

4 Two Cheers for the Argument Culture

IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTERS, I have discussed confusions that can be traced to academia's ways of fogging over its conversations. Some observers, however, complain that what characterizes the academic scene is not "conversation" so much as smash-mouth combat. I have taken flak myself for arguing that conflict and controversy should be made more central in the curriculum. My critics object that today's academia, like today's popular media, is all too rife with conflict of a distinctly ugly and unedifying kind. The critics point to talk-show violence, political attack ads, and other signs of a pervasive "Gotcha!" spirit that aims at humiliating opponents rather than achieving consensus and cooperation.

These objections often come from feminists, some of whom see patriarchal gender bias in the adversarial forms of debate favored in such academic fields as law and philosophy. According to these critics it's increasingly hard to tell the difference between the debates of academics and the trash-talking and taunting that occurs in various professional sports or the kind of media pseudo-debate that was satirized in a celebrated *Saturday Night Live* segment of the seventies in which Dan Ackroyd opened his weekly news commentary rebuttal to his counterpart Jane Curtin with the line, "Jane, you ignorant slut."

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TANNEN VS. THE ARGUMENT CULTURE

One of the most articulate critics of this culture of demonization, insult, and macho combat is Deborah Tannen, who surveys its many defects in her recent book, *The Argument Culture: Moving from Debate to Dialogue*. Tannen objects to a "pervasive warlike atmosphere that makes us approach public dialogue, and just about anything we need to accomplish, as if it were a fight."¹ Like George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By*, Tannen questions the metaphors of war and combat that all too automatically shape our thinking about how we think and converse.² The argument culture, Tannen writes, "urges us to approach the world—and the people in it—in an adversarial frame of mind. It rests on the assumption that opposition is the best way to get anything done: The best way to discuss an idea is to set up a debate; the best way to cover news is to find spokespeople who express the most extreme, polarized views and present them as 'both sides'; the best way to settle disputes is litigation that pits one party against the other; the best way to begin an essay is to attack someone; and the best way to show you're really thinking is to criticize" (3–4). Though Tannen properly warns against reaching too quickly for simplistic gender stereotypes that would deny women's ability to argue on a par with men, she points out what is hard to deny, that men are more likely than women to engage in "ritual opposition," to "take an oppositional stance toward other people and the world," and "to find opposition entertaining—to enjoy watching a good fight or having one" (166).

Tannen sees academia as especially prone to ritualized combativeness. As she puts it in a recent article based on her book, "Many aspects of our academic lives can be described as agonistic. For example, in our scholarly papers, most of us follow a conventional framework that requires us to position our work in opposition to someone else's, which we prove wrong. The framework tempts—almost requires—us to oversimplify or even misrepresent others' positions; cite the weakest example to make a generally reasonable work appear less so; and ignore facts that support others' views, citing only evidence that supports our own positions."³ In the same vein, Tannen complains that "the standard way of writing an academic paper is to position your work in opposition to

someone else's, which you prove wrong." Students, she notes, "are taught that they must disprove others' arguments in order to be original, make a contribution, and demonstrate their intellectual ability." Such teaching leads them "to oversimplify at best, and at worst to distort or even misrepresent others' positions, the better to refute them" (268–69). Tannen cites the case of a professor who confided to a colleague whom he had attacked that "he actually agreed with him, but of course he could not get tenure by . . . simply supporting someone else's work; he had to stake out a position in opposition" (269).

Tannen's critique is often persuasive. Many of the vices and excesses to which she refers are instantly recognizable, and it is hard to disagree with her objections to the incivility, abusiveness, and bullying that pass for public disagreement today. The compositionist Sharon James McGee has observed that "many students see argument only through the lens of the *Jerry Springer Show*—as a shouting match broken up by bouncers."⁴ Anyone concerned about school violence has to be aware that verbal abuse can escalate into physical abuse, which in turn can become psychotic and murderous. Tannen is right that we need a lot more open-minded "dialogue" and a lot less crudely polarized "debate" both in academia and the media, and that we need forums for disagreement that do not lock us into rigid "positions" but allow us to change our minds and concede our mistakes.

Nevertheless, I trust I do not simply exemplify the ugly behavior Tannen objects to if I take issue with her negative verdict on the argument culture. Though Tannen is right that bad versions of the argument culture often dominate the social and academic scene, to me this seems an argument not against the argument culture but for a better one. For debate is unavoidably central to the life of democratic educational institutions and democratic societies. To restore the civility Tannen and the rest of us want in American public discourse, we need more keen debate, not less. Here we could generalize the point that political theorist Michael J. Sandel has made about senatorial confirmation hearings: "The way to restore civility to the confirmation process," Sandel writes, "is not to avoid ideological debate but to engage in it more openly."⁵ And as I argue in this book, when we academics

shrink from acknowledging the centrality of argumentation, we end up hiding our secrets from our students and force them to play the academic game at a disadvantage.

At times Tannen writes as if she herself agrees with such sentiments. Tannen concedes that "conflict can't be avoided in our public life any more than we can avoid conflict with people we love" (4). She acknowledges that conflict, debate, and disagreement are unavoidable aspects of human experience, and she grants that a degree of oppositionality is inherent in the process of differentiating ourselves as individuals. As she puts it, "Even saying 'I agree' makes sense only against the background assumption that you might disagree" (26).

At these conciliatory moments, Tannen seems to grant the positive potential of productive disagreement as the basis of democratic community. She calls attention to the deep forms of agreement and cooperation that underlie disagreement but get ignored when we wall ourselves up in polemical positions and fear losing face by conceding a point. She argues sensibly (273) that to balance our proneness to what compositionist Peter Elbow calls "the doubting game," we need to try out Elbow's "believing game," in which, before we attack a belief, we imagine what it would feel like to hold it.⁶ In such passages, Tannen's quarrel seems to be not with debate as such, but with the kind of reductively binary debate encouraged by the point-counterpoint format of the media, where every issue is presumed to have only two sides. (As Alex Jones observed in the aftermath of the Florida presidential vote controversy, journalism often confuses fairness "with the unsatisfactory practice of quoting one strident voice and then its opposite in every story."⁷) As Tannen puts it, her objection is not to contentiousness as such, but to "programmed contentiousness—a prepatterned, unthinking use of fighting to accomplish goals that do not necessarily require it" and are often prevented by it (8). At these moments, Tannen seems to want only a kinder and gentler version of the argument culture, moving it from sensationalized, hotheaded antagonism to respectful negotiation of differences.

At other moments, however, Tannen seems to adopt an abolitionist view of debate and oppositionality, writing as if these things should be

made to wither away and be replaced by something else. At these times, Tannen implies that debate *as such* is the problem, that what is needed is not more productive and respectful debate, but the cessation of debate. This more radical version of the argument is suggested by Tannen's subtitle: "Moving from Debate to Dialogue." (It may or may not be indicative of her ambivalence that in the paperback edition Tannen's subtitle is changed to *Stopping America's War of Words*, subtly shifting the emphasis to ending "war" rather than debate.⁸) When Tannen writes in this "end it, don't mend it" mode, she seems to wish for some alternative to debate in which we would no longer have to "stake out a position in opposition" or "position ourselves in opposition to someone else's [view], which we prove wrong." It is this antidebate message, I believe, that most readers take away from her book.

ARE WE DEBATING OR CONVERSING?

Again, there is no doubt that academic and journalistic polemicists are often more prone to score debater's points than listen to what opponents have to say, and that a strong dose of Elbow's "believing game," in which we make an effort to inhabit the opponent's belief before leaping to refute it, would be salutary for everybody. But it doesn't follow that we can simply desist from staking "out a position in opposition" or from positioning "ourselves in opposition to someone else's [view], which we prove wrong." For some measure of contrast or againstness, some "as opposed to whatness," is inherent not only in the process of writing, but of being an individual. To be sure, our reasons for writing and reading have as much to do with establishing common ground as with differentiating ourselves from each other.⁹ But it is not wrong that works of scholarship and opinion journalism do not get published if they merely agree with what others have said and don't "stake out a position in opposition."

The problem is that in the very act of warring against polarization, Tannen herself falls into a needless polarization of "debate" versus "dialogue," as in her book's original subtitle. The mistake here lies in setting up debate and dialogue as polar opposites, when they are better seen as complementary moments in the process of social ex-

change, which constantly alternates between the adversarial and the consensual. (This slippage between "debate" and "conversation" is my excuse for my tendency to use these terms interchangeably in this book.)

Tannen writes as if we always *know* whether a given discussion is "debate" or "dialogue"/"conversation," as when she draws a sharp contrast between academic courses that privilege debate over those that encourage "conversation" or "discussion." But which mode we are in—debate or dialogue?—is not always self-evident, a fact that explains why parties to an exchange often disagree about how to classify what they are doing: "Hey, don't take it personally—I'm not *arguing* with you, I'm just stating a fact." Or, "Take it easy, I'm not putting you down, I'm just trying to find out where we stand."

This ambiguity—are we debating or conversing?—is amusingly illustrated by one of my favorite Monty Python sketches, "The Argument Clinic." A man appears at the clinic and announces that he is looking for an argument. He is directed to office 12, whereupon opening the door he is met with a stream of insults and invective from the functionary behind the desk:

"You snotty-faced piece of parrot-droppings. . . . Your type makes me puke. You vacuous, toffee-nosed, malodorous pervert."

"What's this? I came here for an argument."

"Oh, I'm sorry. This is Abuse. You want 12A next door." Going to the office next door, the client asks the man at the desk if this the Argument Department.

"I told you once . . ."

"No, you didn't."

"Yes, I did."

"Did not."

"Did . . ."

Finally, the client objects that "this isn't argument, just mere contradiction."

"No, it isn't."

"Yes it is. An argument is a connected series of statements leading to a definite proposition."

"No, it's not . . ."

"Argument is an intellectual process, not an automatic gainsaying of anything the other person says."

"Not necessarily."¹⁰

Though it's easy to spot the differences here between abuse, argument, and "mere contradiction," the sketch forces us to reflect on how slippery these distinctions can be. Veteran teachers know that a discussion that some students experience as a healthy airing of differences is experienced by others as "mere contradiction," even abuse.

Indeed, the word "argument" is itself ambiguous, sometimes being used to denote adversarial dispute ("Let's not get into an argument over this"), sometimes to refer neutrally to anything that has been stated or proposed ("As I understand it, your argument is . . ."), though even this neutral usage hints faintly at controversy, for there would be no need to propose at all if the proposal were not controversial. Though students are often confused by these ambiguities in the word "argument," they are rarely brought up by teachers. *Mea culpa*: I must have used the word thousands of times in class, but only recently have I begun to stop and unpack its different meanings.

But perhaps the most telling refutation of Tannen's thesis in *The Argument Culture* is the confrontational quality of the book itself. At those moments when Tannen questions the legitimacy of oppositional debate, she traps herself in a performative contradiction in which what she *says* is undermined by what she *does*. In the act of warning readers against the adversarial, agonistic, oppositional stance, Tannen cannot help becoming adversarial, agonistic, and oppositional. In complaining that we clear a space for our views by positioning "ourselves in opposition to someone else's," Tannen enacts the behavior she objects to, positioning herself in opposition to debate lovers. Tannen anticipates this objection, calling her book not "a frontal assault on the argument culture"—which would "be in the spirit of attack that I am questioning"—but an attempt to "expand our notion of 'debate' to include more dialogue" (25–26). But Tannen's pages do often border on "frontal assault," with their hard-edged, disputatious style—which I take to be a virtue—that seems closer to the abrasive rationalism she opposes

than to the soft-focus New Age mentality with which she identifies ideologically. (In this respect, Tannen resembles my colleague Jane Tompkins, another aggressive polemicist who is ambivalent about polemics.)

Furthermore, is it really true that bullying tactics get you ahead as an academic? In my experience, students who attack for the mere sake of attacking or who caricature their targets are readily spotted and corrected. And scholars who earn reputations as hatchet men and women tend to lose credibility among their peers. Polemics tend to be more persuasive with uncommitted audiences when they avoid abusive gestures, accord their opponents a measure of respect, and make due concessions. Tannen sees as typical the professor who admitted to his colleague that he had attacked him in order to get tenure, not because he really disagreed with him. To me the professor sounds like someone with a self-destructive delusion about how his profession works.

By the same token, how accurate is Tannen's picture of today's classrooms as rife with rancorous contention? I would bet that most American students go through their entire high school and college careers without ever witnessing a debate between their teachers, and extended disagreements between classmates are probably only slightly more frequent. To be sure, there is no shortage of classroom *competitions*, but very little of that competition gets channeled into sustained intellectual debate. On the faculty side, there is no lack of disagreement, but what debate there is takes place behind the classroom scenes in faculty meetings and private conversations, or (for college faculty) in publications and conference presentations.

A UIC graduate student, Steve Benton, put the point well in a letter responding to Tannen in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*: "The operative metaphor in the classes I've been in has not been . . . a battleground of ire-raising debate, but a hot tub of sleep-inducing consensus. Gun-slingers though they may be at professional conferences and in faculty lounges, the teachers of the classes I've sat in have, for the most part, done an excellent job of keeping their own classrooms safe from crucial controversy." Benton concludes that the "fact that students . . . are not adept at constructively negotiating intellectual disagreement . . . seems to me a very good reason for giving us more practice at it."¹¹

Perhaps only in their publications do professors open up. Jeffrey

Wallen's caustic account of the quality of discussion at academic public events is right on the mark.

In our profession, our ways of disagreeing with each other are often pathetic. You sit through a fifty-minute talk, and at the end someone will sheepishly raise a few points that obscure rather than convey what the questioner really finds objectionable in the paper: it would be impolite to state forthrightly why one objects to what was said or to challenge the fundamental premises of the speaker. Or someone else, less restrained and more hostile, will blow off steam quibbling about some of the details of the talk in an effort to demonstrate her own greater learning and insight, but she will leave untouched the real ideas of the paper and whatever might be important in the line of thought that was developed: it would be professionally uncool to genuinely contest the spirit of the talk or to act as if there really were a lot at stake in what we say to each other.¹²

In my experience, the avoidance of disagreement Wallen describes here is more common among literary academics (many of whom grew up hearing that there is something inherently anti-literary about propositional discourse) than among their colleagues, say, in philosophy departments. But the attitude he describes—contestation is "uncool"—is certainly at least as pervasive as the combativeness deplored by Tannen.

When Tannen complains that college students are advised to look for someone to attack in order to generate a paper topic, I can only say, "Would it were so!" As I argue in several later chapters (especially 9-11), standard high school and college paper assignments tend to ask not for polemical opposition, but for rehearsals of information or for textual interpretations in a vacuum. My own students' writing seems to improve dramatically when I encourage them to "stake out a position in opposition" and provide them with help on how to do so. Once students are let in on the secret that most influential intellectual work—Tannen's included—springs from having something to contest, they can proceed with a clearer sense of their task. And once it is made

clear that such contestation is necessary, teachers can then help their students learn to engage in it in ways that are not crudely abrasive and antagonistic.

Far from the excess of contentiousness that Tannen sees in today's classrooms, then, I find much too little. Classroom disagreement rarely moves beyond the trading of opinions and observations—Pythonesque “mere contradiction”—to enable differences to be worked through. Even the angry recent confrontations over differences of race, ethnicity, and gender have taken place mostly outside classrooms, where these differences are usually expressed in a noncontroversial airing of “alternative perspectives” and in the choice of assigned authors. The compositionist Joseph Harris rightly describes this evasive celebration of differences as “a kind of multicultural bazaar, where [students] are not so much brought into conflict with opposing views as placed in a kind of harmless connection with a series of exotic others.”¹³

Learning becomes even more of a conflict-free zone when we move from the colleges to the schools. According to Arthur Powell, Eleanor Farrar, and David K. Cohen in their classic book *The Shopping Mall High School*, “conflict is rarely the way [high school] classroom participants come to terms with one another. . . . Agreement is far more common than antagonism . . . because peaceful coexistence seems preferable to outright conflict. . . . Teachers and students have . . . subtle ways of accommodating either differences or similarities: they arrange deals or treaties that promote mutual goals or that keep the peace.” As one school administrator quoted in the book observes, “Interpretation, analysis, inference, main ideas are not part of our educational curriculum.” Powell and his colleagues conclude that “avoiding those things was the essence of the treaty that students and teachers had willingly, if tacitly agreed upon.”¹⁴ This kind of classroom, which steers clear of disagreement, “main ideas,” and other potential sources of trouble, seems far more recognizable and typical to me than the embattled classroom war zones described by Tannen.

Underlying the critique of the argument culture by Tannen and other feminists is a reaction against aggression and its excesses that has become all the easier to understand and sympathize with in a post-September 11 world. The question, however, is whether aggression can

be successfully dealt with by disparaging conflict and the kind of debate in which there are winners and losers. In a fallen world, arguably, conflict and win/lose debate are inevitable. If I believe my government's policies are mean and destructive, I want my side to win the election—throw the rascals out—and I see no reason why I should be made to feel ashamed of this desire. (And if you think I should be ashamed of trying it, you will want to win this point of dispute with me.) Instead of trying to eliminate or repress the aggression that wells up in us when we fight for our beliefs, recognizing the unavoidability of such aggression might enable us to get it under control and prevent it from becoming violent and misdirected.

THE PEDAGOGICAL VALUE OF CRUDE DEBATE

Tannen's contradictory way of exemplifying the polemical spirit that she deplores suggests again that there is something unavoidable about the cultural centrality of argumentation and debate. This claim, which echoes a tradition of thought back to classical rhetoricians such as Aristotle and Quintilian, has been reasserted by many recent thinkers. One is Michael Billig, whose recent book, *Arguing and Thinking: A Rhetorical Approach to Social Psychology*, calls disagreement “the root of thought” itself. Thinking, writes Billig, “is a form of internal argument, modeled on outward dialogue; attitudes are rhetorical stances in matters of controversy. . . . To hold an attitude is to take a stance in a matter of controversy,” “to make an argument *against* counterinterviews.”¹⁵

The point is even more succinctly made in the title of a recent composition textbook: *Everything's an Argument*, edited by Andrea A. Lunsford and John J. Ruskiewicz. As the editors put it: “All language, including the language of visual images or of symbol systems other than alphabetical letters—is persuasive, pointing in a direction and asking for response. From the morning news to the AIDS ribbon, from the American flag to the Nike swoosh, we are surrounded by texts that beckon, that aim to persuade. In short, we walk, talk, and breathe persuasion very much as we breathe the air: *everything* is an argument.”¹⁶ Lunsford and Ruskiewicz distinguish between respectful disagreement that leads to shared explorations and mere fighting. They warn that argumentation need not be “agonistic or combative,” nor need its

goal be "to win out over others." Unlike Tannen, however, they see contentious debate as an unavoidable and normal state of affairs.¹⁷

Tannen might still object that the argument culture is too crudely polarized to be a positive force in education. She might argue, for example, that the Left/Right dualism that structures so much of our public debate is often a pseudo-opposition that conceals as much as it enlightens. In *Culture of Complaint*, a recent book on the culture wars, Robert Hughes describes the clash of cultural Left and Right as a "sterile confrontation," one that disguises the fact that "the two PCs—the politically and the patriotically correct"—need each other in order to justify their existence.¹⁸ Hughes is right to point out the limits of the dualism, but his point would be lost on anyone who has not yet grasped the dualism to begin with. The opposition of Left vs. Right that sophisticated critics like Hughes justifiably want to get beyond may be one to which students and others have not yet been exposed.

To take another suspect dualism, the *New Republic* art critic Jed Perl has recently argued that "High-versus-low is a shopworn intellectual debate," one that is "of little interest to anybody who really cares" about the arts. Debating Mozart vs. the Beatles, for example, is "for the pedants who can't wait to turn off the music, all the better to hear the sounds of their own voices. The more that you're engrossed in different kinds of music (or different kinds of art), the less you're going to care for comparisons that are by their very nature too crude to tell you much of anything."¹⁹ Perl may be right about the crudity of the High vs. Low dichotomy, but he can afford to dismiss it because he takes for granted its history and import. The high/low dualism that bores Perl is grasped only shakily by many students. When we disdain the crude binary oppositions of the culture war, we ignore the heuristic value of these oppositions for those who haven't yet mastered them.

For this reason, I would make a case for the pedagogical value even of "crude" debate, if only as a precondition of advancing subsequently to more nuanced, less reductively polarized conversations. Some debates are not worth entering, but if we shrink from entering debates generally because their quality never seems up to our standards, we are unlikely ever to produce better debates. In order to have good de-

bates, we probably have to start by having bad ones and learn from the experience how to make them better.

Letting students in on the dirty little secret that they will do well in school if they learn to join the argument culture is just a beginning. Learning to play the game well is still an arduous task that won't seem at all game-like to many students. At the least, however, educators will have cleared the air about what the game of schooling is ultimately about and what students need to do to survive it and flourish in it. And with luck, getting the argument game out in the open and acknowledging its inevitability will help us start playing it the way Deborah Tannen rightly wants—with less egotistical competition and more mutual respect.