Debate Students Have a Lesson for the Rest of Us

Christian Feuerstein
Linfield College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/linfield_magazine

Recommended Citation

This article is brought to you for free via open access, courtesy of DigitalCommons@Linfield. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@linfield.edu.
when it made others uncomfortable. Baldwin was willing to engage in conversations with just about anybody, including those whose views he found repulsive. But when he engaged in these conversations, he spoke his mind with brutal honesty. There are many legendary moments when Baldwin, in public and private settings, subjected his listeners to withering torrents of words about some moral, artistic or political topic. While it mightn’t have been pleasant to be on the receiving end of these torrents, Baldwin was committed to speaking the truth as he saw it, even to those who did not want to hear it.

This brings me to the other habit of mind that is essential to civil discourse: we must be willing to listen with empathy. Baldwin engaged in conversations with some nasty characters, perhaps none nastier than James Jackson Kilpatrick, a man whose biographer aptly engaged in conversations with some nasty characters, perhaps none nastier than James Jackson Kilpatrick, a man whose biographer aptly dubbed him the country’s leading “salesman for segregation.” When Baldwin listened to what Kilpatrick had to say, he spoke honestly about the utter wrongness and vileness of the segregationist’s views and he pressed Kilpatrick to come to terms with the psychological insecurities animating his racist politics.

As we reflect in our communities — on campus and in the political culture generally — about what sort of discourse we think might be conducive to our flourishing, we would do well to Remember the example of James Baldwin, who spoke honestly, listened with empathy, and expected others to do the same.

Nicholas Buccola is professor of political science and director of the Frederick Douglass Forum on Law, Rights and Justice. His fourth book, The Radical and the Conservative: James Baldwin, William F. Buckley Jr., and the American Dream, will be published by Princeton University Press later this year.

Nicholas Buccola, professor of political science, stresses the importance of both honest conversation and a willingness to listen in his classes at Linfield College.
team, said she has learned that you can’t—and shouldn’t try—to change someone’s mind unless and until you understand his or her position.

“One thing [debate] taught me is to go into every single conversation, particularly political ones, with an open mind,” Vazquez Duque says. “I’m saying, ‘OK, I’m going to listen in a very open way to whatever you have to say, but you have to back it up with logic, with evidence and with civility. And if you’re unable to do that, you’re going to be unable to change my mind.’”

Miller says the point of debate is learning how to question and challenge one another.

“The spirit of debate should always be about thinking about your side of the issue and defending that, but also focusing on having the most educational and robust discussion about both sides of the issue,” he says. “That’s what you’re there to try to do.”

College debaters can also bring civil discourse to their local communities. Robinson notes that Hofstra holds many dialogues open to the public: from the first Trump-Clinton debate to an exhibition debate that addressed the economy.

“The entire campus and the public was invited, with the audience asking questions,” Robinson says. “These students are able to put issues into a format that’s more accessible than a snippet on the news.”

Experienced debaters also learn how to quickly learn about issues, rather than responding emotionally to a topic or argument.

“One resolution at the Pan American Debate Championship was about robots, and the robot tax,” says Vazquez Duque. “I don’t know anything about the robot tax!”

She quickly found an article in the Economist that gave her enough information to discuss the robot tax intelligently. And that, says Miller, is another important point: debate skills are life skills.

“All colleges value graduates who have critical thinking skills,” he says. “Debate provides an amazing opportunity to work on those skills.”

First and foremost, debate students work on active listening.

“If you’re going to be good at debate, the single most important skill you have to develop is good listening,” says Miller. “You’ve got to take in and understand the other side’s argument, otherwise your response to them isn’t going to make sense. Most of what you do in a debate is taking in and processing what your opponent is saying, and then formulating a response to it.”

Students also hone superb writing skills as they prepare dozens of debate briefs, summaries both for and against a sample debate motion.

“Students might do 25-30 one-page briefs a year. It’s a pretty intense amount of critical thinking,” Miller explains. “So much of presenting an argument is organization of the argument, and clearly laying out your evidence.”

Ultimately, collegiate debate does more than prepare students for careers and promote healthier campus conversations. It prepares them for the rest of their lives.

“Students find themselves through argument,” Miller says. “Debate is a transformative experience.”

– Christian Feuerstein

Linfield chosen for national institute

Linfield is one of only two West Coast colleges or universities selected to participate in the Council for Independent Colleges Diversity, Civility, and the Liberal Arts Institute this summer.

The gathering includes teams from 25 institutions across the country to address issues that drive unrest on campuses, taking advantage of teaching and learning approaches used in the liberal arts. Director Beverly Tatum is a nationally recognized authority on race and education in America. The institute is funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Linfield’s eight participants will bring lessons they learn back to our campuses and integrate them in classes and in programming through the Program for Liberal Arts and Civil Engagement (PLACE) program.

“We are pleased to be in the company of the other participants as well as with the incredible institute scholars,” said Susan Ager-Kippenhan, vice president for academic affairs and dean of faculty. “We hope to both learn and contribute.”
team, said she has learned that you can’t – and shouldn’t try – to change someone’s mind unless and until you understand his or her position.

“One thing [debate] taught me is to go into every single conversation, particularly political ones, with an open mind,” Vazquez Duque says. “I’m saying, ‘OK, I’m going to listen in a very open way to whatever you have to say, but you have to back it up with logic, with evidence and with civility. And if you’re unable to do that, you’re going to be unable to change my mind.’”

Miller says the point of debate is learning how to question and challenge one another.

“The spirit of debate should always be about thinking about your side of the issue and defending that, but also focusing on having the most educational and robust discussion about both sides of the issue,” he says. “That’s what you’re there to try to do.”

College debaters can also bring civil discourse to their local communities. Robinson notes that Hofstra holds many dialogues open to the public: from the first Trump-Clinton debate to an exhibition debate that addressed the economy.

“The entire campus and the public was invited, with the audience asking questions,” Robinson says. “These students are able to put issues into a format that’s more accessible than a snippet on the news.”

Experienced debaters also learn how to quickly learn about issues, rather than responding emotionally to a topic or argument.

“One resolution at the Pan American Debate Championship was about robots, and the robot tax,” says Vazquez Duque. “I don’t know anything about the robot tax!”

She quickly found an article in the Economist that gave her enough information to discuss the robot tax intelligently. And that, says Miller, is another important point: debate skills are life skills.

“All colleges value graduates who have critical thinking skills,” he says. “Debate provides an amazing opportunity to work on those skills.”

First and foremost, debate students work on active listening.

“If you’re going to be good at debate, the single most important skill you have to develop is good listening,” says Miller. “You’ve got to take in and understand the other side’s argument, otherwise your response to them isn’t going to make sense. Most of what you do in a debate is taking in and processing what your opponent is saying, and then formulating a response to it.”

Students also hone superb writing skills as they prepare dozens of debate briefs, summaries both for and against a sample debate motion.

“Students might do 25-30 one-page briefs a year. It’s a pretty intense amount of critical thinking,” Miller explains. “So much of presenting an argument is organization of the argument, and clearly laying out your evidence.”

Ultimately, collegiate debate does more than prepare students for careers and promote healthier campus conversations. It prepares them for the rest of their lives.

“Students find themselves through argument,” Miller says. “Debate is a transformative experience.”

– Christian Feuerstein

Linfield chosen for national institute

Linfield is one of only two West Coast colleges or universities selected to participate in the Council for Independent Colleges Diversity, Civility and the Liberal Arts Institute this summer.

The gathering includes teams from 25 institutions across the country to address issues that drive unrest on campuses, taking advantage of teaching and learning approaches used in the liberal arts. Director Beverly Tatum is a nationally recognized authority on race and education in America. The institute is funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Linfield’s eight participants will bring lessons they learn back to our campuses and integrate them in classes and in programming through the Programs for Liberal Arts and Civil Engagement (PLACE) program.

“We are pleased to be in the company of the other participants as well as with the incredible institute scholars,” said Shaun Agee-Kippenhan, vice president for academic affairs and dean of faculty. “We hope to both learn and contribute.”