

Ben Franklin on the Value of Rational Debate

When students in a maximum security prison education program beat out West Point cadets in a debate competition a while back, the story made headlines because of its almost man-bites-dog nature.

West Point debate coach Adam Scher recently responded to the phenomenon in an opinion piece for [The Washington Post](#). As Scher implies, debate competitions are not necessarily to show the other team up, but to build confidence and inspire thinking in the minds of all students:

“But it is important to understand that we don’t bring cadets to Eastern Correctional Facility for charity or to fulfill civic responsibility. Cadets continue to debate BPI students because, performed properly, debate requires outstanding research ability, critical thinking, public speaking ability, mental agility and flexibility, and the application of reason and logic to solve a problem – all under strict time constraints.”

Judging from Scher’s words, he, his debaters, and their opponents have discovered what Benjamin Franklin and his comrades discovered through their “Junto” meetings. As Franklin delineates in his [autobiography](#), the Junto club was formed to fulfill four purposes:

1. Promote curiosity and thinking by asking questions.
2. Discuss subjects often avoided in “polite” society, such as politics, morality, and philosophy.
3. Expand thinking skills through writing.
4. Seek truth, not argumentation or victory.

The fruits of these principles were described by Franklin as

follows:

*“[T]he club ... was **the best School of Philosophy, Morals and Politics** that then existed in the Province; for our Queries which were read the Week preceding their Discussion, **put us on Reading with Attention** upon the several Subjects, that we might speak more to the purpose: and here too we **acquired better Habits of Conversation**, every thing being studied in our Rules which might prevent our disgusting each other.”*

Spurred on by internet and social media sites, today's world is full of debate and argument. But in comparison to the rational debate fostered by Franklin and his fellows, is our debate all too often irrational? Does it seek to promote our own opinions and make others look like fools, or does it seek to discover truth and foster wiser thinking among all?

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