The Role of Critical Thinking in Promoting Civil Discourse

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ProCon.org
ProCon.org uses controversial issues to promote critical thinking

- Founded on July 12, 2004
- Over 25 million users annually
- Used in over 10,000 schools (in all 50 states and 90 countries)
- Cited thousands of times in the media
- All information is meticulously sourced

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Here’s what we’re going to talk about today:

- Partisanship today
- How are political ideologies formed?
- Can people’s minds change?
- What's the role of critical thinking?
- Tools for engaging in civil discourse
According to Pew Research Center, there is now an average 36-percentage-point gap between Republicans and Democrats.

How much was the gap in 1994?
The partisan gap is much higher than the differences in opinions between races, genders, age, education, and religion.
Our political identities are more divisive than our positions on the issues!

Source: “How Identity, Not Issues, Explains the Partisan Divide,” Scientific American, June 19, 2018
How are ideologies formed?

Nature vs. Nurture
"The children of politically engaged parents tend to become politically engaged adults."

Why Does the Apple Fall Far from the Tree? How Early Political Socialization Prompts Parent-Child Dissimilarity
Hardwired (aka Nature)

Scientists have linked basic character traits to liberalism and conservatism, and identified specific genes they say hard-wire those ideologies.

Liberals are more open-minded and creative; conservatives are more orderly and better organized.

Conservatism is focused on preventing negative outcomes; liberalism is focused on advancing positive outcomes.

Conservatives sleep more soundly and have more mundane dreams; liberals sleep more restlessly and have a more bizarre, active dream life.

Examples from Our Brains Chart
Given the partisan divide, and entrenched ideologies, is it possible for people to **engage civilly** on or even **change their minds** about controversial issues?
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YES!
(I’ve seen it happen with my own eyes)
What Is the Role of Critical Thinking?

John Dewey, American philosopher, in his 1910 work, *How We Think*:

“Active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends, constitutes reflective thought.”
What Is the Role of Critical Thinking?

Critical thinking:

1. Improves our ability to reason and generate strong arguments
2. Improves our ability to assess the strength of the arguments used by others

What Is Civil Discourse?

“Robust, honest, frank and constructive dialogue and deliberation that seeks to advance the public interest.”

The foundations of civil discourse are:

1. A willingness to explain one's views and reasons

2. A commitment to listen carefully to the other side's reasons and views

Source: National Institute for Civil Discourse
Case Study 1: Santa Monica Pier Debates
Our debate series was designed to stimulate critical thinking and civil discourse on current issues.

We brought in prominent experts from both sides of the issues and neutral moderators to facilitate the conversations.

- Free and open to the public
- **Ground rules:** Disagree without being disagreeable
- **Goal:** Model civil discourse
Case Study 1: Santa Monica Pier Debates

Is public education broken in Los Angeles?

Before

Con: 7.1%
Pro: 92.9%

After

Con: 20%
Pro: 80.0%

Relative change

Pro: -13.9%
Con: 181.7%
Case Study 2: Pro/Con at USC

Is public education broken in Los Angeles?

Relative change
Pro: -15.8% Con: 165.5%

Before
- Pro: 91.3%
- Con: 8.7%

After
- Pro: 76.9%
- Con: 23.1%
Case Study 3: JSA Critical Thinking Seminars

Are social networking sites good for society?

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JSA: Junior State of America (a student-run leadership program for high school students)

Each summer, ProCon.org holds a 90-minute critical thinking seminar for 120 JSA students at UCLA.

We teach them how to think critically about an issue and lead them in civil discussion.
Five Tips to Promote Civil Discourse

1. Put your own feelings aside. It's not about you.
2. Step out of your echo chamber to figure out what the other person cares about.
3. Empathy can be a key emotion for convincing someone of a different political position.
4. Focus on connecting a person's values to a political issue, not changing the person.
5. Don't be rude.

Advice from Robb Willer, professor of sociology at Stanford University, and Scott Wunn, executive director of the National Speech and Debate Association.

If you want to change someone's mind about a moral or political issues, speak to their emotion and intuition first.

"If you ask people to believe something that violates their intuitions, they will devote their efforts to finding an escape hatch - a reason to doubt your argument of conclusion. They will almost always succeed."

Jonathan Haidt, social psychologist at the NYU-Stern School of Business, in *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*
Civil Discourse Toolkit

- Be comfortable with incongruity
- Be intellectually curious
- Seek to Understand
- Have an open mind
- Talk in a way that heals, not wounds

- Practice active listening
- Be aware of your own assumptions
- Slow down
- It’s not about “winning” the conversation
- Look for common ground

Source: Tracy Allen and Eric Galton
"If there is any one secret of success, it lies in the ability to get the other person's point of view and see things from that person's angle as well as from your own."

Henry Ford
The basics:

- Partisan differences are wider today than in the past
- Nature and nurture play a role in political ideologies
- Political opinions CAN be changed
- Critical thinking is essential to civil discourse