham, Washington. Her recent work as a master’s candidate includes collaboration with Dr. Steven VanderStaaay and other graduate students to produce a portraiture study of teacher authority for CCC.*

aloud of it, served as a gentle humiliation, an impetus to arrive on time. The punch line was that one student seemed to enjoy reading Shakespearean sonnets; he apparently got into the habit of regularly arriving late so that he could take the stage.

Intrigued, not by poetry used as a deterrent, but by a student's pleasure in a sonnet, I decided to open each class by reading a poem into the silence of the classroom, a silence that, at other times, feels urgently uneasy, as though it is pressing to be filled with the worthwhile, with provocation and process. I like using that silence instead as a space where a poem can unfold for just a minute or two. And I like knowing that I have sometimes chosen a poem specifically for one student, a gift that may or may not be noticed. So I read Tony Hoagland's "Grammar" with the line about the robustly loved woman who has "some kind of light coming from her head" for a student whose recent in-class fast write about the writing process undergoes a heartfelt interruption, a few longing sentences about a young man she can't stop thinking about. "Here," I silently offer her. "In case he's still on your mind, this poem is for you."

No one ever comments on the poems I read. Yet the poems have had their moment as they spool out and create invisible connections in the room. When the business of the class begins, lingering words float into corners or rise without protest to the ceiling like a child's let-loose balloon nudging the rafters. I imagine that on a dusky evening a line may roll out in a student's head: a lifting, a spark, a question. ☺

### Work Cited

Hoagland, Tony. "Grammar." *Poetry 180*. Ed. Billy Collins. NY: Random House, 2003: 37-38.

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### Manuscript Submission Information for Volume 15

*JAEPL* (*Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*) invites submissions for a special issue about the believing game and closely related issues guest edited by **Peter Elbow**. For more about this theme, see the four essays in Volume 14 of *JAEPL* (November 2008 release) by Peter Elbow, Pat Bizzell, Mary Rose O'Reilly, and Nat Teich that initiate a conversation about the believing game.

**Deadline for submission: January 30, 2009**

Peter Elbow writes:

*For this issue, I welcome essays that push and explore and expand what you see in these four essays. I invite essays that explore the application of believing game to diverse arenas—and not just in the academy. Also: I frame the believing game as a complement to what I call “the doubting game” or “critical thinking”—which I characterize as the assumed or preferred mode of thinking in our culture. But is there a preferred mode, and if so how does it relate to the believing game or methodological believing? I am also interested in responses that question or criticize the believing game.*

Electronic copies are preferred—10-20 pages double spaced, MLA citation style. If you apply by mail, please send four paper manuscripts along with postage for mailing three copies to readers.

Send essays to Peter Elbow at 47 Pokeberry Ridge, Amherst MA 01002. You can address questions to him at [elbow@english.umass.edu](mailto:elbow@english.umass.edu)

Send editorial inquiries to Kristie S. Fleckenstein, Co-Editor, *JAEPL*, Department of English, Florida State University. E-mail: [kfleckenstein@fsu.edu](mailto:kfleckenstein@fsu.edu)

Visit *JAEPL*'s website at <https://www.sworps.utk.edu/aepl/html/jaepl.htm>

## Manuscript Submission Information for Volume 16

<b>Deadline</b>	January 31, 2010
<b>Typing</b>	Double-spaced, numbered pages, including works cited and block quotations; at least one level of internal headings, when necessary; wide margins for feedback; author's name to appear on title page only
<b>Title Page</b>	Title of Article; Name; Address; E-mail Address; Home and Office Phone; Institutional Affiliation
<b>Abstract</b>	1–2 double-spaced sentences on title page
<b>Preferred Length</b>	Articles, 5000 words, including works cited
<b>Documentation Style</b>	Current <i>MLA Style Manual</i>
<b>Copies</b>	Electronic submission in rich text format (RTF) Special Sections: Book reviews (1000 words) are determined by book review editor. "Connecting" editor (hwalker@messiah.edu) determines 500-1000 word personal essays.
<b>Editorial Report</b>	Within 8–12 weeks
<b>Compensation</b>	Two complimentary copies
<b>Copyright</b>	<i>Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning</i>
<b>Address</b>	Joonna Smitherman Trapp jtrapp@nwcsiowa.edu Northwestern College 101 7th St. SW Orange City, IA 51041 712-707-7047

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# The Believing Game as a Model for Thinking

AEPL Summer Conference 2009

YMCA • Estes Park, CO

July 30 – August 1, 2009

The purpose of this conference is to explore the believing game, which Peter Elbow also calls, “methodological believing,” as a way to think more clearly. We contrast the believing game with the “doubting game”—being skeptical, questioning, criticizing all ideas in order to uncover hidden flaws—which has come to dominate our culture’s conception of good thinking. We will gather in the beautiful Colorado mountains to interact with Peter Elbow and with each other. Our goal is to provide a venue for each of you to enrich and deepen your understanding of the believing game and its possibilities.



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**Call for proposals:**

We are looking for presentations (15-30 minutes) or interactive workshops (75 minutes) on any aspect of the believing game inside and outside the academy. Here are some possibilities; feel free to propose others: The believing game in relation to “critical thinking,” in classroom dynamics, as an antidote to doubting, in written argumentation, in oral argumentation, in genres of writing, with emotions, with religious issues, with religious differences, as a tool for social change, outside the classroom, doubts about the believing game, gender and the believing game, stories about the believing game, philosophical issues in the believing game.

Send proposals or questions via email to both conference co-chairs: Irene Papoulis, [irene.papoulis@trincoll.edu](mailto:irene.papoulis@trincoll.edu), and Joonna Trapp, [jtrapp@nwciova.edu](mailto:jtrapp@nwciova.edu), by April 1, 2009 with “AEPL Conference 2009” as your subject heading.

**Registration info:**

REGISTER ONLINE at [aepl.org](http://aepl.org). The conference will begin with dinner on Thursday, July 30 followed by an opening evening plenary. The final conference event will be on Saturday night, August 1, with breakfast on August 2 included in the conference price. Send registration questions to Allison Brimmer, registration chair: [abrimmer@nova.edu](mailto:abrimmer@nova.edu)

Registration rates include dormitory lodging and cafeteria meals from dinner on July 30 through breakfast on August 2.

If you register by April 15, 2009 (rates go up \$50 after that date);

Single room:	\$500
Double room:	\$375 each
Triple or Quad:	\$275 each
Discount for students/retired/adjuncts/unemployed:	subtract \$50

Deposit to reserve a place: \$100 (refundable until May 1)

Participants must be members of AEPL—if you aren’t, become one on our website: [www.aepl.org](http://www.aepl.org)

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