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Expository Writing

Productive Conversation or Useless Banter?

Throughout their twelve years of state-mandated education, American students are introduced to a vast range of essential subjects; mathematics, art, literacy, etc. but shockingly enough, despite its fortes, public education does not include any mandatory lessons on maintaining productive, progressive conversations. How could this clearly relevant topic be so ignored in mainstream youth and adolescent teaching? One might assume such an imperative skill would come naturally endowed to humans but by all accounts this statement is entirely false. Furthermore, the lack of experience in this sector has had crippling effects on numerous occupational settings, ranging from healthcare all the way up to the federal government. Luckily, by comparing and contrasting events and ideologies introduced in “The Naked Citadel” by Susan Faludi, “Losing Matt Shepard” by Beth Loffreda, and “The Roots of Debate in Education and the Hope of Dialogue” by Deborah Tannen, one can synthesize personal and environmental conditions necessary for both creating, as well as sustaining, constructive conversations. To maintain a productive conversation about community and identity, people must avoid falsely dichotomizing subjects and arguments, furthermore they must banish fear and anxiety in order to preserve an open-minded, free thinking ideology.

The impact of dichotomy-centered thinking on productive conversation is a main theme in Deborah Tannen’s “The Roots of Debate in Education and the Hope of Dialogue.” Tannen begins by presenting a reference to mass media and its methods for stimulating debate:

It is standard for American shows to provide balance by featuring two experts who represent contrasting political views: two senators or political consultants (one Republican, one Democrat), two journalist commentators (one on the left, one on the right), or two experts (one pro and one con). (Tannen 423)

The repetitive nature of this passage is key in understanding Tannen’s viewpoint on her subject. Right from the start she is presenting just how polar the two sides of these arguments become, furthermore her listing of various examples (left/right, democrat/republican, pro/con) is meant to substantiate the claim by providing scenarios the reader can easily connect to. Interestingly enough, her use of the word ‘balance’ here would seem to conflict with this sense of polarity and dichotomy and, as it turns out, it does. Instead of insinuating an *actual* balance of two sides, it can be understood that she is referring to a *strive* for balance, two very different ideas, as she will go on to explain: “In the public arena, producers can try to avoid, whenever possible, structuring public discussions as debates. This means avoiding the format of having two guests discuss an issue, pro and con. In some cases three guests – or one – will be more enlightening than two,” (Tannen 422). In this passage, Tannen explicitly states that polar conversations involving two opposite sides are highly likely to just default to arguments; become less ‘enlightening.’ As well, despite their power to append this situation, many American producers still don’t fully understand its implications and nevertheless, decide to introduce difficult topics using this dichotomized approach. To propose a solution to such an un-productive, polarized interaction, Tannen introduces the ideologies behind *Japanese* talk shows: “the Japanese show uses a similar format to these American TV shows. But it typically features a single guest. Japanese shows, in other words, have a wide range of formats featuring one guest or three or more – anything but two, the number most likely to polarize,” (Tannen 423). To exemplify the effect this singular change has on the atmosphere of these formerly dichotomized discussions, Tannen proceeds to describe an argument pulled from a Japanese talk show between two guests; ‘Shikata’ and ‘Irokawa.’ The two men had completely polar views on a subject and after a brief dispute involving “pretty strong words” their anger began to manifest itself physically: “according to Honda, as Shikata posed his question, he was beating the table with his palms; as Irokawa responded, he was jabbing the air toward Shikata with a pen,” by including their physical, as well as lingual reactions, Tannen is attempting to prove just how intense the altercation was becoming and how defensive the two men felt about their viewpoints (Tannen 423). Had this situation occurred on an American talk show, it most likely would have resulted in several minutes of useless argument but because Shikata and Irokawa were not the only guests on the show “the confrontation did not take on a rancorous tone. The television cameras offered close-ups of both men’s faces – smiling… and while Shikata and Irokawa smiled, other panelists rushed to add their voices – and everyone burst out laughing” (Tannen 424). Through her inclusion of this resolved conflict, Tannen has proven both the ill-fated nature of dichotomized interaction, as well as proposed a sufficient solution to the problem. The fact that the two men, Shikata and Irokawa, were able to finish their previously heated altercation with nothing but smiles and laughter proves the effectiveness of the banishment of dualities in arguments and is a testament to how much more progressive and productive discussions can become without singularly forcing together two opposite ideologies. As presented in “The Roots of Debate in Education and the Hope of Dialogue,” a key to achieving a progressive conversation is to provide insight from all sides of the table and avoid duals between two polar opposite opinions.

As demonstrated by the effectiveness of its introduction in Japanese talk shows, maintaining an open-minded attitude and being able to laugh off otherwise precarious conflicts is another key to achieving productive conversations. In “Losing Matt Shepard” Beth Loffreda introduces the LGBTA in Laramie, Wyoming, a group interested in preserving the rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual members of the community. Because Matt Shepard identified himself as gay, his murder caused rifts in this group and its responsibilities intensified for weeks after the event. To substantiate its myriad accountabilities, Loffreda lists several of the LGBTA’s roles: “the group plans upcoming events – speakers, dances, potlucks… tries to be a public face for gay and lesbian issues on campus (organizing events, running panels about sexuality for many courses)” (Loffreda 226). She then stresses how maintaining a light-hearted attitude is important to the LGBTA: “Meetings are usually… punctuated by bursts of laughter… After the meetings, members of the group… [go] out for coffee at the College Inn, something of a Tuesday-night LGBTA tradition,” this is then connected to the productivity of Jim, an avid member of the LGBTA: “Jim can talk an eloquent blue streak and is something of an organizational genius – at LGBTA meetings I’ve listened to him recall the minutiae of university regulations and budget protocols as if they were fond personal memories,” (Loffreda 226). By connecting the holistic attitude of the LGBTA to its impressive agenda and clear organization and efficiency, Loffreda has substantiated the importance of an open-mind and light attitude when it comes to maintaining productive conversation and action. By extrapolating this instance, it can be inferred that if the LGBTA hadn’t been open to appreciating new ideas and laughing off conflicts, then it assuredly wouldn’t have the ability to complete its numerous responsibilities after the death of Matt Shepard. Along with avoiding dichotomized thought processes, it is now clear that maintaining an open-minded, almost liberal viewpoint is another key factor in the ability to initiate and progress a productive conversation.

Earlier on in “Losing Matt Shepard,” Loffreda, in passing, mentions a second fact that can be connected to the free-minded attitude of the members of the LGBTA but also can be used to contrast situations, similar in nature, found in “The Naked Citadel.” She explains that the number of participants at the meetings of the LGBTA is far smaller than the number of members who receive its emails and this is attributed to “the reluctance of many college students to join groups and, more specifically in this case, the anxiety some gay or questioning students might feel attending a public meeting,” (Loffreda 226). This proclamation is far more important than it is given credit because, in effect, it is revealing an interesting condition. Because the majority of individuals would experience some sense of anxiety by attending one of its meetings, the only members who show up at the LGBTA are those who are open-minded, light-hearted and aren’t afraid of criticism. This fact is another justification of the idea that free-mindedness is an important aspect of maintaining productive conversation because its complete antithesis is presented in “The Naked Citadel” by Susan Faludi. When interviewing ‘cadets’ of The Citadel, Faludi was intrigued by one in particular:

One cadet… sidled up to me. He spoke in a near whisper… ‘The great majority of the guys here are very misogynistic’ he said… I asked him to explain at greater length. He agonized. ‘I have to keep quiet,’ he said, but he finally agreed to meet me later, in an out-of-the-way spot on the upper floor of the student-activities center. (Faludi 82)

This cadet was the only one to actually provide any information to Faludi and even at that, his description of the Citadel environment is vague. Because he agrees to meet at another location at a later time, the reader can expect that the two may be able to conduct a productive conversation; Faludi may be able to collect some valuable information about the atrocities of The Citadel. On the other hand, the fact that the cadet is speaking in a ‘near whisper’ and insists on meeting in private draws the reader to question his actual state of mind. Unfortunately the cadet is not able to hold up his side of the bargain: “the receptionist handed [Faludi] a message from [the] vanished cadet. ‘Please don’t ever call here again!’ it read,” at first this sudden change of attitude may be surprising and seemingly without-reason, but when the following sentence is contrasted to the successful, open-hearted attitude of the LGBTA, it becomes clear why the cadet changed his mind: “The phone clerk peered at me curiously. ‘Sorry about the exclamation mark, but he seemed quite distraught,’ she said. ‘His voice was shaking,’” (Faludi 82). This passage undoubtedly implies that the cadet was paralyzed with fear as Faludi uses words such as ‘distraught’ and includes that his voice was shaking. This substantiates the magnitude his fear as it has actually manifested itself in his body and through his mouth and vocal cords. Because the cadet was fearful for his safety, his ability to maintain an open-minded attitude was forsaken and his primitive instinct towards survival was initiated. By taking a step back and comparing this situation to the incredible productivity of the LGBTA, it becomes clear that an open-minded attitude and lack of anxiety are both important boxes to check in creating and maintaining productive conversations.

Another extrapolation of the effect of open-mindedness and disconnect from anxiety exists in “Losing Matt Shepard” and this time is centered on Jay, a Native American residing in the same town as the LGBTA and the murder of Matt Shepard. Jay lived on a desolate reservation for much of his childhood and upon moving to Laramie, was met by racism and prejudice. Loffreda explains: “In his first year in Laramie, as he walked home from school near the university campus, a college-aged man spit on him. And on the day we talked, a white woman hissed ‘spic’ at Jay minutes before we met,” by providing two examples; one in the past and one in the present, Loffreda has made the argument that the mistreatment of Jay has been continuous for a long duration and is still as prevalent as ever to this very day (Loffreda 242). Due to his Native American heritage and the bigoted undertones of Laramie, Jay was never fully given the chance to assimilate into the culture and society of the town and even at the time of Matt’s murder, never felt fully like a member of the community. Jay’s significance in “Losing Matt Shepard” is in his honesty and ability to remain completely open in his evaluation of the murder of Matt Shepard: “‘he was the nuclear son of the nuclear family’… ‘If that was me hung on the fence, they’d just say, oh, another drunk Indian. No one would have paid much attention’… His argument makes some undeniable sense” (Loffreda 241). In his assessment of Matt Shepard’s murder, Jay, along with several other minorities in Laramie, were either the only people able to see through the lies and intricacies portrayed in the media, or were simply the only people who felt safe in reporting them. When contrasted to the situation of the cadet at The Citadel, the same evaluation is repeatedly evident. Because Jay and the other minorities were not part of the Laramie community, they did not fear the judgment of their peers on their opinions and thus were able to fully express their ideas. At The Citadel, the cadet feared repercussions of telling the truth and was unable to help Faludi uncover what was actually happening there. Both of these scenarios fit very well with a third situation exposed by Deborah Tannen. In her analysis of the variable effect of fear on openness and therefore productivity, Tannen provides reference to the adversarial nature of many university classrooms. The long-time accepted rule of thumb for professors was to attempt to contradict any comments or questions students may propose as this was thought to ‘sharpen’ their quick thinking analytical skills. As explained by Tannen, one professor decided to omit this technique “he noticed that women were relatively silent in his classes. He decided to try beginning discussion with relatively open questions and letting comments go unchallenged. He found, to his amazement and satisfaction, that more women began to speak up in class” (Tannen 407). Because the professor only altered one variable, his challenging of new ideas, the fact more people were open to provide insight once again proves beyond a doubt that fear plays a key role in the ability to maintain productive conversations. When the women in the professor’s classroom were sure they would not be drawn into a fight over their beliefs, they were less afraid of actually sharing them and were therefore able to further the class discussions. In “The Naked Citadel” the cadet was unable to aid Faludi because he was afraid of repercussions, in “Losing Matt Shepard” and “The Roots of Debate in Education and the Hope of Dialogue” Jay and the female students *were* able to express themselves and provide productive conversation because they were not afraid of any outcome by doing so. Through contrasting these situations and their outcomes, it becomes clear once again that the degree of fear and anxiety one is exposed to has a definite impact on their openness, thus their ability to maintain a productive conversation.

In many present day communities, occupations and education are backed up and stagnated by the fact that many people still cannot maintain productive conversations. Instead of being taught the conditions necessary for achieving productive conversation, the American community of the present relies on their environment and natural human intuition to guide them in their interactions. Rather than leading to progression and development, this mindset lends itself to feelings of anger and an overall pointless argumentative society. Only by preserving an open-minded approach through a banishment of fear and avoiding dichotomized thinking can one hope to forgo this useless and childish behavior, furthermore it is up to those in charge to prevent situations which could lead to a sacrifice of either of these crucial conditions. If even a small percentage of people were to adopt these simple mentalities, the world would be a much more harmonious, enlightened place and pointless, childish arguments would become a thing of the past.