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Bringing the Rhetoric of Assent and the Believing Game Together - and Into the Classroom

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Bringing the Rhetoric of Assent and the Believing Game Together —And Into the Classroom

From *College English* 67.4 (March 2005): 388-99. A response to Wayne Booth's essay in the same issue a "rhetoric of assent."

To Wayne Booth's argument for assent, I assent. I will explore our large agreement, our small difference—and then describe some specific classroom practices that can support our common desire to improve rhetoric, thinking, and teaching.

Common Ground

My assent to Booth is not surprising. I've also written a number of times about the need to explore what it means to say Yes—though in somewhat different terms from Booth's. I wrote my first essay on this topic as an appendix to *Writing Without Teachers*. I needed to work out a theoretical, epistemological defense against the charge of anti-intellectual when I proposed a no-arguing guideline for "teacherless classes." I proposed what I called "the believing game" as a necessary supplement to "the doubting game" or critical thinking. (I wrote this before Wayne's *Modern Dogma*—a work I gratefully learned from for my later essay, "Methodological Doubting and Believing.")

We agree on five central arguments about assent or belief.

(1) We're both trying to avoid the same two dangers: dogmatism and skepticism. People who are stuck in dogmatism are unskilled in doubting. They are trapped in one position and unable to see problems. Sometimes dogmatists are stuck because they are naive--believing what's easiest to believe and believing it too fervently. But of course, some dogmatists are anything but naive.

In contrast, some people doubt *everything*. They are unable to assent or believe or commit themselves to anything. They become disengaged, detached. This is the characteristic danger for academics, intellectuals--"clerks." Booth and I agree in our analysis of these two root dangers to the intellectual enterprise.

(2) We agree on the need for a major expansion of focus for rhetoric: not just "How can I change *their* minds," but also, "Does *my* mind need changing?" Any study of good thinking or effective argument is flawed if it fails to focus on the problem of how we change *our own* minds.

(3) We both emphasize the role of assent or belief in any model of good thinking, rhetoric, or communicating. We question the pervasive assumption that good thinking centers only on argument as a process of skeptical scrutinizing for flaws and contradictions. We notice that people often feel they are using a flabby kind of thinking if they come to agree with a view that's very different from their own instead of quarreling with it—that they must be failing in their duty to "critical thinking." Wayne and I express our common debt to Polanyi for his powerful account of the necessary role of *trust* in all good thinking--what he calls the "fiduciary transaction." Thinking and discourse are flawed when someone tries to criticize something without first managing to "dwell with" and indeed "dwell in" it. Wayne writes: "Just as I must earn my right to criticize a poem by dwelling with it until I can find my dwelling *in* it, I [must

also] earn my right to criticize criticism [i.e., any theory] in the same way” (*Critical Understanding* 351). Yes.

Academics often feel they’ve taught some of their students to be critical thinkers if those students come to say, “Now I’ve learned critical thinking because I’ve learned to criticize how I used to see the world and how most of my friends see it.” But this story misses the story that Polanyi tells so well: the student doesn’t learn to criticize earlier ways of seeing and thinking except through coming to trust and believe this teacher well enough to enter into her way of seeing—and finally from this new vantage point to see the world differently. If this trust-based process goes on over and over, the student may indeed have taken on a new critical skeptical mentality that he or she comes to exercise even when the trusted teacher is not present. This is a genuine change in habitual thinking and it was made possible by a foundation of trust. Fine. Neither of us argue against this kind of critical thinking.

But when this process doesn’t work so well—as often happens—we have nothing but a change of faiths or doctrines. The person who has allegedly become a critical thinker has really just transferred trust to new authorities or joined a new crowd who themselves are often just trusters in fashionable “critical” doctrines. Here is no real critical thinking.

(4) While both of us champion critical, skeptical thinking, we nevertheless emphasize the *limits* of the skeptical method. We fight the monopoly it tends to hold on our culture’s sense of what good, trustworthy thinking looks like. For in fact, critical doubting doesn’t actually do so well in the arena where it’s most needed: helping us doubt our own ideas—ideas that we probably hold because we are part of a community and a culture. The doubting, skeptical method is remarkably poor at preventing people from being suckers and believing attractive but wrong ideas that we live inside of. It’s hard to doubt ideas that are actually part of how we see the world or structure our thinking. In practice, critical doubting tends to function as a way to help people *fend off* criticisms of their own ideas or ways of seeing. Intellectual and academic interchange suffers badly from participants spending too much time fending off criticisms of their *own* views, and not spending enough time *listening* to views they experience as wrong, different, odd, alien, or unfashionable.

It is especially because of this Achilles heel in the skeptical method that we need the rhetoric of assent or the believing game. Because it’s so hard to let go of an idea we are holding (or more to the point, an idea that’s holding us), our best hope for leverage in learning to doubt such ideas is to *take on different ideas*. We don’t have a very good mental “letting go” muscle. The analogy with the body is illustrative: we can’t forcibly “let go” of a muscle; all we can do is send it a message to relax. And as we all know from experiences of tension, our orders to relax a muscle often fail—like our orders to let go of a way of seeing. The only reliable way to relax a muscle is to find a contrary muscle and tighten it so that it relaxes the first one. So too, the only reliable way to let go of an idea is to get inside another one and *look back from there* at one’s own view—from the outside: to see it with perspective and thereby see its shortcomings and see what it doesn’t show us. This is only possible if we learn to enter into ideas different from our own—which requires practicing the rhetoric of assent and the believing game.

(5) I’ve made the following point in passing, but it bears repeating as a separate item for methodological emphasis. Booth and I run the danger of being misread as one-sided enthusiasts who are interested *only* in assent or believing. Again and again we find ourselves having to emphasize the point from Dewey: *either/or thinking* is a trap. We don’t seek a monopoly for

assent or belief—only to *break* the monopoly of the skeptical adversarial method. Wayne doesn't fail to affirm the important role of standing firm and *not assenting*: working to change the other person's view. He calls this "overstanding" in contrast to "understanding." He uses a book title that looks in *both* directions, *Critical Understanding*, for his main work about critical, rhetorical, intellectual methodology. Similarly in my work about the believing game, I repeatedly make it clear that the doubting game or skepticism is just as important and just as needful for good thinking as the believing game.

Four Small but Interesting Differences

(1) I link the term *critical thinking* with the doubting game. I don't see how "critical" can ever be pruned away from its connotations of criticism, argument, doubt, and skepticism. (Etymologically, the word *critical* comes from a Greek word that means "critical"—which derives from a root meaning "judge.") So when I notice how often people treat *critical thinking* as a kind of God term and equate it with "good thinking," I see yet more evidence of the monopoly of the doubting game in our culture. But Wayne disagrees and sees *critical thinking* in a larger more charitable light—as containing *both* the skeptical method *and* the rhetoric of assent. (For that reason I'm mostly avoiding the term "critical thinking" in this essay.)

(2) Wayne threads a path *between* Scylla's cave of extreme dogmatism and Charybdis's whirlpool of extreme skepticism. In effect, he's preaching a kind of middle way. In contrast, I'm arguing for a kind of figure eight path *all the way around* both Scylla and Charybdis. Mine is a counsel *not* of the golden mean but of extremes. Extreme belief: go overboard and believe everything—take the risk of dwelling *in* the cave of belief. But not just one belief—rather all relevant beliefs. Then extreme doubt: go overboard and doubt everything—take the risk of dwelling *in* the whirlpool of doubting everything. I'm arguing for a dialectical alternation over time.

If this emphasis on going overboard sounds odd, notice that it is completely noncontroversial when it comes to the doubting game or critical thinking. That is, we are frequently asked to adopt the disciplined practice of doubting *all views* in order to look for flaws that our habitual thinking hides from us. We accept (and rightly so) the principle that it's easier to find hidden weaknesses if we go overboard and try to doubt everything. This method of skeptical thinking has been taken as default good thinking since the Enlightenment and Descartes. But just because we doubt everything, it doesn't mean we accept nothing. Our goal is the one Descartes had—to accept only ideas we can trust.

I simply apply the same method or principle of extremity to the believing game: adopt the disciplined practice of believing *all views*—even unwelcome or "obviously wrong" ones—in order to find virtue or validity that our habitual thinking hides from us. We don't get the benefits of critical thinking unless we make an active effort to analyze, pull apart, and root out hidden assumptions or implications; merely listening or reading in a skeptical frame of mind is not enough. So too, 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. Thus, extremity—not a middle way.

(3) 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.

In my roundabout path of extremes, I never quite get to that final act of deciding. My believing and doubting games are pictures of what to do *before* deciding. Elizabeth Sargent accuses me of chickening out by avoiding this final act of decision--and thus not being true to Polanyi. She's right. I focus on the process of thinking--the series of activities, pushups, exercises, or wind sprints that we need to engage in if we are going to reach a good decision. I'm reticent about a method for the final step because I just don't know any good criteria for making final decisions. But Booth does suggest such criteria—and one point, anyway. He suggests that it makes sense to accept “every belief that can pass two tests: you have no particular, concrete grounds to doubt it . . . ; and you have good reason to think all men who understand the problem share your belief” (*Modern Dogma* 40).

Thus, even though we're both interested in the process of *changing our own minds*, we use two different senses of that phrase. For him, changing our mind means reaching a new conclusion--a new decision. For me, it means creating a change *in* our mind through playing the believing and doubting games. In order to play, you have to put your mind through changes--and playing will create a change in the end. But I fade away and don't talk about that final act of deciding.

(4) There is an interesting small difference in emphasis or flavor between our approaches. Wayne tilts just a bit towards agreement, convergence of opinion, the ability to come together in thinking, and the communal dimension (perhaps because he focuses more on reaching a conclusion). I tilt just a bit toward disagreement, divergence of opinion, difference, the ability to see differently, and the individualist dimension (perhaps because I focus more on preparatory or exploratory activities and not on a conclusion). Wayne himself acknowledges a danger that perhaps he asks for too much acceptance or agreement: “I have, in fact, made understanding into a supreme goal, running the risk of implying that it is better for two human minds to share erroneous views than for one to have the truth and the other to misunderstand him” (*Critical Understanding* 341-2)*.

*I would call attention to how he indulges in a bit exaggeration--bordering on self satire or even parody--in order to highlight and clarify the dominant shape of his argument. This is no mere stylistic idiosyncrasy. Both our methods, in their emphasis on seeing through the eyes of others, tend to improve our ability to describe our own views through jaundiced eyes. I take some solace in the way Joe Harris accuses me of criticizing my own view more persuasively than I argue for it (23-45).

In contrast to Wayne's slight tilt towards agreement, the believing game gives more support to individual or minority views that are idiosyncratic, unpopular, or counter-intuitive. Wayne leans a bit toward saying, in effect: if we don't have good reasons to disagree, let's agree or assent (see the passage just quoted.) My goal, in contrast, is to *seek out* divergence. What preoccupies me is how views that turns out to be helpful, necessary, or even true may often start out seeming all wrong to most sensible, reasonable, and even smart authorities. That is, all reasonable people in the room believe X, but someone is somehow drawn toward believing Y. This person often stays silent because she cannot find good reasons for Y and fears she is crazy to be drawn to it—indeed suspects it is plain wrong. This person often fails even to speak her view unless we've set up space for the believing game. But speaking out is not enough. I'm interested in deploying the energy of the group to *try to believe Y* in order to probe

whether perhaps there is something true or useful or interesting in Y—or in some dimension of Y—that this person is sensing but is unable to demonstrate because of the power of “common sense” (namely, the lens that we share).

This individualistic flavor in my believing game comes from my belief that a group or community or discipline is most in danger when all sensible and reasonable people agree. In the end, of course, 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. Dissenters, almost by definition, are going to look unsensible, but they are just the ones we need to listen to if we want to escape the inevitable limitations of our present “sensible, rational views.” Critical thinking asks, “Which views can best withstand the light of strong doubt.” The believing game asks, “Which views bear the best fruit in the light of strong belief.”

Oddly enough, then, the believing game seeks to achieve what is actually the goal of critical thinking or the doubting game: disagreement and dissonant views. 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. The believing game is a repeated attempt to believe the ideas of one person after another—to sleep with whatever idea comes down the pike—but everyone is trying communally to sleep with the same idea at once!

I have a rough faith that agreement or consensus on the best view will eventually emerge if a group manages to play the believing game well together. But it’s fair to say that the believing game derives from my distrust of pressure for agreement. But disagreement doesn’t have to lead to fighting or an adversarial process if we *cooperate* in exploring divergent views. When people are asked to believe one idea after another, this tends to maximize the warfare of competing views *inside* each person’s head; in this way we reduce the amount of warfare *between* persons.

Classroom Practices

These four differences between our approaches seem to me interesting and productive, but they are trivial in comparison with our overall agreement. So our shared pedagogical question is clear. How can we help students be more skilled at this rich and neglected kind of thinking, the ability to enter into or dwell with a point of view that is new or alien? But this question is likely to provoke an obvious objection: *The problem with students is NOT their failure to assent or believe. What they lack is the ability to question, to achieve critical distance, to read against the grain, to “interrogate.”* This objection helps me underline the dialectical point we are making about the role of assent in *all* good thinking. Yes, students often don’t read against the grain; but that doesn’t mean they are good at reading *with* the grain. Lack of critical distance is *not* the same as full, rich involvement—the ability to *dwell in* a text or an idea. For all too many students, the text is a pretty “nothing” experience—as are many of the ideas we try to convey to them. Why should students be interested in learning to question or see contrary depths in a ho hum experience? So again, this is not an either/or argument. The doubting game is valuable, but many students won’t really invest in this critical process till they get better at entering in, assenting, or playing the believing game.

The classroom is a particularly apt place to work on this process because, despite our commitment to critical thinking, most of us *do* want our students to be good at entering into new ideas—particularly ideas that bother them. When we try to teach students a new point of view, it's obvious that they are in trouble if they can *only* fend off, be critical, or doubt.

In this final section, I will list as briefly as I can some specific teaching activities that can help students learn better to *dwell in, enter in, or experience* a multiplicity of views or texts--even views that seem uncongenial or contradictory.

First on my list is Wayne's concluding classroom portrait. At a certain point the teacher enforces a discipline of listening: Kim can't argue his point till he has restated Marna's point to Marna's own satisfaction. To manage that, Kim really has to listen--to get inside Marna's way of thinking. (This is the process that Carl Rogers introduced and made famous in a 1951 essay. Rogers is an important figure for rhetoric and thinking and needs more notice than he is currently given. For recent explorations of Rogers by people mostly in rhetoric and composition, see Teich.)

This is an excellent procedure. If someone *tries* to see something from someone else's point of view, they will often succeed. But it's not always easy with a view we don't like. What if Kim has *trouble* seeing things from Marna's point of view? What if his every attempt to restate her position shows that he doesn't really get it? How could we help him? We can start by noticing a contrast between two root phenomenological ways of relating to ideas: doubting and critical thinking are acts of self-extrication; believing or assenting are acts of experiencing, dwelling in, entering, or self-insertion.

Doubting calls especially on the rhetoric of propositions and logic. If we want to extricate ourselves from a sensible and tempting view—to look for flaws and short comings—it helps to formulate the view into careful propositions with attention to logic. Symbolic logic strips language down even further to give even better leverage for finding hidden flaws. So if Kim uses language carefully, he can find all the flaws in Marna's position. But how can he enter into it or experience it?--especially if he is already preoccupied with its flaws or even finds her view threatening?

But what are the linguistic or rhetorical practices that help us dwell in a view or assent or believe? *Story, narrative, and poetry* help with experiencing. *Metaphor and image making* also help. When students have trouble entering into a new point of view (perhaps even just understanding it), I find it useful to ask them to harness language in ways like this: tell a story of someone who believes it; imagine and describe someone who sees things this way; tell the story of events that might have led people to have this view of the world; what would it be like to be someone who sees things this way? write a story or poem about the world that this view implies. Where doubting thrives on logic, assenting or believing thrives on the imagination and the ability to experience.

As Booth and Carl Rogers both emphasize, sometimes the central and enabling thing that Kim must do is simply to stop talking and listen; keep his mouth shut. Thus, in a discussion where someone is trying to advance a view and others object to it, there is a simple rule of thumb: the objectors need to stop talking and simply *give extended floor time* to the minority view. There are three concrete intellectual practices that I find helpful:

--*The three-minute or five-minute rule.* Any member of the class who feels he or she is not being heard can make a sign and invoke the rule—and no one else can talk for 3 or 5 minutes. This voice speaks and we listen; we cannot reply.

--*Allies only—no objections.* Others can speak--*but only* those who are having more success believing or entering into or assenting to the minority view. No objections allowed. Most people are familiar with this discipline from the process of brainstorming.

--“*Testimony.*” First, speaker(s) are invited to tell stories of the experiences that led them to their point of view and to describe what it’s like having or living with this view. Not only must the rest of us not answer or argue or disagree while they are speaking; even afterwards, we must refrain from answering or arguing. (This process is particularly useful when issues of race, gender, and sexual orientation are being discussed.)

The goal here is safety. Safety for the speaker, of course: most speakers feel unsafe if they sense we are just waiting to jump in with all our objections. But we need safety just as much as listeners who are, after all, trying to learn to be more skilled at in-dwelling or believing. It’s *difficult* for most of us to enter into a view we want to quarrel with feel threatened by; it’s safer for us to do so if we have permission simply not to talk about it any more for a while. Let the words we resist just sink in for a while with no comment.

For peer groups dealing with each other’s writing, it’s very productive to follow a “no-arguing” guideline. Writers read and readers describe their responses—giving movies of their minds as readers. Of course these responses might well involve disagreement with the text, but there’s no further discussion. The writer doesn’t answer back and say, “But you didn’t understand, you must have missed the place where I explained &c. &c.” And none of the readers argue with one another about their divergent responses. Just listen. This process pushes both the writer and the other readers *to enter into each other’s understandings of the texts*—instead of arguing and fending off. (For movies of the reader’s mind, see my books of 1973 and 1981 and Elbow and Belanoff.)

Language itself can sometimes get in the way of trying to experience or enter into a point of view different from our own. There are various productive ways to set language aside. We can ask students to *draw* or *sketch* literal images. What does this view look like--or what things do you see if you take this position? Teachers who have experience with theater or performance studies (along with counselors, social workers, and therapists) have learned to use certain kinds of nonverbal or noncognitive activities to help people get a literal *feeling* for a point of view: role playing and making sounds, movements, or gestures.

Silence. For centuries, people have made good use of the rhetoric of silence for in-dwelling. After Marna has spoken and Kim has tried and failed to restate her view to her satisfaction, sometimes what’s needful is for *no one to say anything* for 120 seconds or more. That’s not much time out of a class hour, but it feels like a long time in a classroom or an academic conference. Even this little silence can have a powerful effect in helping people reflect, digest, think—and eventually communicate better. (There’s been a remarkable resurgence of academic interest in silence in the last decade or two; I sense a renewed recognition of the limitations of language. See Belanoff, Dalke, my “Silence,” Gere, Jaworski, Tannen and Saville Troike.)

Private writing. There’s a *kind* of silence involved in asking people to engage in private writing. One of the most useful things for Marna and Kim—and the rest of the class—is to stop talking and do seven or ten minutes of writing for no one else’s eyes. What’s crucial is the invitation to language in conditions of privacy and safety.

Dwelling in through the voice. When we want students to be able to enter texts that are difficult or distant from them—say a Shakespeare sonnet or something written by someone very different from themselves—it’s extremely helpful to ask them to try to render the text aloud. (With longer texts, I choose crux passages of a few paragraphs or a page.) I stress that I’m not asking for skilled acting. The goal is only to “sound right” or “get the meanings across successfully to listeners with no text.” There’s no need for the reading to be dramatic; the words and syntax and rhythms just have to “go” or “work.” After we have three or four different readings of the same passage, we can discuss which ones manage to “sound right”—and usually such readings help us enter in or assent. (It’s no good putting students on the spot by asking for a reading without preparation time. I get them to prepare it for homework or practice it briefly in class in pairs.)

This activity illustrates something interesting about language. It’s impossible simply to say words so that they sound “okay” without participating in and thus understanding their meaning. So instead of asking them to “study carefully” this Shakespeare sonnet, I say, “practice reading it aloud till it works or sounds okay.” I’m asking students to practice dwelling in the words—to practice giving a kind of bodily assent.

Reading aloud creates more than meaning; it creates interpretation. That is, we cannot read a passage of words so they sound okay without creating an actual (if implied) interpretation. We can usually make a class discussion more fruitful by starting off with contrasting readings of a central passage. The readings give us actual interpretations—“live” and already on the floor. Everyone has heard words that have been dwelt in and given a kind of assent--and most listeners have been drawn into these contrasting or alternative in-dwellings.

If Marna had put her position in writing, it might have been helpful for Kim to read her text out loud--not critically but trying to make it “sound right.” Reading or saying aloud is an exercise in putting yourself into words.

Nonadversarial argument. Finally, the classroom is an ideal place to practice nonadversarial forms of argument. Traditional argument implies a zero sum game: if I’m right, you must be wrong. Thus, arguments (and essays and dissertations) traditionally start with criticism of the views of opponents. Only in this way—the assumption goes—can I clear any space for *my* ideas. But this is usually rhetorical suicide with any readers who aren’t already on my side. I’m telling them that they can’t agree with my ideas unless they first agree that they are wrong or stupid—before they’ve even heard my allegedly better ideas.

We can help students learn a model of nonadversarial argument that is conceptually simple and obvious: argue *for*, not *against*. But this contradicts traditional training in “critical thinking” so it takes practice and discipline. It’s not so easy to focus on all the reasons why my ideas are good—but stay tacit about the shortcomings of competing ideas. This *non-zero sum* model of argument assumes that two ideas or views that appear to be in conflict or even logically contradictory *might*, in fact, both be right. They might need to be articulated better or seen from a larger view—or seen in different frame of reference that the parties haven’t yet figured out. A virtue of nonadversarial argument (and the believing game and the rhetoric of assent) is the leverage it provides for helping us work out larger and better frames of reference. And even if my opponents *are* dead wrong, I can usually be more persuasive with them if I just dwell on what’s good about my idea and don’t talk about the problems I see in theirs. (I’m not arguing that nonadversarial argument will be appropriate in all contexts.)

To conclude. Booth and I are engaged together in an ambitious but important project: to help people understand that even though the skeptical, adversarial, doubting mode of critical thinking is necessary and good, nevertheless we shouldn't let it take over our minds and the culture by equating it with good thinking itself. It's *one kind* or *one dimension* of good thinking. We can get better thinking and discourse if we give equal importance to another dimension--the rhetoric of assent and the believing game. I feel braver in my arguments for having Wayne Booth as an ally in this fight against either/or thinking.*

*I'm grateful for the great pleasure and learning I derived from working with Wayne Booth on this project. Our papers started off in a session at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in Chicago in March 2002. That session was personally notable for us because it followed an evening of string quartet playing together at Wayne's house. I have learned from helpful explorations of the believing and doubting games in my work by Flynn, Moran, Knoblauch and Brannon, O'Donnell, and Sargent.

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