

ACADEMIA | Letters

The Relationship between Facts, Debate, and Education

Stephen Llano

Around the world we are mourning the death of facts. People no longer snap to, fall in line, and begin to march to the drumbeat of the fact. The idea of having a set of information that, upon presentation, compels changes in heart and mind is a tempting fantasy. But this is not how facts have worked. Facts are powerful not because they are unchallenged, but because of how they respond - or more appropriately how they allow us to respond - to the challenges they face. That art of “response to the challenge” is something that we no longer practice, hopeful that facts will do it for us.

Our loss of civility is also related to frustration that facts aren’t working properly. It’s like kicking the vending machine when our bag of chips remains hooked on the plastic corkscrew. We can see what’s wrong, but have no ability to fix the machine. But it’s the root of this metaphor that is the problem. Ralph Ellison warns us about treating the complexities of the audience like a jukebox, demanding they present the tune we want with the push of a couple of buttons.¹ Our emphasis on the rigidity of possible interactions with facts has harmed our ability to craft and create meaningful coalitions. Perhaps it’s best to say that we’ve forgotten how to create meaning together. We expect the machine to work.

A solution to this issue is the re-introduction of the art of debate into education not as an aside or a fun extracurricular for the chosen few, but as a central practice of the educated person. Along with practice in writing, and familiarity with the processes of mathematics, debating provides respect and familiarity with the process of creating meaning within uncertainty. English Professor Francis Parkman suggested as much at a Yale University English department faculty meeting when he expressed concern that his students could not stand and advocate their point of view on an issue.² Such a noticeable lack seemed to be a looming

¹Ellison, Ralph. “The Little Man at Chehaw Station.” *American Scholar* 47, no. 1 (1977): 25.

²Potter, David. *Debating in the Colonial Chartered Colleges*. New York: Teacher’s College of Columbia

threat to the future of democratic capacity. This brought debate back into the classroom in the most direct way since the mid 18th century. Such inclusion would involve structuring debates on various topics that arise in the class, and assigning students to represent one side or the other as best they can given the materials and research they can find (or that the class is considering).

This is not shouting, personal attack, or one-upmanship. This is an investigation of an issue by representing the extreme ends of disagreement. Such a representation, if done passionately and with focus on the audience, reveals just how little we appreciate facts as well as just how little we really understand about our positions. Debate, structured as an exercise in inquiry, explores what's possible instead of starting with what is known. Facts are in play. And through this engagement, we forge them again, understanding how well they can hold up to the challenge of sustained reasons against it.

With the changes to higher education brought on by COVID-19 now might be a good time to stand with Parkman and reintroduce debating as a central component of our educational practices. Like writing, or math, debate is a practice that helps us understand the world, ourselves, and our possible place within it. Also, just like those other two practices, debate allows us to change the world if we so like. How does this happen?

Debate, like mathematics and writing, teaches that process is as vital as result. Debate is the process of engaging in evaluating ideas through the use of words, primarily oral, but could be in writing - particularly with the domination of social media within all of our public communication forums. The need to engage in exchange about competing plans or interpretations of reality before an audience of onlookers is clear. Incivility seems to increase when our presentation of "the facts" is rejected by our opponents. Although we are saturated with incredible amounts of quality information, our ability to order and present that information as quality information is lacking. The practice of debate emphasizes the adaptation of information, reasons, and facts for both different audience contexts as well as different perceptions on what makes a piece of information a fact. Incorporation of this into the curriculum is fairly straightforward.

The primary way that debate process can be taught is through assigning sides on an issue randomly to participants. Divorced from their own conviction, they engage in a process of building a strong case for their side rather than honing in on what they believe to be true. This exercise separates claims of something being true from something being persuasive. This distinction is vital to rhetorical education, disassociating the convincing power of something from its relation to the understandable world. I instruct students to take a position where they are "playing themselves convinced," and remind them that they are not being held to their

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Corresponding Author: Stephen Llano, steve.llano@gmail.com

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position by the end of the exercise. The result is a series of crafted experiences - texts - that can be evaluated and discussed by those observing them as well as those participating in them. Since the commitment to a position is a part of the inquiry, that commitment isn't to a result or a shift of opinion. Instead, that commitment is to **playing a part in an investigative process.**

This might strike readers unfamiliar with debate as a highly pragmatic activity that focuses more on the **negotiation of human relationships** rather than getting the "right answer." Debate is a practice of understanding human relationships through words, and relating the human beings you are speaking to and with to the ideas and information you find meaningful and valuable. To do this one must be able to practice some level of disconnect to one's own convictions, which many find unnerving.

I find Richard Rorty's idea of the "liberal ironist" to be a pretty promising way to think about the value of practicing debate. Rorty defines the liberal ironist as someone who believes in the power of re-description and is aware of the cruelty that re-description of value can have on a person.³ Such subjects are committed to the principle of rearticulation, even to the most deeply held values, because re-description gives us an opportunity to reinvigorate the principles of a social order that values freedom. The art of debate as I'm imagining it here is necessary practice for such a position, for a world where one would want to offer facts to an interlocutor not to make them feel stupid or wrong but to make them feel like they would want to be a part of the suggested position. As Rorty argues, society and language depend on an essential contingency, necessitating rearticulation in order to hold onto what we care about. Debate is practicing holding on to what matters by reiterating it in front of the contingency of issue, situation, and audience.

Debating's focus on articulation for the audience is **respect for the power of language to be cruel and destructive to the things people care about.** Likewise, it empowers us to be responsible for our positions, realizing that even the best facts cannot do much unless accompanied with human breath. Although liberal irony is probably best thought of as a philosophical ideal, we can measure our speech and its respect for the contingent nature of our reality by asking after ourselves if we really presented that case the best way we could, with what we had, to that audience, given the information before us. This is the central question for debate that makes it an art of inquiry and practice of knowing that places it alongside writing and math as an essential practice for developing and maintaining a society that can adapt, inquire, progress, and overcome challenges that arise.

Debate is the practice of restoring the power of **facts** through making them vibrant, **more like plants than like stone.** We need to practice with them; their existence is not enough to

³Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

move the minds of others. Facts are a starting point, not an ending point - this is what debate teaches. Debate teaches that facts are a powerful ingredient in crafting meaning yet cannot be served plain. Debate helps us learn a process of engagement that brings facts to the foreground as powerful sites of engagement with difficult questions. Like facts, the remediation of debate back into the accepted educational practices of writing and reading is not an ending point, but a starting point for the larger conversation of what we mean when we try to say what we think is important.

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