Reflections from a Grateful Guest Editor

Peter Elbow

"A sign of health in the mind," Donald Winnicott wrote in 1970, "is the ability of one individual to enter imaginatively and accurately into the thoughts and feelings and hopes and fears of another person; also for the other person to do the same to us." (Phillips and Taylor 28)

I'm enormously grateful to *JAEPL* for inviting this special issue and inviting me to edit. I'm excited about these essays. Since 1973, the believing game has been getting bigger and bigger inside my little head, but, all along, I've feared that it had no real existence in the world. Here at last are pictures of the believing game not just in other people's heads but as action in the world.

What I've written here are responses after reading all the essays, so you may find it more useful to read my thoughts after you read the essays. (You can use the Expanded Table of Contents to help you decide which order to read them in. I couldn't find an ideal order, so they are printed according to the alphabetic order of the authors' last names.) After the essays, I've put a limited bibliography of works that pertain to the doubting and believing games.

There were a lot of strong essays submitted for this issue, and so I had to turn down other good work for lack of space. I hope some of those writers—and other readers—might consider further work on the believing game for future issues of *JAEPL.*

And let me call attention to a past issue. There are four more important essays about the believing game published in *JAEPL* 14 (2008-2009): essays by Pat Bizzell, Mary Rose O'Reilley, Nathaniel Teich, and me. My essay is the most recent of various essays I've written about this topic (starting in 1973), and I think I've managed to summarize my essential train of thinking more briefly and clearly here than before.

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In the following reflections, I can't try to do any kind of justice to these rich essays. Rather I'm using a kind of collage form for one of my favorite forms of response: noticing. To notice, in this sense, is to brush aside any impulse to evalu-

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ate and instead try hard to look, to see, and to say what you notice. C. S. Lewis put his finger on a big problem at the root of most school responses and indeed much human interaction when he wrote that "most people are . . . far more anxious to express their approval and disapproval of things than to describe them" (*Studies in Words* 7).[1]

The Need for Experiments

I see this as a pervasive theme. "Don't take my word for it, the Buddha would always insist, try it out for yourself. . . . [Come] to know through testing and experiencing." This comes from Donna Strickland's essay. Interestingly, the Buddha is inviting *both* the doubting and believing games. To try out is obviously a doubting test—putting something to the test to find flaws. The folks at *Consumer Reports* have an intriguing job that I've often envied: designing clever ways to stress and even misuse cars and washing machines to see which ones break down first.

But trying out is a test that also uses the believing game. We try out alternatives to see which one "believes best." In fact, that's how perception works: we see a figure in the distance and can't tell if it's a dog or a horse. When we do manage to see what it is, it's not usually by means of a skeptical test that "disproves" horse (checking, say, for neck length); more often the testing is a process of "trying out"—trying to see it as dog and then as horse—perhaps back and forth—and finally we find that it "sees better" as dog. As dog, it snaps into the best focus.

And not just perception. Judgments about *interpretation* too rely on the believing game as test. When we encounter a difficult novel or poem or an inscrutable remark by a friend, it's more common to "try out" different interpretations in an effort to see which one makes the best sense. It's not that we never bring the doubting game to bear, but this is usually a later retrospective process—as in critical (!) essays and scholarly seminars.[2]

But let's think a little further about critical essays and scholarly seminars. They seem to go on and on, don't they, and arrive too seldom at any closure. We can see here—if we dare—the extraordinary centrality of the believing game in our intellectual lives. For in fact *no interpretation of a set of words can ever be proved wrong:* a text can mean almost anything—to some degree or in some sense. None of the wildest of the odd readings of *Hamlet* can be proven wrong. Someone can always find in a text a *little* scope for some odd reading. (When interpreters are stuck, they can even say, triumphantly: "Look at what the text *doesn't* say! The author's *silence* speaks volumes about how important this interpretation is.") It's only the believing game that helps us decide how much *weight* to put on the myriad of possible and to-some-degree valid interpretations of a text. Try proving to someone that his or her interpretation of an inkblot is wrong. The interpretation of a text is much more like interpreting an ink blot than disproving a mathematical or logical computation. A serious flaw can torpedo a piece of logic or geometry. A serious "flaw" never seems to slow down anyone's commitment to some interpretation of a text.

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[1]On noticing, see Carini; Knoester; and Weber. Noticing could be thought of as a certain kind of "pointing"—on which, see Elbow.

[2]See the Nobel scientist Peter Medawar on the difference between scientific articles—which are usually retrospective attempts to prove a hypothesis to be valid—and the actual messier and more belief-oriented process by which the authors came to understand their hypothesis.

But how about arguments? They are made with logic. We can find indubitable errors in an argument—even in arguments about the interpretation of a text. Yes, but have you noticed how seldom you get people to change their mind when you show them their bad reasoning? It's not just because you are smart and they are stupid. The fact is that bad reasoning in support of an interpretation does not make that *interpretation* itself bad. It might in fact be good. The folks at *Consumer Reports* have the doubting fun of showing that cheaper products last longer and work better than expensive ones. But the doubting game is toothless in arguments about interpretation.

Indeed this applies to all arguments: any *claim* can be right even though the supporting arguments for it are flawed. We see this all around us: good arguments for bad claims and bad arguments for good claims. Yes, we need the doubting to test the validity of arguments, and, yes, arguments count for a lot. But this kind of disconfirming argument often doesn't bring results in the real world of discourse.

Consider the typical rhetorical situation. You have what you think is a good claim, and all your arguments for it have been shown to be flawed; or you are troubled by someone's claim that you think is bad, but you cannot find any flaws in their arguments for it. In both these situations, you have two uses for the believing game. First, you need play the believing game with the positions you don't like—to try hard to believe them and actually understand and appreciate what's good about them. You may discover they are right and you need to change your mind. For the quickest results, this is the way to go. (Imagine here a smiley emoticon.)

But if after this sincere test of believing you still think you are right and they are wrong, you have the harder job of trying to persuade "the enemy" to play the believing game with your idea. For reasoning will not do the trick. The best you can do is to speak to them as follows: "I tried as hard as I could to believe your idea. In the process I found the following good things in it, and I now understand why your position is appealing and why it seems right to you. So now that I've done that, would you please do me the return favor of playing the believing game with my idea?"

The larger principle here is this. The doubting game has coercive leverage when applied as logic to any piece of reasoning. (Socrates was excited as he began to figure out logic and said that it permits the single person to outvote the crowd.) But when it comes to claims or positions or interpretations themselves, the only leverage comes from the human act of *entering* in or *mentally participating*—and this process has no binding or coercive force. For us to use it within ourselves, we have to muster both effort and pliancy to enter into places we don't like. If we want others to use it, we have to persuade them to join with us by choice and enter into our views. There's no reason for them to want to do this unless we first demonstrate that we are willing to do it for them with their views. This is why (as Pat Bizzell emphasized in her essay in the last issue) the believing game is such a weak reed when it comes to powerfully emotional religious or political views that people stake their identities on.

So the essays we see in this issue of the journal are examples "trying out" that don't have the coercive force of disproof. They simply help us decide how much of our weight to put on this ladder or bridge that looks rather frail—that is, on a particular way of using the believing game.

Both Clyde Moneyhun and Tim Doherty experiment with first-year writing courses that put the believing game near the center. Shelley Harkness and her

colleagues try believing wrong math answers that students give. In a classic piece of literary interpretation, Sheridan Blau tries to see Milton's orthodox religious views as true—even through a modern secular lens. Judy Lightfoot speaks to someone on the street who qualifies as crazy and says, "Let's sit down and have coffee and chat for an hour." Stephanie Paterson tries the effects of devoting every Friday's class to uninterrupted writing—supplemented by lowered lights, candles, and music. Anne Geller does what may be the most radical thing for an academic: trying to believe *colleagues* who seem wrong—colleagues from other disciplines who lack our wisdom about writing across the curriculum. Irene Papoulis—who has always prided herself on practicing the believing game—experiments with pushing it away.

I can't resist saying that there is at least one indubitable proof that all these experiments yield. Minimal, perhaps, but it's big for me—and something that would help lots of others. The experiments prove that it was possible for these particular writers in their particular circumstances to do what their culture and their habits call wrong—and live to tell the tale. One of the best favors that anyone can do for me is to show that even though I'm having a feeling or thought that everyone thinks is wrong—including me!—nevertheless, I am not crazy. The most effective way to silence us and instill fear is to make us suspect we are crazy for seeing or feeling or believing as we do.

The Difficulty of the Believing Game

Difficulty strikes me as the biggest theme here. It's not that believing is hard in itself. It's probably more natural than doubting. We all started out as naive credulous toddlers and children (though most of us took a little break during our "terrible twos"). But through the process of being socialized and civilized and educated—at least in modern Western culture—we got rich training in skepticism. Have you noticed that *critical thinking* is the one common element in all curricula at all levels—no matter how different those curricula might seem in spirit or emphasis or ideology? Critical thinking is the one thing never doubted. When we label a culture "primitive," it's usually a culture that doesn't practice skepticism and critical thinking.

Still, all this training against believing makes sense. Believing often gets us into trouble—for instance, when we get an email that says we've won $10,000 and we only have to send $1,000 to expedite shipment. Believing has become a bad word, and "true believers" feel defensive. (Stephen Carter, on the faculty at Yale Law School, writes about "how American law and politics trivialize religious devotion.")

But despite the training against it, "mere believing" or true believing is easy and actually very common in our culture. You just have to give in. Virtually everyone has one or more things they've found truly worthy of belief, and they give in and believe them. (They may not think of themselves as believers because they have not articulated or examined these beliefs.) What's truly difficult is a more sophisticated and disciplined form of believing: a conscious methodology or technique or game that uses believing as a *tool*. And it asks something peculiar: to believe *all* views that anyone wants to advance—some of which will be difficult to believe and not worthy of serious belief. At least the believing game doesn't ask us to *commit* ourselves to all these views; but there's something odd and unfamiliar about the act of *conditional* belief.

Interestingly, most of us already know how to *doubt* conditionally. The doubting game or critical thinking trains us to use doubting as a *tool* or methodology or game. Critical thinking doesn't ask us to commit ourselves or reject positions we doubt—even necessarily where we find flaws. It asks us to doubt even what we are committed to—just to see it better and think better. And thus we don't have to be skeptical or cynical in temperament to use this good tool.

But our culture mostly hasn't taught us how to use *belief* as a tool and bring it to bear even on what we know we will never accept—just to see it better and think better. In the absence of this tool, the word "belief" still tends to connote full, naive belief with commitment ("Yes, Lord, I believe.") So, while our culture (especially the school and intellectual culture) rightly warns us against naive or mere belief because it can do such harm, it hasn't trained us how to use belief as a tool (which, among other things, can help us avoid the dangers of credulity.)

Thus Clyde, Tim, and some of the other contributors note the reluctance of students to entertain alien views even when the assignment is explicitly to try them *all* out, and there's no pressure to actually adopt any of them. Sheridan and Anne both show us the discombobulation of trying to entertain opposite ideas at the same time. In addition, Anne notes how strongly people in the WAC field resist views that don't fit the prevailing wisdom. It takes training. We need to remember that it took training and special help to learn to use doubt as a tool.

Many of the experiments in this issue involve extra help. Tim brings in play, games, and role playing for entering alien positions so that people don't feel that the stakes are too high. Tim and Stephanie both show the importance of warming up not just the mind or feelings but even the body—for this helps give flexibility to the mind and feelings. Stephanie adds inviting sensory conditions: lowered lights, music, and candles. Clyde shows how helpful it is to get company as we try to use believing as a tool—that is, adding the element of collaboration. Anne shows the power that comes from joining a larger ongoing enterprise like the Difficult Dialogues Project or the Public Conversations Project. (I'd mention another good enterprise of this sort, Educators for Social Responsibility, ESR. They have built the believing game into many of their curricula and workshops.) Shelly Harkness and her colleagues found they had better luck playing the believing game with students' wrong answers when they were *observers* of a class; that helps them when they return to their own teaching and have to carry the responsibility (and even anxiety) of being in charge.

I think the difficulty of the believing game is not just cognitive (which Donna points out), but moral. I'd like to think of the believing game as an exercise in developing courage. If we can learn to overcome the threat of entering into a view that we experience as alien, perhaps we can be braver in general. When I do something bad or fail to do something good, I can usually notice the role of fear or timidity (if I manage to stop and think about it afterwards). If I'd been braver, I wouldn't have ignored that person or that problem. When we tell white lies—or even big lies—we often simply didn't have the courage to tell the truth. (Ghandi felt that his larger virtues like nonviolence stemmed simply from telling the truth. He called his autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*.) Fear is what permits governments (like that of Bush, Israel, and Iran) to get citizens to stop seeing the "enemy" as human. When I feel brave, I find myself a better more generous person. C. S. Lewis again (this time from *The Screwtape Letters*): "Cour-

age is not simply one of the virtues but the form of every virtue at the testing point, which means at the point of highest reality."

And yet, interestingly, a couple of essays here open a window onto the believing game as easy: for Irene because her growing up led her to develop it as a habit, for Judy because something happened in her life that prompted her simply to "just do it."

Sequence or Timing

In planning for some classes, I sometimes fall into a repeating loop. I want to have a discussion, so I plan some freewriting to prepare the soil for it. But then I realize that I want to prepare the soil for the freewriting with some discussion. But then . . . . I can waste time in this loop because there's usually no best answer. (Perhaps there's a larger ironic principle here: what's hardest is to start. Perhaps we can avoid having to start if we start by getting ready to start.)

So too with the believing and doubting games. Which comes first? Hard to say. They each prepare the soil for the other and help us understand the other. Believing comes first in the history of the child and of cultures. We naturally trusted what looked right or attractive, and we had to be trained to distrust it. So believing is a good way to start—a basic foundation. Whether we are alone writing or talking in a group, the believing game helps us *find* or *create* words and ideas. It doesn't make sense to distrust and criticize things till we have a lot to criticize. What turns out in the end to be our best idea was often one that would never have arrived if we'd been critical at the start.

Thus Stephanie's essay is all about the need to listen trustfully to ourselves in order to write productively. Yet she opens a paradoxical window onto how "listening to oneself" can feel like an act of standing outside ourselves and getting out of the way: a kind of "taking dictation" without letting one's "own" feelings meddle or judge.

On the other hand, the doubting game can be helpful as a starting place. Especially in an academic or school culture, faculty members and students often cannot let down their skeptical guard until they've had a chance to use it. It's only *after* critically testing ideas for flaws (and naturally finding some) that intellectuals dare to try using belief as a tool to see what can be seen and to think better.

Tim is particularly interested in the value of preparing the soil for the believing game in a different way: waiting, going slowly, holding off any use of the believing game for a while. He starts with activities to support and affirm students in their *present* views—before asking them to enter into new or different views. And he also helps people with believing by emphasizing the ludic dimension with outright play, games, and role playing. And Donna insists that *trying* is psychologically prior to believing.

Clyde gives lots of useful attention to what comes *after* the believing game: the deciding game and the acting (or living) game. Interestingly, the processes of deciding and acting may often re-activate the doubting game.

Stirring the Pot:
Complicating and Enriching Our Thinking About the Believing Game

Irene shows how doubting and believing are not simple opposites. Their relationship is paradoxical and complicated—even correlative. She had to learn to doubt others to believe in herself—or is it that she has to learn to believe in

herself in order to doubt others? She points out, too, that expert critics of others are often poor at doubting themselves—and indeed their skill in doubting others helps them *avoid* doubting themselves.

By working out a different way to slice the pie, she helps us think more richly about doubting and believing. She shows that there can be *two* different tendencies within each: healthy and productive vs. unhealthy and destructive. She's interested in how believing can nurture the self or undermine it; how doubting can help us work *with* others or against them. She shows doubting and believing are not single uncomplicated entities.

Donna makes what is for me a crucial addition to any theory of the believing game: "I find two different kinds of learning—the cognitive game of believing and the bodily, experiential game that I'm, for now, calling 'trying.' . . . We experience all things first of all with the body."

As soon as I read her essay, I saw she was pointing to an incompleteness that had needed figuring out all along. I think her large insight (not adequately summed up here) will be very productive at the level of both theory and practice. She gives the most explicit and theoretical emphasis to the role of the body, but the body became an important subtheme in a number of these essays: how the body opens the door to the mind.

In the end, these essays show the doubting and believing games reinforce each other. I'm grateful to the authors for trusting my initial train of thought enough to take a ride on it and thereby developing new ideas which can, in turn, be tried and tested—and that can even throw some doubt on my starting train of thought. The larger moral is that we are in trouble if only one side of the dialectic has a monopoly on what people call good thinking.

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