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Why Students Are Afraid of Arguments and What We Might Do About It

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I've been increasingly frustrated with my first-year students' reluctance to argue with each other. Several years ago, I started asking my classes where these sentences change from being OK to not OK:

1. I agree with Peter.
2. I want to add to what Peter said.
3. I disagree with Peter about this.
4. Peter's view has some serious problems.
5. Peter is wrong about this.
6. Peter's view is silly and naïve.
7. Peter is an idiot.

Years ago, first-year students here at my small Catholic college in the Northeast usually said it was around 4 or 5. But these days, they generally draw a line between 2 and 3. Expressing disagreement is no longer okay.

It's a significant loss. As an academic, I know that defending our position from challenges helps us hone our own position. It sharpens our wits, and it makes us revise and improve our arguments. My students are no longer getting this practice, and it shows in their papers. They don't anticipate basic objections and their arguments are weaker.

For years, I tried to reverse the trend. I explained the value of academic arguments, and I pushed my students to express disagreement with each other. They resisted. I pushed harder.

One day, a student looked at me and said, “We know you want us to fight but we don’t want to!”

Of course I didn’t want them to *fight*. Did I? The comment shook me, and I started thinking.

1. Why did they think that I wanted them to *fight*? Were there downsides to classroom arguments that I wasn’t seeing?
2. Could I reach my pedagogical goals without having students argue with each other? What might that look like?

I kept thinking.

I studied Buddhism and thought about the downsides of an adversarial approach: It makes us focus on winning, so we listen for flaws and weaknesses, ignoring the strengths of positions. We risk becoming less open to alternative views and less able to see the flaws in our own thinking.

I studied feminism and considered reasons why some won’t enter a combative discussion. Not everybody has the confidence and inclination to speak up if they believe that they’ll be attacked—and they might see what I consider rather mild disagreements as attacks. I wondered how many had not dared enter those lively discussions that I so fondly remembered from my past classes, and I squirmed.

I have increasingly come to see my students’ distaste for disagreement and argument as healthy reactions to an overly angry and combative culture. My students years ago could playfight in class and trust that things would be fine. My students today have seen too many discussions turn nasty. Too much is at stake for them socially. They don’t have that luxury.

I rethought my approach. I want them to “fight” because I want them to get better at building and examining arguments. Could I treat “fighting” as the means, not the goal, and then reach that goal in a different way?

I started shifting the focus away from students arguing with each other towards us together examining and arguing with the text and its author. I let them work together to identify flaws and to devise ways to improve arguments, and we discuss better and worse ways to communicate what we discover to an author. It’s not as effective as arguments with each other for teaching students how to improve their arguments and respond to objections. But they like having a class in which they talk and figure things out together. And I like the care and sensitivity with which they investigate the views of others, finding things to appreciate and ideas to consider—even in arguments that I thought were rather bad.

I worry that by letting them avoid “fighting,” I am ignoring something crucial. Students need to

learn how to disagree civilly—heck, most of us could use some work in this area! I worry that they only have two modes: polite avoidance of conflicts in person, and then fights, name-calling, and cancel culture online.

I'm still figuring out how to get students out of those two modes. I've had some success with role-playing, assigning them a position to argue for and sometimes even assigning them a confrontational personality. That makes it safe. If disagreeing and being disagreeable is their assigned job, it's my fault, not theirs, so their performance in the role won't harm their relationships. They tend to go at it with some enthusiasm.

It still doesn't have the energy and fire of real arguments where students defend their own position to people who disagree. I worry that I'm babying them, but it seems that they need that safe space.

And sometimes, the dissonance between what they are saying in their assigned role and what they believe becomes too much for them. They fess up, stating out loud that they disagree with the position I'm making them argue for and explaining why.

It's a roundabout approach, but it may get the job started.

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