

Professor Explains How He Trains Students in Civil Discourse

It was getting late and the college student next to me let out a sigh. "I've got to get home," she said. "I still have an assignment I need to complete tonight."

"Aww, really?" I asked as the event we were attending wrapped up. "I hope you don't have to stay up too late!"

"Nah," she replied, "I just have to pick a couple people to disagree with on the discussion board."

Laughing, I replied that such a task shouldn't be so very hard. "Yeah, I just need to back up my disagreement with reasons and facts!" she responded.

She had a point. Providing a good counter argument is a challenge, especially in a classroom setting where many students seem to argue whichever way their emotions happen to be blowing.

Debate by emotions is familiar to all of us, for it is the seed of the cancel culture permeating society. Yet before cancel culture reached the great unwashed masses, it ruled college campuses. It's still there, but a few professors are standing up and countering cancel culture by teaching students to actually argue rather than simply offer their own opinions.

Professor Mark Brennan teaches at New York University and recently joined the Charlemagne Institute for its [weekly Backchannel program](#), discussing the campus environment, and suggesting some ways in which students can maneuver through the "[ideological conformity](#)" higher education presents. One of the tactics that Brennan uses involves teaching students to

debate with real arguments, not just their personal opinions:

I don't allow anybody in my classes – which are all seminars in either ethics or history – to ever start a sentence with the word 'I think,' or 'I feel,' or 'In my opinion.' Because when somebody starts their sentence that way – first of all, unless your last name is Trump or Biden or Krugman or Greenspan, nobody really cares what you think! And ditto for me – nobody cares what I think. What we all think doesn't really matter, they're just opinions. So I make my students start what they are going to say with 'Well, one argument for this, or against this, is the following.'

According to Brennan, it takes about half a semester to break students from their habit of citing their own opinions, but by the second half of the course, the whole class is ready to argue substantially. Students have even returned to Brennan telling him how this lesson stayed with them through the years.

By taking this tack, Brennan notes that “a student can put out something controversial,” giving them a chance to “actually debate that issue.” Brennan concludes, “It's a way to kind of impose civil discourse. It's a way to increase civil discourse. It's a way to bring important issues to the fore in discussions.”

Civil discourse is a worthy goal... so how did we stray from it and head toward debate by feelings instead?

Christopher Lasch suggests that such a switch happened in the 1960s when “the student movement embodied a militant anti-intellectualism.” “The demand for more ‘relevant’ courses,” Lasch writes in [*The Culture of Narcissism*](#), “often boiled down to a desire for an intellectually undemanding curriculum, in which students could win academic credits for political activism, self-expression,” and other frivolous items:

Even when seriously advanced in opposition to sterile academic

pedantry, the slogan of relevance embodied an underlying antagonism to education itself—an inability to take an interest in anything beyond immediate experience. Its popularity testified to the growing belief that education should be painless, free of tension and conflict.

Judging from the angst-filled state of both college campuses and society at large, it seems tension and conflict only increase the more we rely on experience. Would we see some of that dissipate if more professors tried Brennan's approach in their classrooms, teaching students to engage in true civil discourse rather than meaningless experience and opinions?

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