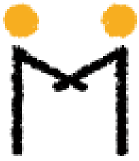

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TEACHING CRITICAL THINKING: THE BELIEVING GAME & THE DOUBTING GAME

Submitted by **Alan Shapiro** [1] on Sat, 07/23/2011 - 13:39
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Grade Level: High School
Topic: Critical Thinking
Teaching Strategies

Description:
These two processes offer us an opportunity to think rigorously without polarization and to embrace contradictions that normally divide us.

by Alan Shapiro

"If people don't obey the law, you can't have a decent society."

"But what about people like Gandhi and King? Without them India would still be ruled by Britain and the South would still keep African-Americans from voting."

"Most people aren't Gandhis or Kings."

"Some, are, though, and we need them."

The scene is a history classroom. The subject is Thoreau's essay, "Civil Disobedience," written shortly after he was jailed for refusing to pay his poll tax, a protest against the U.S. war in Mexico, 1846-1848. Student discussion is lively and combative. The debate exhausts the period, and when the bell rings, students continue to argue as they leave the room. A good class, the teacher is probably thinking.

The debate has produced strong disagreement, some reasonable arguments, and lots of heat. But it has not produced a recognition of complexity, a sense of the strength and worth of a position not one's own; a movement, however, slight, in one's own position; a desire to go on thinking.

We teachers are often better at stimulating exciting arguments than at complicating and deepening understandings; often better at developing critical thinking skills than at entering into another's point of view and working to experience it and find whatever truth it may contain.

The intellectual tradition of critical thinking Peter Elbow calls "methodological doubt," that is, "the systematic, disciplined, and conscious attempt to criticize everything no matter how compelling it might seem-to find flaws or contradictions we might otherwise miss." To complement methodological doubt, Elbow proposes "methodological belief," which he defines as "the equally systematic, disciplined, and conscious attempt to believe everything, no matter how unlikely or repellent it many seem-to find virtues or strengths we might otherwise miss."

Together, these two processes offer us an opportunity to think rigorously without polarization and to embrace contradictions that normally divide us. They can help us recognize that, as Elbow writes, "the truth is often complex and that different people often catch different aspects of it." They can also help us see that "certainty is rarely if ever possible and that we increase the likelihood of getting things wrong if we succumb to the hunger for it." (Peter Elbow, "Methodological Doubting and Believing: Contraries in Inquiry," in Embracing Contraries: Explorations in Learning and Teaching, N.Y., Oxford University Press, 1986.)

What follows is an approach to teaching critical thinking that includes a "methodological belief" process (the believing game) and a "methodological doubt" process (the doubting game). An excerpt from "Civil Disobedience" will be the take-off point for an outline of how the two games might be used with students as they study any controversial issue. Starred items in the description of the doubting game refer to suggested lesson plans that follow the conclusion of the game. Teachers may find one or more of them useful when a close examination of some aspect of the question process seems desirable.

FROM CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

"Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once? Men generally...think that they ought to wait until they have persuaded the majority to alter them. They think that, if they should resist, the remedy would be worse than the evil. But it is the fault of the government itself that the remedy is worse than the evil. It makes it worse. Why is it not more apt to anticipate and provide for reform?....If the injustice...is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine.

"What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn. As for adopting the ways which the state has provided for remedying the evil, I know not of such ways. They take too much time, and man's life will be gone....A man has not everything to do, but something; and because he cannot do everything it is not necessary that he should do something wrong....any man more right than his neighbors constitutes a majority of one already."
-Henry David Thoreau

THE BELIEVING GAME

"Everyone agrees in theory that we can't judge a new idea or point of view unless we enter into it and try it out, but the practice itself is rare." *-Peter Elbow*

1. The teacher might introduce the believing game by making the following points to students:
You have probably noticed that when we consider controversial issues like anti-terrorist legislation and its effects on civil liberties or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or our own personal conflicts, what may start as a discussion quickly can become a debate. We argue eagerly for our own opinions; we listen to opposing arguments mainly to find flaws and, when we do, interrupt and attack them. We are more interested in proving ourselves right, in winning the argument, than in considering seriously another viewpoint, in continuing to think. The idea behind the believing game is to suspend judgment, promote continued thought, open oneself to the strengths and values of a perspective with which one does

not agree in part or in whole, and work at believing that perspective.

The believing game is the first step in a critical thinking process. In the second, the more familiar doubting game, we can ask probing questions, attack faulty logic, point out inadequate evidence, provide information that rebuts. A third step is to work toward judgment by integrating the insights gained by experiencing an idea from the inside and scrutinizing it from the outside.

2. It can be useful to ask students to write a short paragraph as an initial record of their thinking on the issue to be considered-in this case, civil disobedience. For example: Do you believe it is ever right, as a matter of conscience, to deliberately break a law you regard as unjust? Or perhaps: At one time in US history it was against the law to harbor a fugitive slave. Would you have broken that law? Why or why not?

3. Ask students to read or listen to the viewpoint they are to believe (in this case, the excerpt from "Civil Disobedience"). They need to work hard at believing as much of the argument as they can. If, as is likely, they disagree with Thoreau, they should ask themselves: What does he see that I don't? How could this argument possibly be right? What can I agree with? They should try to suppress the inclination to disagree.

4. Divide the class into small discussion groups for 10-15 minutes. Students are to make only statements that support Thoreau. They are not pretending or role-playing. They are finding and speaking from places in themselves that honestly connect with him. Elbow suggests they ask themselves such questions as: "What's interesting or helpful about the view?...What would you notice if you believed this view? If it were true? In what sense or under what conditions might this idea be true?" Tell students they should not make any negative or even challenging statements.
An acceptable comment might be: "Going to church is very important for me. If it was against the law to practice my religion, I think I would do it anyway, even if secretly." Unacceptable would be: "I think it makes more sense to try to change a law than to break it."

5. When discussion flags-and it may after a short time the first time students play the believing game - the teacher can interrupt and ask that they now work at formulating questions in the believing mode. These must aim at clarification and invite fuller understanding and acceptance. Perhaps other members of the group can answer them. They must not be loaded, rhetorical questions. An acceptable one might be: "Can someone give me an example of an unjust law that ought to be broken"? Or, "I have a problem with what Thoreau calls 'being an agent of injustice to another.' Can anyone tell me what he means?" Unacceptable would be: "Isn't Thoreau just blaming the government? Don't we elect the government?"

6. The remainder of the period can be used to process the students' experiences. What success did they have? What problems? How did they deal with them? To what extent did the experience feel authentic? What did they notice about other students' statements and questions? Did the experience affect their point of view, even if only slightly? How? Or why not?

Conclusion:

Students will probably have difficulty in their first experience with the believing game. It may seem artificial, perhaps uncomfortable, even threatening. Under some circumstances, playing the game may challenge deeply held beliefs and the security that goes with them. If methodological belief, almost certainly an unfamiliar process for students, is to take hold and have a chance to produce worthwhile results, students need to experience it with some frequency. Have students play the believing game when a significant disagreement occurs in any class session. Play it when a student is reporting to the class or reading an essay on a controversial subject. Play it after students hear an outside speaker. Play it when a student offers a view that others find peculiar or even stupid. The teacher can interrupt the session for ten minutes' worth of believing. What does the student feel and see? Am I sure I understand? What values underlie this view? Which do I acknowledge as valid, as important? How can this point of view possibly be right?

Entering into and really experiencing unfamiliar or irritating points of view takes time and effort. But it invites listening, instead of arguing; it fosters empathy rather than antagonisms. It encourages an understanding that there can be competing truths, each of which has some value; that, as Elbow writes, "Certainty is rarely if ever possible and we increase the likelihood of getting things wrong if we succumb to the hunger for it."

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THE DOUBTING GAME

"Knowing and questioning, of course, require one another. We understand nothing except in so far as we understand the questions behind it." *-I. A. Richards*

1. A necessary complement to the believing game is the doubting game. Just as the former asks for a systematic, disciplined effort to believe a point of view no matter how unfamiliar or ridiculous it may seem, so the latter invites students to engage in a systematic, disciplined effort to inquire into or doubt a point of view no matter how familiar and reasonable it may seem. The doubting game begins with learning how to ask and to analyze questions. The subject may be an issue discussed in a history text, a bill being debated in Congress, any controversial issue, but in this case will be the excerpt from "Civil Disobedience."

2. The teacher can begin by inviting student questions about it, questions, which if answered well, might lead to a better understanding of civil disobedience, questions that will test its worth. Some sample questions students might ask:

a. What is an unjust law?

b. Is breaking the law ever justified?

c. Why did Thoreau think the war against Mexico was unjust?

d. What about our gun laws?

e. Why does the US government take too much time to remedy unjust laws?

f. What would happen to our society if everyone who thought a law was unjust broke it?

g. How long was Thoreau in jail?

3. The next step is to analyze the questions to help students understand that: 1) clarity is vital; 2) questions are instruments of perception; the nature of a question helps to determine the nature of an answer; 3) some questions are better than others ("better," in this context, meaning more helpful in leading one to a fuller understanding of civil disobedience). The class should analyze their questions using the following criteria:

a. Do any questions require a strictly factual answer? (c) Where will the facts come from? Can you get information that enables you to answer with reasonable certainty? How do you know?

b. Do any questions call for an opinion? (a, b, e, f) Whose? Why?

c. Do any questions call for the definition of any words* before they can be answered intelligently? (a) If so, how shall they be defined?

d. Do any questions contain assumptions (c, e) If so, are these assumptions reasonable to make? If they are not, how might the question be reworded?

e. Do any questions call for a yes/no answer? (b) If so, what follow-up questions might be asked?

f. Are any questions unclear? (d) If so, how shall they be reworded?

g. Do any questions call for predictions? (f) Whose? Why?

h. Are any questions useless for the inquiry? (g)

Rigor in the process of question analysis is essential. For example, question e makes a triple set of assumptions: that government officials are aware of unjust laws; that they eventually remedy them; that they take too much time doing so. Once students recognize such a set of assumptions they can be helped to develop other questions that might lead to

Once students recognize such a set of assumptions they can be helped to develop other questions that might lead to worthwhile inquiry. For example:
Is there any law you know of that at least some US officials regard as unjust? If so, which officials and what law? (Students might know that Senators McCain and Feingold have sponsored legislation to correct what they regard as unjust campaign finance laws.) Have such officials done anything to remedy this situation? If so, what? If not, why not? What are some of the reasons they have not yet succeeded in changing the law?

Obviously, pursuing answers to such questions will take time. Some of the answers will be factual; others will require facts and opinions, perhaps opinions of experts who know what it takes to get a law passed on campaign finance reform. That, in turn, raises questions about experts and expertness: What makes a person an expert on a subject? How can you know if the person has these qualifications? How can you know if the person has any bias you should take into consideration as you examine the person's views?

4. Having clarified the questions and determined which are most useful, the students can begin an inquiry. The teacher has several choices about how to proceed. One might be to assign common class readings bearing on the questions to be answered and then to discuss them with the class. A second could be to divide the class into groups, assigning each certain questions to be answered in a presentation to the class. Still another would be to assign questions to individual students. In any of these assignments an important consideration will be the amount and difficulty of work required.

5. Playing the doubting game is likely to have several byproducts:

(1) The students will find that their questions often generate still other questions;
(2) The process is likely to bring out not only information of the factual kind but also about attitudes and values. These, too, can be worth further examination and discussion;
(3) The teacher will also note what class work is necessary on a number of critical thinking skills. Do students distinguish between *factual and judgmental statements**? How well do they understand the process of *definition**? Are they clear about assumptions? How well do they identify central issues? What help might they need in determining the relevance and reliability of evidence?

Like the believing game, the doubting game requires repeated experiences if students are to become good questioners and inquirers. Experience with the two games need not focus only on current or historical issues. An English class can play the games with poems and novels; science classes can believe and doubt competing points of view on environmental issues; a mathematics class can do the same on the use of statistics to support differing opinions.

Integrating One's Thinking

Having believed, doubted, and investigated further, students can now work at integrating their thinking. Have the students' experiences opened possibilities for finding some common ground on an issue? Are they feeling and thinking somewhat differently than they were originally? How? Or why not? What does this mean for one's actions in a world where most social issues are complex and certainty about them is "rarely if ever possible"? Following a discussion of such questions and as a conclusion to their work, students can subject themselves and the issue they have examined to some written analysis. What was their opinion before they began the study? Have students take another look at what they wrote earlier. Are their answers to the questions any different now?

* DEFINING

Introduction: Are the men incarcerated at Guantanamo Bay prisoners of war? An answer depends upon how one defines "prisoners of war," and people can and do disagree about them. So what is the "real definition"? Since people are the only sources of word meanings, there is no "real meaning" to be found. This is true not only for such potentially controversial terms as "terrorist" and "freedom fighter" but also for such seemingly innocent words as "girl." Someone who says, "Come here, girl," may intend to be loving, sarcastic, contemptuous, or something else. It is not words that have meanings but we who give them meanings.

1. Ask students to read the following definitions of "friend" and then to determine into which of the categories below them each falls.

a. Diamonds are a girl's best friend.

b. A dog is man's best friend.

c. If you want to know what a friend is, read the Biblical story of David and Jonathan.

d. A friend is the opposite of an enemy.

e. A friend is a comrade.

f. The word friend is a noun in sentence e.

Definition by synonym (e)
Definition by "word as word" (d, f)
Definition by attitude (a, b, c)
Definition by operation or by what is happening (c)

Help students to understand that there are multiple ways of defining words, that each serves a different purpose.

2. Have students read the following poem.

The Blind Men and the Elephant
by John Godfrey Saxe

It was six men of Indostan
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the Elephant
(Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind.

The First approached the Elephant,
And happening to fall
Against his broad and sturdy side,
At once began to bawl:
"God bless me! but the Elephant
Is very like a wall!"

The Second, feeling of the tusk,
Cried, "Ho! what have we here
So very round and smooth and sharp?
To me 'tis very clear
This wonder of an Elephant
Is very like a spear!"

The Third approached the animal,
And happening to take
The squirming trunk within his hands,
Thus boldly up and spake:
"I see," quoth he, " the Elephant
Is very like a snake!"

The Fourth reached out an eager hand,
And felt above the knee:

"What most this wondrous beast is like
Is mighty plain," quoth he;
"'Tis clear enough the Elephant
Is very like a tree!"

The Fifth, who chanced to touch the ear,
Said, "E'en the blindest man
Can tell what this resembles most;
Deny the fact who can,
This marvel of an Elephant
Is very like a fan!"

The Sixth no sooner had begun
About the beast to grope,
Then, seizing on the swinging tail
That fell within his scope,
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant
Is very like a rope!"

And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong.
Though each was partly in the right
They all were in the wrong!"

For discussion:
How does the poem suggest any problems of defining? Like the men of Indostan, each of us by our individuality is limited in what we can see. What is "partly in the right" about each of the definitions of "friend" even if none is "in the wrong"?

3. Student exercise

Using each of the four ways of defining "friend," define "unjust law."

Divide students into groups. Ask them to share their definitions and then to pick what they think is the best one. "Best," in this context, means the one that will be most useful in considering whether it would be right to break an "unjust law."

Have each of the definitions chosen read to the class and the best one selected. Students need to recognize that the chosen definition is not the final word, that it limits the group in certain ways but at least allows them to talk about an "unjust law" from the point of view of a shared definition.

Apply the class definition to one or more of the following laws that at least some people have regarded as unjust: the British tax on tea and other items in colonial days; the law allowing only white men to vote; the fugitive slave law; current laws on abortion, marijuana, the income tax.

4. Assignment

Keeping in mind the definition the class has agreed upon, answer the following question in one well-developed paragraph: If you regarded a law as unjust, would you break that law? Why or why not?

** REPORTS AND JUDGMENTS

In "Civil Disobedience" Thoreau states his belief that some laws are unjust. He tells his readers to break the law if it requires one to be "an agent of injustice." Both of the preceding sentences are factual. Reading the essay verifies that these are his views. Of course Thoreau's statements themselves are judgmental. The words "unjust" in the first sentence and "injustice" in the second as well as his advice about breaking the law are judgmental. So we have factual statements that include Thoreau's opinions.

But what about such statements as, "Thoreau published 'Civil Disobedience' in 1840. He is also the author of 'Self Reliance'"? These sentences are factual in form but are inaccurate. It is therefore useful to use instead the term "report," which may be defined as a verifiable statement that excludes judgmental language but that may or may not be factually accurate.

The following sentences raise still other issues: "Thoreau was jailed for opposing the war with Mexico." The verifiable fact is that he was jailed for refusing to pay the poll-tax, so the sentence, while a report, is factual in form but only partially accurate.

"Civil Disobedience" contains frequent judgments, some of which may look like reports. Thoreau's famous comment that "any man more right than his neighbor constitutes a majority of one already" includes a judgmental term, "more right," and what looks like a report, "a majority of one," but is a rather subtly stated opinion.

Students need to discuss such matters and gain sophistication in distinguishing among different kinds of statements, an essential critical thinking ability.

To help students understand the distinctions between reports (accurate, partially accurate and false) and judgments, the teacher might have them analyze readings and use such exercises as the following.

Exercise 1

Directions: Mark each sentence either R (report) or J (judgment).

1. Laws never made men a whit more just.

2. I have paid no poll-tax for six years.

3. I was put into jail once on this account, for one night.

4. The night in prison was novel and interesting enough.

5. There are nine hundred and ninety-nine patrons of virtue to one virtuous man.

6. The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.

7. Our life is frittered away by detail...Simplify, simplify.

8. I have traveled a good deal in Concord.

9. Thoreau was born in 1920.

10. He wrote "Civil Disobedience," *Walden* and *Moby Dick*.

Note to Teacher: The first five sentences are from "Civil Disobedience, " the next three from "Walden," the last two invented.

Exercise 2

Directions: Write five reports and five judgments about "Civil Disobedience." Then exchange papers with a partner and

mark each other's sentences either R or J. Discuss.

Exercise 3

Directions: Write a short paragraph beginning with a judgmental statement about "Civil Disobedience" with which you agree and support it with three reports. Then write another short paragraph, beginning this time with a judgmental statement about the essay with which you disagree but support with three reports.

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