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### Cover Page Footnote

Clyde Moneyhun is Director of the Hume Writing Center and Assistant Director of Stanford Introductory Studies at Stanford University. He has published research in journals including CCC, JAC, Rhetoric Review, and the Journal of Teaching Writing; has spoken widely at conferences including CCCC, MLA, RSA, WPA and NCTE; and has served on the executive boards of WPA and CCCC.

# Believing, Doubting, Deciding, Acting

Clyde Moneyhun

As director of a composition program at a small regional university, I had the habit of piloting first-year writing curricula that addressed new problems we saw with existing courses, new needs we perceived among students, or new conditions in the program or at the school. For example, when we received five computer classrooms for our exclusive use and decided to schedule all our sections to spend half their days in the classrooms, I created a computer-based curriculum and taught it for several quarters before passing the syllabus on to the rest of the teaching staff. When we decided that special sections for prospective education majors weren't helping them produce better writing, I partnered with several local schools and created a curriculum of readings and writing assignments that required students to engage with the real problems faced by teachers and administrators in the area, then gave the syllabus to the teachers who took over the course.

When we wanted to find ways to encourage our students to do better critical reading and critical thinking, I considered and rejected many approaches before I reread several of Peter Elbow's classic pieces on the doubting and believing games. I decided that his theory gave our students what they needed to become not only better readers, thinkers, and writers, but also better participants in conversations that mattered both in and out of college—in short, better citizens. I set about creating a curriculum based on playing the believing and doubting games with difficult and problematic texts, as well as the additional games of “deciding” and “acting”; that is, the game of extending insights gained from reading texts into “real life” to help us make a decision, and the game of planning action based on those insights. Teaching the curriculum several times taught me the difficulty of changing my students ingrained ways of thinking within the doubting culture we inhabit.

As Elbow says in the earliest published iteration of his idea in 1973, “the doubting game has gained a monopoly on legitimacy in our culture” (“Appendix”). We are, generally in our public discourse and specifically in academic discourse, too quick to leap to critical judgments that may be poorly informed, poorly reasoned, poorly constructed—that are, basically, knee-jerk negativity. Such negativity invites not real argument in the intellectual sense, but mere contradicting, as in the old Monty Python comedy routine where a man goes to an “argument clinic” and pays to have an argument with a professional arguer. He is directed to a door down the hall, and the following conversation ensues:

MAN: Ah, Is this the right room for an argument?

ARGUER: I told you once.

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MAN: No you haven't.

ARGUER: Yes I have.

MAN: When?

ARGUER: Just now.

MAN: No you didn't.

ARGUER: Yes I did.

MAN: You didn't

ARGUER: I did!

MAN: You didn't! (150)

We might be tempted to think of this comedy routine when we hear what passes for debate on many television and radio talk shows. Particularly on partisan commentary programs, we may see spokespeople from opposing parties shouting slogans and talking points at each other and, far from listening to each other, actually talking over each other. This is fighting, but it isn't arguing, and it is a poor way to make responsible decisions that govern our actions in both public and private life.

How, then, can playing Elbow's believing and doubting games, supplemented by games that challenge students to make decisions and plan actions based on them, be turned into a curriculum for a writing course that teaches students to reason well?

My syllabus told students that, to read a complicated or difficult text aimed at an educated audience, they would first learn to understand what the author intends, see things the way the author sees them, before jumping to conclusions based on a superficial skimming of the text and a stock of preconceived opinions. This step is important particularly if the reader already disagrees with the author's message. Next, and only after that first step, the students would adopt a skeptical frame of mind, calling into question the author's main points in various ways, and this step is important particularly if the reader already agrees with the author's message.

To help get across these ideas, I asked the students to read excerpts from Elbow's later (1986) "Methodological Doubting and Believing." Elbow asserts there that "methodological doubt is only half of what we need" because "thinking is not trustworthy unless it also includes methodological belief: the equally systematic, disciplined, and conscious attempt to believe everything no matter how unlikely or repellent it might seem" (256). In short, as I emphasized to my students, "you may not reject a reading till you have succeeded in believing it" (257).

I went on to explain that we would not stop with the believing and doubting games. After first believing and then doubting, they would be asked to make their own decisions, consciously choosing what elements to accept, reject, qualify, and transform in the creation of their own point of view. We called this "the deciding game." Elbow acknowledges elsewhere, though he is "reticent" to suggest a specific method himself, that this step of "making up our minds—the act of genuine deciding," is the next logical step after the believing and doubting games—especially, of course, if we decide that "the other person is right and that we need to change our minds" ("Bringing the Rhetoric of Assent" 392). That decision would be a kind of ultimate test of the sincerity of the mental work that precedes it. While the doubting game can help us find flaws in the thinking of others, it is poor at "finding flaws in our own thinking" ("The Believing Game" 23). Only by

exercising both believing and doubting together can we actually change our minds and make a sound decision.

The ultimate purpose of all this mental work, I told the students, was to extend their thinking into the world they actually lived in, to teach themselves how to act and why they should act that way. This game I called “the acting game,” but the first class in which I used this curriculum started calling it “the living game,” and in subsequent classes I continued to use that phrase too. I wanted them to see the process of playing believing, doubting, and deciding games as more than an intellectual exercise, but rather as a way to help them choose a major, accept or reject a job offer, buy the right tires, or vote for a candidate and to perform such actions in the confidence that they had considered all sides without bias. Elbow might object to the closure implied in asking students to finally decide and act as the culmination of the open-ended believing and doubting games. I did emphasize that decisions reached and actions taken this way are always provisional, open to rethinking that takes us back to the beginning of the process and challenges all preconceived notions: What if I reconsider and believe my advisor’s advice about the major? What if I hesitate before I pull the lever and reject my candidate’s claim that I should vote with my political party at all times? As long as life endures, living is, after all, a game that never stops.

I gave the students a number of handouts to collect the four games into a single process. One handout described the process as “steps to reasoned inquiry” and provided action verbs to help them conceptualize each step; they could follow a process of accepting an idea wholeheartedly, then rejecting it no matter how attractive, then choosing what to believe (especially if it wasn’t simple acceptance or rejection), and finally applying their clarified belief to a situation requiring action (see Table 1).<sup>1</sup>

Table 1: Steps to Reasoned Inquiry

<b>Credulity</b>	<b>Skepticism</b>	<b>Reason</b>	<b>Action</b>
Believe	Doubt	Decide	Extend
Accept	Reject	Choose	Apply
Summarize/paraphrase	State objections	Weigh ideas	Use ideas
Find strengths	Find weaknesses	Draw conclusions	Act
Understand	Criticize	Theorize	Practice
Tell “what it does”	Tell “what it fails to do”	Tell “what I think”	Tell “how it matters”

Another handout tried to give them methods to use, operations to perform, as they read texts and analyzed ideas. To believe an idea, for example, they could show how it confirmed their personal experience; to doubt it, they could show how it conflicted with their personal experience; to make a decision, they could

<sup>1</sup>Peter has pointed out to me that the words I chose to characterize the believing and doubting games in Table 1’s handout, “credulity” and “skepticism,” were precisely the ones he’s used for “a naïve, unthoughtful, unreflective habit of mind” (Elbow, personal communication). I meant “credulity” to connote not mere gullibility but a certain openness, and I associated “skepticism” in my mind not with kneejerk cynicism but the philosophical method of systematic doubt in the pursuit of knowledge. At the same time, the words really are freighted with the baggage Peter sees in them, and I will think about substitutes for them when I revise the handout for a future class.

show how it clarified a broader question from their personal experience; to extend into life, they could show how the process led them to take action in some way (see Table 2).

Table 2: Ways of Reasoning

Ways of believing	Ways of doubting	Ways of deciding	Ways of acting
Idea can be made to fit into a coherent, broader system of ideas	Idea can't be made to fit into a coherent, broader system of ideas	Idea is useful to creating a system of ideas important to the reader	Idea can be made to fit into real-life contexts not considered by the author
Idea confirms reader's personal experiences	Idea conflicts with reader's personal experience	Idea clarifies reader's personal experiences	Idea tells reader how to act, treat others, live
Idea is supported by proof that is convincing to the reader	Idea is not supported by proof that is convincing to the reader	Idea changes, is refined, as reader provides new support	Idea is given new life by its use in the world

All these mental operations and habits were good, I told the students, not only for reading texts but also for writing them. To write a text aimed at a thoughtful and reasonable audience, they needed to envision readers also capable of playing the believing game and the doubting game. First, understanding how hard it is in our culture to play the believing game, they needed to give readers as much help as possible. That is, first they needed to provide readers with everything they needed to understand the writer's intentions, leaving nothing unstated that couldn't be guessed by an attentive reader, making ideas crystal clear, providing helpful supporting details, connecting it all to a main overall message. Second, they needed to anticipate their readers' skepticism, doubt, even mistrust. They needed to put themselves in their readers' shoes and address the ways in which a reader might not understand or accept the message. This step, sometimes conceived of as "meeting objections" in order to disarm an opponent, should be more than a persuasive ploy. Effective writers must, with complete sincerity, occupy the position of a reader who is right to disagree with them. On the deepest level, I asked my students to use the two additional games to envision their real purpose as a writer: not merely to persuade, but to invite readers to believe, to honor readers' doubts, and ultimately to help readers decide for themselves what they think and how to act in the world and why.

To enact a pedagogy based on the all these mental operations, I designed reading journal assignments that asked students to read in a series of steps, to play the believing, doubting, and deciding games one after the other several times in several different ways. First, all the students read the same three unrelated essays; then they all read a group of three essays that "spoke" to each other (literally, with authors referring to each other by name); then they formed small groups and chose another essay to read together. At each stage, I asked them to believe, doubt, and decide in separate journal entries. In a final paper, they drew on their journal work to extend their thinking into a real-life decision about how to proceed with a vital question requiring action.

For example, before reading Kit Yuen Quan's "The Girl Who Wouldn't Sing," I asked them to play the believing game on a question that caused many of them to have profound doubts—the possible usefulness of academic discourse:

Reading Journal #1: A lot of people hate academic discourse; they find it boring, confusing, and needlessly wordy. If this is your opinion, take a moment to consider why academic discourse is still being produced. If it is so difficult to read and write, what good is it? (And that's not a rhetorical question!) What would the people who want you to learn it say in its defense? What can it do that other kinds of language cannot?

After reading the essay, I asked them to continue the believing game by trying to see things the way Quan did with several questions like this:

Reading Journal #2: Quan lacks confidence in her ability to speak and write English, and she says she also has "limited Chinese." Both these conditions restrain or limit her life in various ways. What does she find herself unable to do? What does she learn to do about the situation? In what ways are her feelings and reactions true to you in any way?

After a second reading, I asked the students to doubt some of Quan's assertions:

Reading Journal #3: Look for statements that Quan makes that might not be true for all readers. Make a list of at least five of those statements and say why some readers might not believe or accept each one.

For a final journal entry, students had to make up their minds about one of Quan's main ideas by weighing their beliefs and doubts, then coming to a conclusion:

Reading Journal #4: Language is something that both separates Quan from her parents and connects her to them. For this and other reasons, many people experience a similar kind of separation from and connection to parents. Is such anxiety inevitable between children and parents? Why or why not?

When the class read a group of three related essays (Richard Rodriguez's "Aria," Victor Villanueva's "Whose Voice Is It Anyway?", and bell hooks' "Keeping Close to Home"), their journal entries again asked them to play, in succession, the believing, doubting, and deciding games:

Reading Journal #5: What does each writer have to say about the possibility of "keeping close to home"? What does each writer say about the problems people from minority backgrounds encounter when they enter the broader culture,

especially school? What does each writer offer as a solution, if anything?

Reading Journal #6: Two of the writers (Villanueva and hooks) criticize the other writer by name (Rodriguez). What are their criticisms? Can you disagree with Rodriguez in any other ways? How can you defend Rodriguez against the criticisms? How might he be right, and how might Villanueva and hooks be wrong?

Reading Journal #7: What is “assimilation” for each writer? What are its advantages and disadvantages? Is it possible, do you think, for minorities to assimilate in any of the ways defined by the writers? Is it desirable?

Journal assignments were similar when students formed groups of three and selected a reading to work on together, choosing from among essays such as June Jordan’s “Nobody Mean More to Me than You,” Emily Martin’s “The Egg and the Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles,” Susan Sontag’s “On AIDS,” Deborah Tannen’s “Men and Women Talking on the Job,” and Patricia Williams’s “Hate Radio.”

At the end of the process, which took about half of our ten-week quarter, students had a vast store of thinking on which to draw for the essay assignment that occupied the second half of the quarter. First, students drafted a version that essentially summarized, in more detail and with more formality than the journal entries, their work on believing, doubting, and deciding about the issues presented by one essay or one set of essays. This set them up to make a final step common to professional essays with a similar logic: describe a course of action actually taken or recommend a course of action to be taken.

How did the students respond to this curriculum?

As might be anticipated by Elbow, they were better at doubting than believing. In general, when asked to “believe,” they were able to answer what they construed as “reading comprehension” questions by citing bits and pieces from the text. Only in the rare “believing” reading journal was a reader’s “doubting” guard dropped, an unfamiliar or distasteful point of view suddenly seen as valid, even for a moment. One student, a strong believer (she said) in the power of education to create a level playing field “if a student worked hard enough,” was able to say about Quan’s view of her school: “The teachers, probably knowing they were immigrants, did nothing extra to help them. The teacher never noticed when someone else filled in her spelling book and how she never raised her hand to sing. Nobody realizes the way immigrants are treated differently by their classmates in school, which ends up affecting them.”

My students were much quicker to criticize, to doubt, and because doubting was stronger, almost more natural to them, than believing, it was poorly informed by the understanding that was supposed to be created by the believing exercises. It called for the most part on unquestioned opinions the students brought with them to the course: Quan was wrong to complain that the United States was a difficult place for immigrants, since it was the land of opportunity; hooks was wrong to resist assimilation since “keeping close to home” would also keep her



out of the mainstream; Martin was wrong to identify sexism in science because science was, after all, just facts, and facts don't lie. This same pattern applied to the reading journals that asked students to decide how they themselves felt about the central theme of a reading or group of readings; for the most part, they quoted bits and pieces they came into the class already believing and squared off against opinions they came in opposing. Here too, however, the rare reader was able to come to a thoughtful decision about an issue that may have surprised him even as he wrote it:

It is possible for minorities to assimilate, although they should not have to do it on the scale that Rodriguez did it. Minorities should keep their native culture and also learn to speak the mainstream language. As I have said before, it may take longer, but it will be worth it, because they will have the most important gift of all, their family. I'm not a minority, but I am a country boy, so I guess I can say that I am partially assimilated. By coming to college every day, I learn a little more each day about the world. As for feeling happy or unhappy about it, I really feel neutral about it. I don't know how I'll feel if I see I've changed a lot.

Students did much better when asked to define a course of action based on the thinking they'd done, by way of the reading journals, about a topic common to one or more of the readings. I think, however, that the setting in which they presented their ideas in final form probably had more to do with the quality of their ideas than the reading journal preparation. Possibly some stray lessons from the believing, doubting, and deciding games made their way into the process. More important, however, may have been the fact that they prepared short oral versions of their papers and delivered them at an in-class academic conference. I asked them to collaborate on descriptions of their panels, and from their discussions emerged thinking that acknowledged the several legitimate opinions that might be had about a topic—evidenced, in other words, the operations of believing, doubting, and deciding:

The panelists disagree with the guidelines for language set down by June Jordan in “Nobody Mean More to Me than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan.” However, we want the audience to realize how important it is to have a connection between home life and school life.

I'm guessing that these more reasoned, and reasonable, formulations of ideas resulted from the give and take of opinion involved in writing a short collaborative text representing the group.

As for the actions their final essays were supposed to describe or propose, most of the panelists were aware of the need to extend their presentations into life and to play what they continued to call “the living game.” Many descriptions ended with specific calls to action: “We will describe how each of us has taken steps to reduce miscommunication between men and women and we will describe how our audience can do it too,” “We will show how we unknowingly label epi-

demics like AIDS as plagues and we will show how people can let go of their ignorance,” and “We will ask how Black English can be considered a language, whether Ebonics should be taught, and why an audience of future teachers should make up their minds.”

These were small victories, but I learned two hard lessons from the mixed results of the curriculum in encouraging students to think in more complex, less knee-jerk critical ways.

First, I experienced first-hand, as Elbow might have predicted, the virulence and persistence of the doubting gestalt in our culture and in the habits of mind we encourage in our schools. It can be a habit of mind that fairly well defeats reason, in that it can function to prevent us from open-mindedly weighing the truth, value, and real-world implications of our beliefs. In Elbow’s words, “critical doubting tends to function as a way to help people fend off criticism of their own ideas or ways of seeing” (“Bringing the Rhetoric of Assent” 390). Most of my students made gestures toward believing, but, when invited to doubt, they mainly returned to the same reasons for rejecting ideas they had in the first place.

Second, I learned that my well-intentioned curriculum was probably not the best way to make inroads into the culture of doubt we live in. Possibly each step looked too much like tasks they had been given in previous writing classes, so that the believing game sounded like “summarize the writer’s argument” (as in “reading comprehension” exercises), and the doubting game looked like “take a stand on a controversial topic” (as in countless “persuasive essay” assignments that invited, even required, agonistic either/or reasoning). Possibly there were ways to play these games better, in ways that were more disarming and didn’t resemble the very habits of mind they were operating to short-circuit.

At the same time, I saw hope in their ability and willingness to complicate their thinking when confronted with real-world dilemmas, especially when they were asked to explore answers and solutions in a collaborative setting. In future versions of the course, I may experiment with texts drawn not from a college reader, but from the everyday flow of their lives. Rather than frontload issues I find compelling and difficult, I might collect ideas from them about important decisions and exigencies confronting them. And I wonder if I can find ways to introduce more collaboration at every stage. This is important if we conceive of our mental games not as acts of individual cognition but as essentially social acts. Though Elbow has been criticized (notably by James Berlin, 484-87) for lacking a sense of the social construction of knowledge, he asserts that the believing game in particular, if played as he envisions it, is intensively collaborative. Though playing the believing game can, ironically, lead to “disagreement and dissonant views” by making individual players doubt their cherished notions,

Nevertheless, I insist that the process by which the believing game works for this goal is highly communal rather than individualistic—and certainly more communal than the typical process in critical thinking. The believing game asks for maximum cooperation in order to achieve maximum differentiation. We can only play the believing game well if we do it collectively or cooperatively. (“Bringing the Rhetoric of Assent” 393)

Most of all, as I often am, I was awed by my students' patience and good will and grateful for their trust in my methods, though I wondered from time to time whether it was misplaced. I'm sometimes struck by the reflection that we get better work from our students than we actually deserve. Their openness, willingness, and generosity give me the will to believe rather than doubt and to continuing exploring ways to tap into the same capacity in them. ☐

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