

Readings: Religions of China and Japan

Rel 202 * Dale Lugenbehl * Spring 2010

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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