

Believing As Thinking

by Deborah Tannen

"The doubting game" is the name English professor Peter Elbow gives to what educators are trained to do. In playing the doubting game, you approach other's work by looking for what is wrong, much as the press corps follows the president hoping to catch him stumble or an attorney pores over an opposing witness's deposition looking for inconsistencies that can be challenged on the stand. It is an attorney's job to discredit opposing witnesses, but is it a scholar's job to approach colleagues [and ideas, or written works] like an opposing attorney?

Elbow recommends learning to approach new ideas, and ideas different from your own, in a different spirit--what he calls a "believing game." This does not mean accepting everything anyone says or writes in an unthinking way. That would be just as superficial as rejecting everything without thinking deeply about it. The believing game is still a game. It simply asks you to give it a whirl: Read as if you believed, and see where it takes you. Then you can go back and ask whether you want to accept or reject elements in... the idea. Elbow is not recommending that we stop doubting altogether. He is telling us to stop doubting exclusively. We need a systematic and respected way to detect and expose strengths, just as we have a systematic and respected way of detecting faults.

Americans need little encouragement to play the doubting game because we regard it as synonymous with intellectual inquiry, a sign of intelligence. In Elbow's words, "We tend to assume that the ability to criticize a claim we disagree with counts as more serious intellectual work than the ability to enter into it and temporarily assent." It is the believing game that needs to be encouraged and recognized as an equally serious intellectual pursuit.

Although criticizing is surely part of thinking, it is not synonymous with it. Again, limiting critical response to critique means not doing the other kinds of critical thinking that could be helpful: looking for new insights, new perspectives, new ways of thinking, new knowledge. Critiquing relieves you of the responsibility of doing integrative thinking. It also has the... [effect] of making the critics feel smart, smarter than the ill-fated author whose work is being picked apart like carrion... [In addition, it] has the disadvantage of making them less likely to learn from the author's work.

Excerpted from *The Argument Culture*, by Deborah Tannen, Ballantine Books, 1999, pages 273-4.

Receptivity to Truth*

By Thich Nhat Hanh

When we hear a Dharma talk or study a sutra, our only job is to remain open. Usually, when we hear or read something new, we just compare it to our own ideas. If it is the same, we accept it and say that it is correct. If it is not, we say it is incorrect. In either case, we learn nothing. If we read or listen with an open mind and an open heart, the rain of the Dharma will

penetrate the soil of our consciousness.

The gentle spring rain permeates the soil of my
soul.
A seed that has lain deeply in the earth for many
years just smiles. (1)

While reading or listening, do not work too hard. Be like the earth. When the rain comes, the earth only has to open herself up to the rain. Allow the rain of the Dharma to come in and penetrate the seeds that are buried deep in your consciousness. A teacher cannot give you the truth. The truth is already in you. You only need to open yourself... If you let the words enter you, the soil and the seeds will do the rest of the work.

**The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, by Thich Nhat Hanh, Broadway Books, 1998, pp. 12-13. (1) From Thich Nhat Hanh, "Cuckoo Telephone," in *Call Me By My True Names*, p. 76.