

◆ Chapter 8

It's Not What You Said, It's How You Said It: Socio-cultural Learning, Motivational Interviewing, and the Usefulness of Cervantine Contradiction in Teaching Reality Literacy

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If the past decade has taught us anything about how we receive and process information, it is this: how it is packaged and presented is frequently more important than the information itself. The tailoring of rhetoric to appeal to the audience's desired form of reality can depart drastically from concrete data and can be used as a suggestive vehicle that motivates audience members to follow a path that may, ultimately, not be in their own self-interest or deeply damaging to other fellow stakeholders within our society and culture. Despite mounting evidence of the reality-distorting power of this type of rhetoric and the media outlets that spreads it, consciously or unconsciously, we have been unable and/or unwilling to break free from viewing this as a dialectical conflict between seemingly opposed worldviews and ways of life instead of considering the unavoidable root causes: our human inability to perceive reality as a logical totality, despite belief to the contrary, and the nuanced and often contradictory evidence that this inability provides us, thereby making it easier to place our faith in simple dialectical thinking as a strategy for avoiding unwanted cognitive dissonance.

Both ends of the spectrum, from the right's delusional denials of climate change and election results, to left-wing cancel culture's inflationary reduction of even the most complex situation to a case of black and white, have fallen prey to the human blind spot inherent in dialectical thinking.¹ This is exacerbated by language and rhetoric that tend to frame the situation as "this, not that," creating a common misconception that reality is composed of components that should be organized in an "either, or" fashion. There may be an ontological reality that undergirds our epistemological and phenomenological framings of reality, but

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like the totality of reality, it cannot be extrapolated by our limited access to it. This is ancient wisdom found in the parable of the blind men and the elephant (circa 500 BCE). Therefore, reductive practices of simplification, though less taxing, are antithetical to the ultimate and unattainable goal—a complete understanding of reality—because they turn a blind eye on the much larger and unintelligible picture. Language further complicates this issue as the mediating force through which we attempt to share perspective and create a coherent patchwork of reality beyond our personal experience because it purportedly simplifies to facilitate exchange, but like reality it is constantly accreting further meaning and complexity, and as a result, making its purported goal less and less possible. “You who read me—are you certain you understand my language?”² This quote by Borges shows that even the intelligibility of language does by no means guarantee a faithful transmission of the intended message and/or meaning. How many people have had a conversation and believed to have understood each other when that could not be further from the truth?

Narratives that adhere to simplistic opposition are easily converted into products that can produce economic gains in an ever-hungry capitalist media marketplace that is motivated by inflationary profits and not the well-being of its audience.³ Like the windmills Don Quixote attacks, the media marketplace is a technological juggernaut whose efficiencies and products blind it to the disruptive and damaging consequences it produces.⁴ As increasingly dominant forces in our lives, these technological and medialogical factories continue to churn out varying framings of reality that must compete in the hierarchy of the market, which unchecked pursues growth to the point of its own destruction.

So, where does that leave us? Are we an inane and ineffectual “knight-errant” tilting at windmills as we cower before the unavoidable polarization of society and discourse in the interest of profit margins and savvy special interests that seek power?⁵ Or is there perhaps another avenue open to us? As always, I return to Cervantes—*Don Quixote* in this case. How can the mad knight’s tale teach us to think about the world in which we live, weighing reality and truth?

Though many have made the confrontation between Don Quixote and the windmills a centerpiece of their reading or adaptation of the novel, it should be remembered that the knight and his squire have barely left home at that point, and we, the readers, find ourselves practically at the beginning of the 900-plus-page tome. To believe that this incident is the crux of the book and not a catalyst for what comes after is an oversimplification of this work’s potential. Most people that I ask what they know about *Don Quixote* answer that it’s a story about a crazy guy that attacks windmills, usually with either a positive or negative judgment of that action lurking beneath the surface: “he valiantly tilts at windmills” or “he stupidly assails windmills.” Students and other “idle” readers frequently encounter the book in this abbreviated form and feel they must choose between

these two reactions to the text. Rarely do they explore the potential of this text to transcend this “either, or” choice.

Even in seminar courses where the whole text is addressed, opportunities are missed as professors preach their own particular reading, perhaps not as a free act, but instead to succeed in the increasingly capitalistic marketplace of academia (i.e., my reading and not your reading). Perhaps this is why *Don Quixote* has rarely realized its revolutionary potential(s) in our society. It is inherently not an “either, or” text, but as Julio Baena shows us, a “yes, and” text.⁶ What is contradictory from the perspective of dialectical reason reveals the inane nature of opposing categories as Don Quixote is a crazy person living in a crazy world. Instead of describing the components of its story as “either crazy, or sane,” *Don Quixote* the novel says “crazy yes, and crazy too.”

Following this extensive prologue, the goal of the following pages is to provide a possible framework for how to use *Don Quixote*'s “yes, and” nature, primarily within the classroom (but by no means limited to the classroom), to transcend the dialectical thinking that creates a rich breeding ground for mis- and disinformation and provide students with tools to develop what Castillo and Egginton have dubbed “reality literacy.”⁷ This begins with several changes to the format of the typical college seminar and the introduction of a production-based active learning framework that allows students to familiarize themselves with the production of cultural narratives and how to best interrogate their simplified application of thought to cultural and societal issues—production is key because it informs critical analysis of cultural artifact by both “taking them apart,” but also “putting them together.” But as was stated in the beginning, information is rarely convincing if it is not disseminated using situationally appropriate rhetoric. This leads to the other crucial component: the formulation of an effective anti-rhetoric that does not engage disinformation within its preferred dialectical posture but instead uses its reliance on “either, or” to disarm it.

The two central concepts needed to explain this pedagogical approach are the social constructivist approach to pedagogy theorized by Lev Vygotsky and the motivational interviewing strategy from the realm of counseling psychology. By combining these two components within the framework of the Cervantine text, it becomes possible to help students shed, in part, their dialectical preference to understand the world, consider how the rhetorical tools used and promoted by many media outlets entice us toward dialectical simplification, and formulate a way to combat this root cause of disinformation.⁸

In many ways, this is the path Don Quixote and his compatriots take as they continue their journey beyond the delusional failure at the windmill. Each delusional failure throughout the novel reveals in part the rules of the mediological game. We, as readers, and the characters to a certain extent, see that the facts are up for debate and that shared reality is frequently more determined by rhetoric

than the truth of a nuanced analysis of quantifiable and qualifiable data. One can easily turn to the academic tradition of Cervantismo (reading and interpreting the works of Cervantes) to find supporting evidence for this interpretation of the text. These general examples should begin to bring the issue into focus.

When students arrive in my seminar, they typically are of three minds with regard to Don Quixote: he's a hero, he's a fool, or "who's Don Quixote?" The first two groups have chosen their side, at least provisionally, while the third is already primed to see interpretation as a dialectical choice. The challenge is, therefore, to help them deconstruct their assumptions: "yes, Don Quixote is a hero, and he is also a fool, and maybe defining these two categories is much more complicated than we first thought." I teach in a medium-sized state university in the American Midwest. Even though there is some self-selection in my student population due to their study of Spanish, their ideological demographics do not match what I encounter among the student body of many of my American colleagues and opposing academic traditions in other places: more conservatism and religious belief. If I attempt to tell them what *Don Quixote* is about, beyond the verifiable surface facts of which there are few, I may convince those already primed to accept my point of view, but the truth is it will fall on many deaf ears.

To be perfectly honest, the same could be said of many academic conferences. At such events, there is a ready audience (size may vary) primed to accept the argument and evidence of an academic presentation, while another group is primed to dismiss the idea. Thankfully in my field, the former is frequently a larger group than the latter, but if we think about it critically, even a larger receptive audience is not the most productive outcome; it can lead to unproductive group thinking that does not meaningfully expand our understanding of our field, and of equal importance, our motives for arriving at that understanding.⁹ It is really the conversations and collaborations that emerge from these events that allow us to transcend the limitations created by the format. Sadly, this extra step of synthesis does not always happen in the classroom and even less frequently in the public discourse.

Students, like academics, must do something themselves with the material and concepts they encounter to truly engage in the learning process. This is the crucial next step because to hear something is to come to a (un)informed decision point (accept or reject), but to do something with it is something else altogether. This is where Vygotsky's social constructivist approach to pedagogy comes into play because it describes the pedagogical practices that undergird best practices in classrooms where the development of critical thought is the primary learning outcome. In "Social Constructivism: Implications on Teaching and Learning," the authors identify constructivism as one of the three broad learning theories, which also include behavioral and cognitive. They continue

by stating that constructivism “holds that learning is significant when learners through active participation construct or create basic knowledge by themselves through enquiry and discovery.” They then nuance this definition further in terms of social constructivism, “which focuses on interaction, collaboration group work for effective learning.”¹⁰

Vygotsky, a Soviet psychologist working during the early twentieth century, developed his version of social constructivism as a framework to emphasize the collaborative nature of learning, as he believed that mental and cognitive abilities are not determined on a biological level but rather on a cultural and social level. This theory of knowledge leads to a pedagogy that is social and focuses on interaction among students, usually geared toward the construction of some kind of artifact or project that concretely embodies the outcome of learning. The opposite pedagogical approach prioritizes the warehousing or memorization of information within a student’s mind while social constructivism engages students in the creation of knowledge and meaning through action and application.

The social constructivist approach affords educators a way to engage students on a deeper level in the learning process through a type of synthesis via community effort. Within the context of the humanities classroom, this expands the scope of experiential input by creating an empathic affective relationship between students, allowing them to understand the viewpoints of others beyond a reductive two-dimensional understanding of the other, so common in an age of screens and digital bubbles. They witness how others construct meaning and their understanding of reality while also reflexively recognizing the same processes in their own mental and interpretive practices. This is a key component to developing the type of reality literacy advocated by Castillo and Egginton as a weapon against mis- and disinformation.

Nonetheless, it is important to understand the limitations and pitfalls of social constructivism within the educational environment—as I said, there is no panacea. Yuriy Karpov in *Vygotsky for Educators* identifies some of the primary problems that can be encountered, first by emphasizing the importance of necessary guidance and scaffolding to keep students on track and engaged. This is especially true in courses in which correct understandings of concepts exist. Karpov states, “Some experimental data shows that cooperative learning of a group of peers may even result in their rejection of the correct concept in favor of an incorrect concept that one of them has formulated.”¹¹

Readers of Cervantes are no stranger to this phenomenon as *Don Quixote* is awash with examples of group delusions innocently or nefariously produced; Don Quixote and Sancho’s understanding of pretty much anything, especially the *yelmo de Mambrino* come to mind—a barber’s basin Don Quixote believes is a magical helmet. Most of Cervantes’s works contain episodes in which there are discussions/debates resulting in a tenuous group consensus about

the reality of something. My personal favorite, from Cervantes's posthumous novel *Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda*, is Rutilio's story about the old woman who whisks him, an Italian dance teacher, away from Italy to Norway on a magic carpet and then transforms into a werewolf. Much after the fact, he and Mauricio, a wise man from Hibernia, forge a tentative yet incomplete understanding of what may really have happened based on Rutilio's experience and Mauricio's knowledge of the natural world, and the result is hilarious, especially to a modern reader: a pseudo-scientific explanation of lycanthropy or, more accurately, it's non-existence.¹² Though we may find these types of episodes humorous, we should realize that they mirror how we as groups come to a negotiated understanding of reality and we should not expect anything different from our students.

While social constructivism has shown the advantages of productive group work in formulating an understanding of reality, both Karpov and Cervantes have added a second edge to this sword. But there is yet another challenge that social constructivism faces. In Vygotsky's framing of this pedagogical approach, appropriation is a primary component that facilitates the process:

In particular, Vygotsky wrote that learning scientific concepts by students is based on their "appropriation" of verbal definitions provided by adults. When exercising self-regulation, children, as shown in Vygotsky-based studies, use verbal tools that they have *appropriated* from adults: It is not only that they repeat the exact words that their caregivers used to direct and regulate their behavior; they sometimes even imitate the caregiver's voice.¹³

Despite the focus on young learners in this passage, the same mechanisms of appropriation can easily be found in adults throughout history and literature: Don Quixote adopts the archaic and fantastical parlance of a knight-errant while today proponents of the political right and left parrot pundits (of which I myself am guilty).

We seem to have encountered a bit of a paradox. There is a deep usefulness in allowing people, especially groups, to formulate a better understanding of reality instead of providing a pre-made and rote understanding to be accepted and memorized (dogmatic ideology). But groups and their constitutive individuals are susceptible to the distortional nature of discourse and the predilection for simple dialectic thinking. These distortions can be manipulated by nefarious forces, such as the Duke and Duchess in the second part of Don Quixote who

pull Don Quixote and Sancho into their bubble, or arise as skewed thinking, as in the case of the town ready to go to war because they believe the neighboring town is mocking their braying (a paranoid default to victimhood).

Though I have my own interpretation(s) of *Don Quixote* and Cervantes's work, I am less interested in convincing the students of the validity of my ideas than I am in showing them the parameters of our social construction of reality and how there is no outside of that system (an interpretation, nonetheless). Of course, I hope to help them develop into free and thoughtful members of society who like Don Quixote (to a certain extent) pursue equity and justice. But is this truly accomplished by projecting my thoughts and interpretations upon them and coaxing them to appropriate my way of thinking and speaking? On the contrary, I do not wish them to adopt fascist ideologies like those proffered by the likes of Ernesto Giménez Caballero, a Francoist thinker. But giving them free rein to think for themselves may unfortunately lead to this result. The price of liberty is releasing control of such outcomes.

A possible solution to this paradox is the incorporation of motivational interviewing as a crucial teaching and conversational technique. Through its focus on examining the motives and motivations of a speaker/thinker, it interrupts the process of incorporating ideas and interpretations into individual and group identities. It is done in a way that does not threaten identity, eliciting a defensive response, because it merely asks the interlocutor to think about the source of their ideas, values, and judgments. The strategy has many more moving parts to accomplish the goal, but the goal is to facilitate rethinking and, possibly, changing because of the conversational process.

To start, it is important to understand that motivational interviewing was created for application in mostly clinical settings in which a health or behavioral issue exists that requires a change of behavior. The clinician works with patients to analyze their motivations for their behavior to elicit change in the interest of the patient's wellbeing. Our approach will be to appropriate its techniques and insights and incorporate them into the realm of pedagogy.

In their seminal work *Motivational Interviewing: Helping People Change*, the pioneers of the technique, William R. Miller and Stephen Rollnick, lay out the fundamentals. They begin by defining motivational interviewing thusly:

MI [motivational interviewing] involves attention to natural language about change, with implications for how to have more effective conversations about it, particularly in contexts where one person is acting as a helping professional for another. Our experience is that many such conversations occur in a rather dysfunctional way, albeit with the best of intentions. MI is designed to find a constructive way through the challenges that often arise

when a helper ventures into someone else's motivation for change. In particular, MI is about arranging conversations so that people talk themselves into change, based on their own values and interests. Attitudes are not only reflected in but are actively shaped by speech.¹⁴

This quote contains a fair amount that would distance motivational interviewing from the goals of open dialogue and communal reality production we seek in the classroom, but it also presents insights that root it to the very process of language and story creation. By readjusting our perspective, these differences between the expressed intention of motivational interviewing and our application of it to our purpose should dissolve.

First, in the classroom, the helping professional is a teacher, but unlike the healthcare professional, their goal is not to help someone realize that it is in their best interest to vaccinate themselves or quit drinking. Beyond the transmission of information, it is the teacher's duty to provide students with the skills necessary to critically understand the world in which we live.¹⁵ Though the learning outcomes of a course may be specific and discrete, the overarching goal of education transcends the thing learned and focuses on the process.

Early in his career and writing in Morehouse College's *Maroon Tiger*, Martin Luther King Jr., shared his definition of the purpose of education:

The function of education . . . is to teach one to think intensively and think critically . . . We must remember that intelligence is not enough. Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education. The complete education gives one not only power of concentration, but worthy objectives upon which to concentrate. The broad education will, therefore, transmit to one not only the accumulated knowledge of the race but also the accumulated experience of social living.¹⁶

In the case of the humanities classroom, presenting multiple perspectives without the necessary intensive critical thinking is not enough to create “character,” and the application of motivational interviewing to pedagogy affords students the opportunity to consider their motivations when reacting to multiple perspectives, thereby overcoming the simple application of intelligence via the accumulation of information and arriving at a morally informed wisdom about the process of the creation of perspective. In light of this goal, a teacher engaged in this task cannot simply present perspective(s) and information but instead must guide students through the creation of their own understanding by addressing the motivations behind any of their personally held beliefs that may

stand in the way of or inform true critical understanding. The teacher will not always be present to guide students through our postmodern sea of information, misinformation and disinformation included, so process must take precedence as a goal over presentation of perspective—nonetheless, an important component in the process.

Another possible difference is the focus on change. In my case, I teach students as we read a 400-year-old text that is widely considered to be the first modern novel. The accretion of meaning and its status in the Western literary canon should make change appear to be a counterintuitive goal. Nonetheless, in short, and contrary to the assumptions of some, *Don Quixote* is the perfect playground for change when it comes to formulating an understanding of reality both on the individual and communal level. The sandbox nature of the text allows readers—students and myself in my case—to see ourselves and our process mirrored and partially distorted in the interactions of the novel’s many characters. They show us something we still see today: reality is a product of the sharing (and, at times, not sharing) of stories and the interaction (or lack thereof) of these various stories within a social environment.

Among these possible differences, we do find a similarity between motivational interviewing and *Don Quixote*: the way that language—speech or text—actively shapes attitudes. There are not many books more metaliterary than *Don Quixote* and few conversational techniques more metacognitive than motivational interviewing. In episodes such as the lengthy interlude at the inn in part one of *Don Quixote*, the characters, without Don Quixote present, cycle through genres and comment upon stories, blurring the lines that separate pure fiction (though the innkeeper is predisposed to believe nothing is fiction) and the stories of the travelers that arrive at the inn. It is important that Don Quixote is not present because it affords the reader the opportunity to see that storytelling and the liminal threshold between “fiction” and “reality” do not cease or dissolve when the foolish other is absent; it merely hides the process more effectively. While characters may only graze the edges of the metaliterary nature of the stories told and the story they occupy, it is usually quite clear to extraliterary readers; we hear their commentary and interjections. By using a critical analysis of this metaliterature, readers begin to consider the motivations that may undergird the stories they encounter in the text. Likewise motivational interviewing takes us out of our own ego- and identity-driven story so that we can ponder how we choose to present situations and ourselves. In both cases—*Don Quixote* and motivational interviewing—this approach to stories fosters understanding of the production process as a fundamental cornerstone of reality literacy.

Without this metaliterary and metacognitive approach, we are, like Don Quixote and the other more “reasonable” characters, swept away by the narrative power of stories and in danger of shipwrecking ourselves on the rocks of reality.

Again, the novel reveals this through an episode: the enchanted boat. As Don Quixote and Sancho are carried along by the waters of the Ebro River, Don Quixote feels well-informed as to where they are headed. He uses the system of navigational knowledge he learned from other books of chivalry and misapplies it to a situation in which this already suspect understanding is not appropriate. His desire both to follow his preestablished storyline and to be in the know leads to this overreach, and the result is predictably disastrous as the boat collides with the wheel of a water mill.

In this type of episode, Don Quixote's motives and motivations have led him to calamity, but we should also continue to view him within our "yes, and" parameters. There exists a desire to simplify our assessment of his actions and forget the complex nature of motivation. Within the framework of motivational interviewing, this moment of judgment is the pitfall of the "righting reflex." This obstacle is born of our "desire to fix what seems wrong with people and to set them promptly on a better course" by directing them on how to change.¹⁷ From the episode with the enchanted boat, we the readers could assume, as other characters in the novel have, that Don Quixote's problem is based in his reading of chivalry novels, but ultimately, this maybe the tip of the iceberg. Other motivations, some positive and good, are enmeshed in the most visible cause of dysfunction: Don Quixote's desire to change the world through the pursuit of justice. Without following the necessary steps of engaging and focusing (the first two stages of motivational interviewing) on the issue, evoking change (the third stage) can lead to unintended consequences or the rejection of change.

Now, to evoke change in *Don Quixote* is impossible, as it is a work of fiction and we are not internal characters within the story. But to consider how Don Quixote's experience, actions, and motivations mirror (accurately or not) ours is to understand the value of motivational interviewing. By engaging with the text and focusing on these motivational issues and bringing them back to the reader, we can then evoke the desire for positive change as a result. As Miller and Rollnick define it, evoking "involves eliciting the client's own motivations for change [and] [i]t occurs when there is a focus on a particular change and you harness the client's own ideas and feelings about why and how they might do it."¹⁸

The importance of this manner of evoking change is twofold. First, it makes it possible to overcome resistance to change (whether due to uncertainty, fear, or ingrained ideological values and beliefs). The reader/student is guided to uncover what lies beneath their thinking and to reevaluate the usefulness of that information or belief in a newer, more (but not absolutely) complete light. Second, the careful reader will begin to understand the process by which these layers of meaning and motivation build up behind our thinking and now have a model to further analyze that process in the future. While this second aspect is

important within the context of the critical thinking classroom, it is not necessarily a sought-after outcome in clinical environments where the initial behavior change is key.

This third process in motivational interviewing (the four processes are engaging, focusing, evoking, and planning) is the most precarious because, though it is guided, we as teachers do not and should not have control of the outcome. In the earlier two stages of engaging and focusing, we have more direct influence: we choose the topics addressed and engage students in the process that will lead to focused consideration of specific issues. But upon arriving at evoking, students make a decision—one influenced by our guidance but ultimately made on their own—to formulate a new understanding or reject the need for rethinking and change. Furthermore, this new understanding may be different than what we believed the process would elicit. This should not be seen as a defect in the process, but instead the very purpose of the process itself. If students ended up exactly where we wished to send them from the beginning, the learning process would not be creative, generative of new thought, and free.

Liberty and freedom are a central theme in *Don Quixote* and Cervantes's other works. The author, who spent years as a hostage in Algiers and as a prisoner in his native Spain, defends this most precious condition and right in the words of Don Quixote. Upon departing the machinations of the Duke and Duchess's court, Don Quixote tells Sancho, "La libertad, Sancho, es uno de los más preciosos dones que a los hombres dieron los cielos. Con ella no pueden igualarse los tesoros que encierra la tierra ni el mar encubre. Por la libertad, así como por la honra, se puede y debe aventurar la vida" (Liberty, Sancho is one of the most precious gifts given to men by the heavens. Neither the treasures that the earth contains or the sea hides can compare to it. For liberty, as with honor, one could and should risk their own life).¹⁹ At this point in the novel, Don Quixote is no longer merely a foolish old man who plays at chivalry but instead a victim of those who wish to manipulate him psychologically for their own purposes and entertainment (the Duke and Duchess, among others). Don Quixote has been gaslit and his state of mind is not far from the average person who has lived through so much to undermine their sense of reality over the past decade and beyond. To truly provide students with a learning experience that will help them develop the skills necessary to be reality literate, liberty and freedom must play a central role in the process.

The uncertainty that accompanies these usually positive values may cause quite a bit of consternation among educators. What if the group comes to the "wrong" conclusion as a result of the evoking stage of the motivational interviewing process? This is where the group work of social constructivism comes back into play, especially in light of the ambiguity, perspectivism, and polyphony of Cervantes's masterpiece. In a system of "yes, and," two

approaches plagued by their possible defect of creating a “mistaken” interpretation can, perhaps illogically, cancel each other out—not positive + negative = null, but negative + negative = null or positive + positive = null. When presented with a text that allows us to think in these terms, we can clearly see that two differing but incorrect ideas do not necessarily increase our confusion or convince us of one or multiple incorrect things. Rather it can help us better understand the contingency of our understanding of reality and the shifting consensus of it that emerges from human communication.

The creative and generative work of production within a group asks students to do exactly what they find within the pages of *Don Quixote*: forge a new aspect and understanding of reality via the creation of a “story,” be it a literary adaptation, a podcast episode, or a service project inspired by their reading of the first modern novel. In a moment, I will provide some examples to help you conceptualize your own approach to motivational interviewing as a way to help students understand their reactions to a text or concept, as well as how to use production via group work to create an empathetic bond with others. But it is important to understand that each component is interdependent. When we extract motivational interviewing, the group production frequently will result in the appropriation of the teacher’s ideas and language or erroneous and dialectical group think. When we extract group production and focus solely on motivational interviewing, the communal negotiation and definition of reality does not occur, which would be fine if the parameters of the situation called for correct and incorrect solutions, but humanity and the humanities are rarely so cut and dry.

Even before implementing an approach informed by motivational interviewing, I was already doing some of the things included in that strategy. I had flipped my classroom and used the Socratic method to guide students through activities. Nonetheless, the inclusion of production through group work was the major breakthrough. This was in part due to the assumption that production or doing something about change is the logical positive outcome of motivational interviewing. After engaging, focusing, and evoking, the planning stage serves as the first step of creating actual change. The (perhaps inevitable) hierarchical nature of education is predicated upon authority, and this can be anathema to liberty and free thinking unless certain practices are in place to serve as a check and balance. While a framework must be provided to engage and focus students, the evoking and planning stages need to be controlled mostly by students. A specific example of this is a course titled “Pod Quixote.”

Before the first day of the semester, I had arrived at a topic for the course drawn from conversations with students in other courses about prescient issues they would like to explore. Given my interest in mis- and disinformation, this became the topic on which the course would focus. This was chosen in lieu of allowing students to choose their own topic of interest, because without

a shared topic, the creation of community would be difficult, and the early incorporation of necessary scaffolding would have been impossible.

The text served as the starting point for all discussions about the central topic, but instead of lecturing, I designed group activities with short “share out” presentations to help students frame the conversation as a group. Beginning with general comprehension activities in which students produced summaries for selections of the day’s reading, we moved to topic identification, which necessarily included self-reflection on why these topics spoke to us as individuals and as groups (“Why are you interested in this topic? What does it make you feel? Why?”). This allowed students to arrive at the evoking stage cognizant, at least in part, of the origins of their interests and beliefs. They could then remain open to seeing the nuts and bolts of the individual meaning-making process before reconvening as groups and “doing something” with the text and the various perspectives of their peers. Planning ultimately led to production, in which students would attempt a variety of tasks depending on the topics and previous conversation: describe in writing or a presentation the complexity of the addressed issues, draft a hypothetical policy or product to resolve problematic issues, create artistic representations of their emotional and affective reactions beyond the bounds of reason, etc. These activities guided students to a community-based framing of and reaction to reality without losing themselves in the aspects of human nature that tend to coax us back to dialectical thinking. While the end product or concept of their work was geared toward doing something active and not just endlessly debating the contingency of the matter, it remained open to debate and modification. This is likely a result of the fact that this approach to production, combined with a base in motivational interviewing technique, reveals the process of the creation of “reality” so students think of it less as a thing that is owned by them and constitutive of themselves but instead a process in which they participated.

To cap off the semester, students—using previous work as a model—produced podcast episodes in which they explored mis- and disinformation, frequently including their experiences with these phenomena as the centerpiece of their work. This led students to adopt a vulnerable posture in which they shared how misinformation and disinformation were not only a threat to the “uninformed other” but instead a byproduct of the production of meaning, to which we tend to blind ourselves in the interest of simplification and avoiding cognitive dissonance.

While this single example of how production-based learning and motivational interviewing can be combined within a critical thinking course, the model can be widely applied to many possible scenarios. While Cervantes’s works, especially *Don Quixote*, lend themselves to this approach, it need not be

the only starting point. Numerous works of literature, and non-literary fields, present the opportunity to recognize the contingency of our understanding of reality and truth. While sciences are frequently thought of as fields with correct and incorrect answers, these “either, or” frameworks dissolve at the edges of understanding, and students of even the sciences can be taught that the scientific method is less responsible for producing certain answers and more of a highly effective approach to producing an understanding of reality.

Finally, this educational approach can be carried forward by students into their post-university lives and careers, thereby transforming the parameters of our social conversations. The more participants understand the process of meaning-making, the more they can remain open to engaging in it fruitfully with others that may not share their perspective. Within our polarized post-modern culture, an answer to our inability to communicate and cooperate is not the clear, inviolable establishment of the “this, not that” dynamic but instead the promise in the synthesis afforded by “yes, and.”

To conclude, I wish to share something from Anthony Doerr’s novel *Cloud Cuckoo Land*. This sweeping story, ranging from fifteenth-century Constantinople to a spacecraft in the distant (but not so distant) future, is framed by the story of Aethon, a shepherd who wishes to find entry to the paradisaical city of the birds. Upon arriving at the city gates, after a number of trials and detours, Aethon, transformed into a crow, is confronted by owls that guard the entrance. To prove he is not disguised as a bird, which he is, the fool Aethon must answer a riddle. Though the riddle itself is lost to time, it is creatively inserted by the fictional translator with the help of a group of children with whom he is staging a local production of the story. According to them, the owls begin, “He that knows all that Learning ever writ.” After much consideration Aethon replies, “The answer is nothing,” and the owl confirms that the answer is correct, “that he knows nothing yet.”²⁰

I reference this moment in the novel because it can serve as an emblem for that to which we aspire as educators: to impart critical thinking and reality literacy upon our pupils. This type of pedagogy, capable of challenging mis- and disinformation, is not merely the transmission of “correct” information to counter the “incorrect” but, instead, a collaborative and creative process in which we understand the contingency of what we know and create. We understand that it is an imperfect and ever-ongoing process that will never lead us to a perfect destination—Aethon eventually leaves the city of birds and returns home. Nonetheless, it is through this process that we, despite the flaws and impositions of reality, brush up against something better, more beautiful and true—for whatever that’s worth.

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Notes

1. To be fair, these issues from both sides of the political spectrum and culture war contain some small bits of truth, but they have been inflated and weaponized through the parameters of the media conversation. I am a liberal and have been taken in by inflated "truths" that contain deeper consequences, such as misconceptions on how to best protect the environment (e.g., grass-fed and free-range livestock husbandry practices have a greater negative impact on pollution levels [see George Monbiot, *Regenesis: Feeding the World Without Devouring the Planet* (New York: Penguin

Books, 2022), 74]) and the mob mentality that can accompany and distort cancel culture's desire to achieve greater justice and equity. In the past, I have had a self-satisfied attitude when falsely touting the positive environmental impact of my "ethically raised" beef and jumped at the chance to judge a cancelled celebrity before learning the details of the case. No matter our values and our politics, we all face the same challenges presented by misinformation and disinformation.

2. Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 118.

3. Perhaps the term should be "well-beings," as no panacea exists to address every issue, but instead, an "ideal" society should provide equal access to its members to resources that facilitate their own individual pursuit of well-being.

4. Disruption and technology are not inherently damaging or "evil." They become problematic when they lash themselves to a positivist narrative that automatically frames other narratives as antagonistic.

5. A political cartoon by Ben Garrison depicts Donald Trump as Don Quixote attacking a windmill topped with a Chinese flag and emblazoned with the names of media and tech companies like Google, Facebook, and Twitter. This is ridiculous, as Trump has no interest in defeating the media apparatus that has served as his stepping stone to power, and the artist seems to have an unironic view of a truly ironic and comic relationship: Don Quixote and the windmill (see David Castillo, "Talking Quixotic Trumpism with Cervantes and his Homie Stephen Colbert and Sacha Cohen," *Cervantes Public Project*, May 13, 2022, www.cervantespublicproject.com/blog/quixotictrumpism). If there is anything we can take away from this image beyond its propagandistic purpose, it is the framing of media companies as disruptive forces that have drastically altered the human experience—but for students of history, especially the Spanish Golden Age, this is nothing new.

6. Julio Baena, *Dividuals: The Split Human and Humanist Split in Early Modern Spanish Literature* (New Orleans: University Press of the South, 2020), 209–11.

7. David Castillo and William Egginton, *What Would Cervantes Do?: Navigating Post-Truth with Spanish Baroque Literature* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022), 48.

8. Shedding dialectical thinking is only partially possible. The brain, especially a brain accustomed to human language, uses the "this, not that" heuristic as its primary operating system and cannot consistently use what the psychologist Daniel Kahneman calls "system 2" to process reality, make decisions, and act accordingly. The glucose cost of perpetual engagement of system 2 is not physiologically feasible.

9. For more on the analysis of why certain groups have arrived at certain interpretations of *Don Quixote* at certain times, please see Stephen Hessel, ed., *Metacritical Cervantes* (Newark, Delaware: Juan de la Cuesta, 2018).

10. Vera Idaresit Akpan, Udodirim Angela Igwe, Ikechukwu Blessing Ijeoma Mpamah, and Charity Onyinyechi Okoro, “Social Constructivism: Implications on Teaching and Learning,” *British Journal of Education* 8, no. 8 (September 2020): 49.

11. Yuriy Karpov, *Vygotsky for Educators* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 172.

12. Though difficult to say with certainty, Cervantes most likely presents this with tongue in cheek, as at the end of a lengthy harangue by Mauricio about how Rutilio is mistaken, Rutilio replies—and I paraphrase here—“well that’s all well and good, but I still found myself in Norway.”

13. Karpov, *Vygotsky for Educators*, 170.

14. William R. Miller and Stephen Rollnick, *Motivational Interviewing: Helping People Change* (New York: Guilford Press, 2013), 4.

15. This is especially true in a world where information has become increasingly accessible but has also been accompanied by the rise of mis- and disinformation.

16. Martin Luther King Jr., “The Purpose of Education,” *Maroon Tiger* 10 (January–February 1947), kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/purpose-education

17. Miller and Rollnick, *Motivational Interviewing*, 6.

18. *Ibid.*, 28.

19. Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *El ingenioso hidalgo don Quijote de la Mancha* (Newark, DE: Cervantes and Co., 2018), 847.

20. Anthony Doerr, *Cloud Cuckoo Land* (New York: Scribner, 2021), 414.

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