Critical reading comprises three main skills: comprehension (making sense of the words on the page), analysis (understanding that texts are rhetorical constructions) and criticism (judging how well a text achieves its author’s communicative purpose). Of the three, criticism is perhaps the hardest to teach and learn, given the tradition of adversarial scepticism in academia and the difficulty of prying ‘criticism’ away from its ‘censure’ and ‘fault-finding’ senses. When students treat critical reading as a search for everything that is wrong with a text, rather than as a means of achieving greater understanding, we know the pendulum has swung too far in the direction of dissent.

Yet, most of us probably think our students’ problem is not a failure to assent but their inability “to achieve critical distance, to read against the grain, to ‘interrogate’” (Elbow, 2005, p. 394, italics in original). Elbow’s point and mine in this article is that our students often read neither against nor with the grain, and that they are unlikely to invest in the former until they get better at the latter.

To help our students escape the extremes of “both utter scepticism and rabid dogmatism” (Booth, 2005, p. 381), we need a notion of critical reading that includes a rhetoric of critical assent. The basic classroom goal of such a rhetoric is to get students “never to assent to or reject any new position they have not fully understood” (p. 386) because the right to criticise must be earned by “dwelling with” and “dwelling in” the writer’s ideas (Booth, 1979, p. 351, cited in Elbow, 2005, p. 389).

Booth’s position echoes psychologist Carl Rogers’ (1961) ideas about empathic understanding—understanding with rather than about a person. Real communication occurs, Rogers argues, when we avoid our very human tendency to judge long enough to attempt genuine understanding of what someone is saying (i.e. to see ideas and attitudes from the writer’s vantage point and sense how they feel to him/her).

Both Rogers and Booth advocate a method of active listening incorporating paraphrase, in which we speak up for our own view only after we have first restated our interlocutor’s ideas and feelings to the latter’s satisfaction, as illustrated in the extended extract from Booth (2005, p. 387) on page 23:

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**About the Author**

**Assoc Prof Sunita Anne Abraham**

Dept of English Language & Literature

Assoc Prof Sunita Abraham’s teaching interests lie primarily in the areas of discourse analysis, the language of persuasion, the discourse of argumentation, with particular emphasis on the development of critical reading, writing and thinking abilities. She has received eleven teaching awards at faculty and university levels, including two Outstanding Educator Awards (2000, 2007).
Writing professor Peter Elbow (2005) recommends a slightly different route to help students inhabit others’ ideas (i.e. alternating between extremes of doubt and belief in what he dubs the doubting and believing games, respectively). As a Doubter, the reader’s role is to be wholly skeptical of a writer’s claims, to look for counter-examples and inconsistencies that weaken the writer’s case—something that we routinely encourage our students to do. Conversely, as a Believer, the reader’s role is to try and see things from the writer’s frame of reference, even if you disagree with what is being said.

One strategy that Ramage, Bean and Johnson (2010) recommend for reading as a believer is summary writing, using both says statements and does statements. Says statements summarise the content or main idea of a paragraph or section of text. This is the kind of summary that students are familiar with from their high school training. In contrast, does statements summarise the function of a paragraph (i.e. the rhetorical action performed by a writer), as illustrated below:

Para. 1: Uses an anecdote to introduce the problem of ...
Para. 2: Frames the problem of ... in the larger context of...
Para. 3: Sketches two common opposing views to...
Para. 4: Uses statistics to refute the first view.

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The two kinds of summaries map onto the skills of comprehension (understanding the text’s message) and analysis (understanding the text’s rhetorical construction) integral to critical reading.

Three other strategies that Elbow (2005) recommends for reading as a believer include storytelling and image-making, reading aloud, and non-adversarial argument. The first strategy rests on the assumption that whereas the doubting game thrives on the detachment of propositional logic, the believing game thrives on our ability to imaginatively experience things by means of narrative and metaphor. Thus, when students have trouble entering a new and alien view, Elbow (2005) asks them to “tell a story of events that might have led people to have this view of the world” or to imagine what it would be like “to be someone who sees things this way” (p. 394).

The second strategy literally gives voice to the writer’s voice in that students are asked to read central passages out loud in class because reading aloud necessitates putting yourself into the words and “creating an actual (if implied) interpretation” (Elbow 2005, p. 397). To make a class discussion even more fruitful, Elbow recommends starting with contrasting “live interpretations” of a key passage so that students can hear and be drawn into these alternative indwellings of the author’s ideas.

Elbow’s third strategy (practising non-adversarial argument) is based on a distinction between agonistic and non-agonistic modes of argument. Classical argument typically involves refutation of opposing views in a zero-sum game (if I am right, you must be wrong) which can result in a ‘win-lose’ (winner takes all) notion of argument. In contrast, non-adversarial argument is a non-zero-sum game which acknowledges that “two ideas or views that appear to be in conflict or even logically contradictory might, in fact, both be right. … [if] articulated better or seen from a larger view or in a different frame of reference that the parties haven’t yet figured out” (Elbow, 2005, p. 397, italics in original).

Neither Booth nor Elbow reference the philosopher Georg Hegel (who was behind the development of dialectics), but the similarity to dialectical reasoning is apparent in the progression from believing an idea (Elbow’s believing game; Hegel’s thesis) to inevitably doubting it (Elbow’s doubting game; Hegel’s antithesis) to the sophistication of a more holistic or integrated perspective (Booth’s critical assent; Hegel’s synthesis). As both Elbow (2005) and Booth (2005) emphasise, the attempt to build bridges or seek common ground does not signify blind faith or surrender. The goal here is to break the monopoly of extremes, whether of skepticism or dogmatism, by keeping the forces of assent and dissent in dynamic equilibrium. The rhetoric of critical assent reminds us that there are two questions central to rhetoric. Too many people consider only the first: “How can I change your mind?” forgetting the second and much tougher question: “When should I assent to your view, thus changing my mind?”

References

