

VENTURING OUT

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English Professor Tim Doherty engages students with role play, games, and conflict resolution



(PHOTO BY JODIE ANDRUSKEVICH)

FACULTY PROFILE

ACADEMICS

Ph.D. in English, Rhetoric, and Composition, University of Massachusetts, Amherst

CURRENTLY

Coordinator of Department of English and Communications, a position he's held since 2005. In addition to his extensive work on faculty development, he teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in Rhetoric and Composition and pre-19th century British literature.

PROJECTS AND PUBLICATIONS

- Recently published "Lessons from the Believing Game" in the *Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*
- Collaborating on a book project pertaining to conflict resolution in college writing with Dr. Zan Walker-Goncalves at Franklin Pierce University.

In 1992, Tim Doherty, associate professor of English, took part in a life-changing workshop with Brazilian director and writer Augusto Boal, founder of Theatre of the Oppressed. "Boal helped me to realize that I could use theatre and role play to move my students from their media-saturated home language to a more academic language," says Doherty. For the next 15 years, Doherty integrated role-play and improvisatory theatre into his teaching of college writing. During his 2006 sabbatical, he expanded his interest to conflict resolution and mediation, practices that also involve "flexibility of mind" and can be used to teach persuasive writing.

His work led him to adopt “The Believing Game,” a classroom technique pioneered by English scholar and personal mentor Peter Elbow. In the Believing Game, students are asked to suspend their own tightly held beliefs on a topic and to argue or write effectively on the opposing view. This time-intensive exercise involves research, role play, reflective writing, and eventually persuasive writing.

Doherty answers questions about the role of play, active listening, conflict resolution, and The Believing Game in the teaching of college writing.

Q. How does playfulness promote learning?

A. Play can lower apprehension—it helps students feel a bit less intense about getting their learning right the first time and it can promote risk-taking. Play alone isn’t the point—it has to be matched with reflection on whatever the play generates.

I opt for certain forms of play that are appropriate to a college writing classroom—so, I’ll introduce a topic and ask everyone to pass notes. I let them do what is usually forbidden, and we see where it takes us. Texting about a topic is my next playful experiment—I haven’t done it yet. I also do what I call the vocal museum—people write anonymously on a topic and then I tape their short compositions on the walls around the room. From there, students write responses on the wall of writings. It loosens everyone up and gives them a foothold on a topic in a way that is lowstakes. I also do more extended forms of play—such as role-plays that are open to modification.

Q. What was your primary goal in introducing the Believing Game? How are we culturally programmed to hold on to our views, “no matter what?”

A. We often use combat metaphors when we talk about argument and persuasion in college writing. We talk about “shooting holes” in an argument or “tearing apart” an argument. The aim is to win rather than to seek common ground or find some way out of the mire. In her book, *The Argument Culture*, linguist and author Deborah Tannen brought my attention back to the fact that we are programmed by media and by schools to associate argument with combat. I have always tried to teach students both adversarial and non-adversarial strategies of persuasion, and Peter Elbow’s *The Believing Game* is a non-adversarial approach. The game helps students to see that language is marked by habit: we have habitual ways of using language in conflict that either push people away or invite a respectful dialogue. More often than not, we don’t realize that conflict can mean opportunity rather than fear of loss.

Q. How do you promote active listening among students? What role does listening play in learning?

A. A strong link I have been able to forge between conflict resolution and academic writing is that between listening and reading. After we establish that it helps a lot to listen when you are in a conflict, then it’s a small leap to realize that that same stance can be taken when you read. You don’t just bathe your text in yellow highlighter—you find instead those moments when a writer is revealing the real nature of his or her argument. That’s the role that listening can play in higher education—it’s both an actual skill that we often underuse in interpersonal settings and it’s a metaphor for reading.

When I pursued 40 hours of training as a mediator, I was most impressed by two things: how listening is much harder than I thought, and how many tools are available for active, reflective listening. When students come to realize that, in the midst of conflict, we are all guilty of not listening because we are busy thinking about how we’ll respond, they perk up and get interested in the mere fact that they are missing the real substance of what someone is saying.

Q. *You wrote: “The art of teaching with The Believing Game is to know when writers are ready to venture out.” What are some of the signs?*

A. At the Public Conversations Project, where I received some of my training in conflict resolution, they call this moment “the shift.” I find it a bit unpredictable and mystical. One sign that someone is really ready to venture out into the thinking about the values of “the opposition” is when they acknowledge something they hadn’t known or hadn’t quite valued. They “give” a little. During one classroom session of The Believing Game that focused on the death penalty, for example, I saw this shift occur when a student was assigned to play the role of an accused murderer’s brother. In her reflective writing after the role-play, the student responded that she hadn’t ever thought of this perspective—that the family of the accused was also facing impending loss. There was a tiny shift, a glimmer of identification. When role-play goes well, there’s an emotional level of perception that would otherwise be missing from simple conversation about a controversial issue.

Q. *Aside from learning how to write persuasively at the college level, what do you hope students will take away from your classroom?*

A. One of the coolest things about college teaching is to awaken students to their own “habits of mind.” The best I can hope for is to leave them with a suspended and unsettled state of thinking. With active listening and The Believing Game, one of my goals is to help students develop a continuous skill of listening, empathy, and a willingness to change perspective. Ultimately, true listening is about love: it’s a “God moment.” It’s when we realize we are all part of God’s creation. ■

* **LUCIE BRYAR** earned a B.A. in English Communications from Rivier College in 1976. She has more than 20 years experience in news-writing, marketing, and public relations, including 14 years as a staff writer for Rivier College. In her current position as a writer for Southern New Hampshire Medical Center, Bryar produces the employee newsletter. She also writes for the hospital magazine, as well as contributes to the production of collateral marketing material.