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# English Language Arts (ELA) Strategies for Teaching Students How to Disagree Productively

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There is another pandemic spreading throughout America other than COVID-19. Much like COVID-19, it has put a strain on our national mental health crisis while pushing political polarization to dangerous levels. I am speaking about the insidious pandemic of unproductive disagreements. Frustration has plagued our democracy and interpersonal relationships as we struggle to have productive discussions over contentious issues. Our social/political disputes often end up deadlocked over which sources of information are the most credible, how to define words central to the debates, and even which facts are true and real.

While social media and internet search engines help connect us, these technologies have also boxed us into echo chambers. The algorithms insulate us and reverberate our existing opinions back while directing us away from hearing dissenting points of view. Unfortunately, this pandemic ferociously feeds on our innate cognitive biases (i.e., confirmation bias), emotional thinking, motivated reasoning, and toxic tribalism. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated our inability to reason with one another, compounding preexisting social-emotional issues and burdening us with an entirely new subset of politically divisive issues. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, our unproductive disagreements are proving to be catastrophic to our social fabric and civility. Of course, disagreements are also a ubiquitous part of our students' daily interpersonal interactions. Students encounter disagreements when arguing for

more points on an essay, quarreling with their parents about cleaning their room, or just negotiating their way through a crowded hallway. In considering more dire situations, New Jersey educators' professional development training on suicide prevention has repeatedly reminded educators that a severe argument with a parent often precedes adolescent suicides. Teaching practical strategies to argue constructively might be one way to help students build healthier relationships with their parents, teachers, and each other.

As educators, we are an essential element of the cure for the pandemic of unproductive disagreements. After teaching these strategies to my students for many years and sharing these ideas with colleagues, it is clear that both groups are hungry to learn these techniques. In a productive disagreement, students are encouraged to empathize, identify common ground, manage emotions, and use inquiry to persuade tactfully. The following are descriptions and examples of pragmatic strategies for productive disagreements in the ELA classroom. The strategies are based on research done by educators, psychologists, neuroscientists and have been field-tested in the language arts classroom.

## **Rogerian Rhetoric Style for Writing Tasks and Structured Class Discussions**

Exposing students to a Rogerian Rhetoric style can help them develop a more collaborative approach to argumentative writing and class discussions. Dr. Paul Bator, a coordinator of the Writing

Workshop of Wayne State University, wrote extensively on the benefits of using the Rogerian style rhetoric in formal writing. Rogerian style rhetoric was named after famous psychologist Carl Rogers and was later developed by Young, Becker, and Pike (Bator, 1980). Bator describes the Rogerian rhetoric style: “by presenting a careful statement of the reader's position and delineating the areas of validity in the reader's position, the writer establishes a shared basis for further communication and interaction” (Bator, 1980). In the ELA classroom, when teachers require students to summarize the opposition's argument in the most robust version (i.e., steelman argument), students are therefore incentivized to see past their cognitive biases and clarify any misinterpretations they might have. John C. Bean writes that this approach is about “urging students away from egocentric vision” (1986). A de-emphasis on proving one's claim (i.e., trying to win the argument) can free students to focus on identifying common ground (i.e., common goals, interests, enemies, or values) with their opposition. Then, collaborative students can create a mutually beneficial solution to their dispute. Another benefit from using this method in ELA classes is that students often uncover that their disagreements are rooted in a semantic dispute or minor misunderstanding (i.e., having different definitions of words central to the debate). For example, in a Rogerian-style class debate on whether a character is a hero, students might ask each other, What is your definition of a *hero*?

If done genuinely, the Rogerian style requires the student to develop a sincere curiosity for their opposition's point of view and a healthy skepticism for their own. Teachers can remind students to be more skeptical by encouraging self-skepticism questions such as:

What life experiences might I have, or be lacking, making it more difficult for me to understand this person's point of view clearly? How might my perspective be incomplete?

Students can also convey self-skepticism when stating their rebuttal to minimize provoking a defensive reaction in their opposition. Here are some examples:

I might be wrong, but my understanding of the issues is X.

I probably have more to learn about this topic, but I thought X was true.

### **Anger Management**

Anger can be a significant obstacle to having productive disagreements. When we perceive a threat, our amygdala (a part of the brain regulating emotions) becomes hijacked by neuro stress chemicals making rational thought less possible (Shapiro, 2020). To manage the “amygdala hijack,” Shapiro advises mindfulness practices for someone to gain control over the rational thinking parts of their brain (2020). In disagreements, our brains gain a clearer reasoning ability to process others’ perspectives if we manage our anger. In the context of a structured classroom debate, the teacher can guide students in simple mindfulness breathing techniques (i.e., taking deep breaths and thinking about your breathing) to help manage their anger in a disagreement.

### **Demonstrate Empathy to Decrease Defensiveness (Affect Labeling)**

Writing about one’s negative emotions (i.e., personal journals) to improve physical and emotional well-being is a well-documented phenomenon (Baikie et al., 2005). Similarly, students expressing empathy for their opposition is a powerful tool to decrease defensiveness and maintain productive disagreements. A study at the University of California, Los Angeles, used fMRI (functional magnetic resonance

imaging) to measure the negative emotional response seen in the amygdala when subjects demonstrated affect labeling (describing one's emotions verbally) (Lieberman et al., 2007). This research suggests that verbalizing one's emotions may help decrease activity in the parts of the brain associated with stress (Lieberman et al., 2007). Teaching students to describe their opposition's emotions back to them (affect labeling) may help extinguish the opposition's anger and or disgust during a disagreement.

Here is one example activity for using Rogerian rhetoric and focusing on affect labeling to demonstrate empathy for the opposition.

Directions: Should there be mandated school uniforms in our school? Explain why or why not. Write a brief response. Your teacher will help you exchange papers with someone who disagrees with you. Steelman your opposition's argument and describe their emotions back to them.

Student A: Forcing us to wear ugly uniforms is unfair, and other schools do not do that. I like dressing in a way that fits my personality, that shows who I am.

Student B (opposition to Student A): It seems like you really resent the idea of being forced to wear an ugly uniform and sacrifice your self-expression and individuality. You think it is unjust that our school would make us wear uniforms since other schools do not. Is that right?

Student B provides a strong version of Student A's argument and describes Student A's negative emotions. Therefore, Student A is likely to feel less angry and more likely to reciprocate the gesture to their opposition (Student B), and a productive disagreement can proceed.

## **The Problem Using Facts to Persuade on Emotionally Charged Issues**

Experimental studies have suggested that confirmation bias, disconfirmation bias, and motivated reasoning work together to minimize the degree to which facts can change our opinions on emotionally rooted beliefs (Taber et al., 2006). For example, one study from Stony Brook University attempted to measure to what extent facts could change someone's beliefs about affirmative action and gun control and found, "when reading pro and con arguments, participants (Ps) counter-argue the contrary arguments and uncritically accept supporting arguments, evidence of disconfirmation bias" (Taber, et al., 2006). Researchers from Emory University used fMRI brain scans and found that partisan political individuals exhibited motivated reasoning to ignore factual evidence threatening their chosen presidential candidate's credibility (Westen, et al., 1947). These studies imply that beliefs linked to our core values, identity, or social group will not easily change due to the introduction of contrary factual information. Most of us can probably relate to the frustration of failing to change someone's political views despite our presentation of a well-reasoned, fact-based argument.

## **Developing Inquiry Skills to Persuade**

So how can we be persuasive without using facts? Research suggests that an effective way of changing people's minds is by asking carefully crafted open-ended questions to expose what researchers have first described as the "illusion of explanatory depth" (Rozenblit, 2002). I refer to these types of open-ended questions as "flashlight questions" because they flash light on what the opposition does not know. The desired effect is that the opposition struggles to answer the question accurately, and thus their confidence level for their belief

decreases (Rozenblit, 2002). According to Fernbach, Rogers, Fox, and Sloman, their experiments using this inquiry technique found that people do not understand political issues as well as they think they do. These researchers asked subjects to rate their “level of understanding” on a proposed political policy on a seven-point scale, then to offer a detailed “mechanistic” explanation (i.e., How would that work?), and finally to re-rate themselves (Fernbach et al., 2013). Overall, the data analysis revealed that participants' confidence levels decreased significantly due to the questioning strategy (Fernbach et al., 2013). Below is one example of how ELA teachers can employ this inquiry strategy while teaching English literature.

Directions: Did character X make the right choice? Explain why or why not. Write an open-ended flashlight question to an anticipated opposing argument. Your teacher will help you exchange papers with someone that disagrees with you.

Student A (or teacher constructed): No, the character should have just run away instead of turning themselves into the police.

Student B: How would they find means of traveling, earn money, find food, or find shelter?

In this example, Student B has prompted Student A to reflect on why their argument may not work, persuading Student A to consider other points of view.

### **Caveats**

The strategies presented here are a modest attempt at addressing an infinitely complex problem. Rogerian rhetoric, for example, is not very effective if your opposition refuses to reciprocate your courtesies or if their proposed arguments are emphatically wrong. Traditional argument and expository writing should remain a cornerstone of the ELA classroom. Also, ELA teachers should exercise caution

whenever broaching divisive or inflammatory topics in school. The classroom teacher must always consider their students' emotional needs and respond accordingly. Although I have made the case to be careful using facts in emotional disagreements, facts are nevertheless the fundamental foundation for understanding a shared reality.

### **Opportunities in Chaos**

Teaching Rogerian rhetoric and empathetic writing could provide our students with practical skills and shared values for discussing disagreements in and outside of the classroom. In this age of seemingly infinite information, we can search and find so-called “facts” to support virtually any claim we wish. Asking open-ended questions to guide one's opposition to discover relevant facts on their own is one persuasive technique for students to consider.

The chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic has made our need to discuss disagreements productively become increasingly more urgent. Now is a time when ELA teachers have unique opportunities to help students develop these practical skills. Educators need to continue to explore and research different strategies for productive disagreements. Professional development in this area might be one way we can all work together to help make the world a more peaceful and understanding place. I sincerely hope we can all agree on this.

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