Essay: "Inciting Speech"

**by Mark C. Carnes**

*[This essay originally appeared in the March/April 2005 issue of*Change magazine *and was awarded the 2006 William Gilbert Award by the American Historical Association for the best article on teaching history. Mark C. Carnes is Ann Whitney Olin Professor of History at Barnard College, general editor of the 25-volume* American National Biography *(Oxford University Press/ACLS), and creator of "Reacting to the Past."]*

"The Thirty Tyrants have inflicted great pain on all of us here--here amidst the rubble of our once-magnificent city."  Beth looked up from the lectern and gestured vaguely toward the courtyard.  One student took a sip from a bottle of Poland Spring, another chewed on a pen.  Both regarded Beth appraisingly.

"But now that the Thirty Tyrants are dead or gone," she continued, "we should banish them from our hearts and minds.  We must not rekindle old hatreds."  She looked down, turned a few pages, and read: "I therefore propose to you, citizens of Athens, that we pass a reconciliation agreement.  No Athenian shall ever again speak of the past wrongs of those who supported the Thirty. We must . . ."

"No!" Allison shouted, "We must not forget those who died at the hands of the Thirty!"

Beth, taken aback, stared at her.

Allison continued:  "Our dead martyrs demand vengeance."

"But revenge is wrong!" Rachel called out.

Another voice: "Revenge will lead to violence, and then to more violence."

"Not revenge, vengeance," Allison replied.  She leaned forward, shoulders hunched, a strand of black hair tumbling across her eyes."

I ask you, Beth"--Allison's voice softened--"is memory bad?  Is truth bad?"

But sometimes the truth can hurt people," Beth answered.

More voices:

"The truth is the truth."

"But talk of the past only stirs up trouble."

"We suffered enough under the Thirty Tyrants.  Should we suffer again, under the memory of their rule?"

Then a half-dozen shouts, and several students moved in line behind Beth at the podium.

"We must trust each other, not kill each other!"

Beth's voice rang out, pitched higher, the rhetorical flourishes gone.

"That's right." Dara, hands fluttering with excitement, was on her feet. "Let's say you've got two farmers who are neighbors. OK?  One says to the other.  'Hey, last night I slept with your wife.'  What would happen?  A fight!  The truth would lead to violence!"

 "If you keep talking about the evil of the Thirty," Beth added, "we'll just keep killing each other.  We've got to stop the hate and the hurt!"

More hands, more shouts.

Sitting a corner, scarcely noticed amidst the din, I looked at the class roster and put checks next to those who had spoken.  When I finished, every name was checked.

Except Veronica's.

I looked up and spotted her at the far end of the table, her wide eyes moving from one speaker to another.  She looked as though she had wandered into a den of bears.

When class ended, as students were gathering their books and jabbering about Athens,  Veronica at last spoke.  Her words were ostensibly addressed to nearby students:   "I thought the purpose of college was for everyone to cooperate and help each other, not tear each other apart."  She looked at me and walked out of the room.

Words can wound; debate can be hurtful.  The Athenians understood this well.  That was why, in 403 B.C.,  they endorsed a "reconciliation agreement" to  prevent public discussion of the city's recent past.

The previous year Athens had surrendered to Sparta, a devastating conclusion to the 28-year Peloponnesian war.  The Spartan army then installed a group of dictators--the Thirty Tyrants--to rule Athens.  The Thirty butchered hundreds, perhaps thousands, of democrats, which provoked an insurgency.  Sparta soon wearied of the chaos and  withdrew its military garrison.  Left to fend for themselves, the Thirty fled and democracy was restored.  The "reconciliation agreement" prohibited Athenians from "remembering the past wrongs" of those who had supported the Thirty.  The Athenians took the law seriously, putting one citizen to death for violating its provisions.

The case of Socrates further demonstrates the limits on Athenian speech.  To many democrats, Socrates' utopian state, run by a manipulative elite, resembled nothing so much as the Spartan oligarchy.  Moreover, the leader of the Thirty--Critias--had studied with Socrates.  In 399 B.C. some democrats, still bitter, brought Socrates to trial on charges of "impiety" and "corrupting the youth," probably an allusion to his connection to Critias and his scorn for the democracy.  Both the reconciliation agreement and the case of Socrates demonstrated that despite its purported commitment to free speech, Athens, the "cradle of democracy," had emphatically decided that certain subjects were off limits.

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The same could be said of our nation's colleges and universities, which have developed a culture of reconciliation.  It is so pervasive that no one much notices it, nor are explicit sanctions required to impose it.  The point became awkwardly evident to me when my wife and I took our daughter on a college-hunting trip through New England.

During our tour of Wesleyan College, an energetic student guide boasted of the school's diversity.  He ticked off various clubs and associations for all races, religions, and ethnic groups, as well as for all sexual orientations, including separate groups for gays and lesbians.  "And I almost forgot," he added, "we have a really active asexual movement on campus."  Towards the end of the tour, someone pointed across the road to a Victorian building with large columns and asked what it was.  "Oh that," the guide muttered.  "It's a fraternity where the conservative kids live."  "But that's ok," he said, hastily recovering his bright tone.  "That's where they do their stuff so the rest of us don't have to deal with them."

What, I wondered, was my daughter to make of these words?  I had wanted her regard college as a place to grow intellectually by bumping up against new ideas and people, but the guide was making the opposite point.   Diversity was valuable not because students would learn from each other, but because just about any student there could find a comfortable niche among like-minded peers.

Fraternities and sororities have long channeled college students into homogeneous social groupings, but the sorting trend has gained momentum in recent years.  My own campus, once famously resistant to such compartmentalization, has witnessed not just a revival of Greek organizations but also the development of countless associations based on religious, ethnic, sexual, or racial identity.  When I ask why they join such groups, students respond that it's good to have a place where "people accept you for what you are" or where "you feel comfortable immediately."

Within companionable peer groups there is plenty of talk but little of the conflict that generates thought or the intellectual friction that stimulates learning.  "Our antagonist," Edmund Burke wrote, "is our helper.  He that wrestles with us strengthens our nerves, and sharpens our skill."  "Conflict is the gadfly of thought," John Dewey added.  "It shocks us out of sheep-like passivity.  Our students, having herded themselves into peaceable pastures, graze free from contentious words.  Intellectual disputes, such as they are, rumble in the distance, beyond earshot.  "Whatever."

Some students don't believe that college should be so comfortable.  Rachel, a first-year student in the same class that had debated the reconciliation agreement with Allison, wrote a letter to the Columbia Spectator criticizing university plans to create two new organizations for varsity athletes--one for Christians and another for Jews.  Too often, Rachel complained, "intellectual factions form strictly and predictably along the lines of one's personal identity."  This prevented students from having "meaningful conversations with those who differ from themselves."

This point was confirmed in a 1998 survey of student attitudes at Grinnell College (Change, September/October 1998).  Most students said that they would not discuss sensitive issues with anyone with whom they strongly disagreed.  Nearly half went further:  unless they knew in advance the views of the person with whom they were talking, they would not discuss any sensitive subject.  Many students claimed  a "right" to express their views without being criticized or challenged.  "Promising our students that we will make them comfortable may simply confirm them in their view that they have the right not to be challenged," the authors of the study concluded.

Not only do students smilingly evade contentious discussion within peer groups, they don't say much in class, either.  Many studies have confirmed this point.  My favorite appeared in the Journal of Higher Education (May/June 1996).  There, an education professor described her thoughtful attempt to determine which teaching techniques were most effective at eliciting discussion.  Her researchers went to a large public university in the Northeast (she did not disclose its name) and asked students, faculty, and administrators to identify the teachers on campus who had proven most adept at promoting discussion.  This resulted in a list of the top twenty professors.  The researchers audiotaped a random set of these professors' classes, ranging in size from 15 to 44  (the median was 29).  Evaluators then listened to the tapes, noting exactly who spoke, for how long, and under what circumstances.

The data produced an awkward revelation.  Even these "best" teachers in relatively small classes failed to generate much discussion.  Indeed, the student response was so poor that the author was hard-pressed to identify any effective strategies for  stimulating discussion.  On average, students spoke only 2.28 percent of the time.  That is, the professor spoke nearly 49 minutes in a typical 50-minute class.  And the "student speech" was rarely substantive.  "Will this be on the final?" was a characteristic question. The great majority of students said nothing.  The author concluded that even "very good" teachers should improve their "discussion-leading" skills and students should work on their "participation skills."  But people learn skills only when they need them, and clearly today's silent students feel they have little need for discussion skills.

Some professors are not displeased with this arrangement.  Many regard a silent class as proof that students are paying attention or at least showing a sensible measure of deference to their intellectual betters.  Others reason that professors are paid to teach and that in speaking a lot, they are working hard.  But most professors know that passive students don't learn much.  Ideas do not gain coherence until they have been incorporated within students' own patterns of thought.

Most students amiably accede to an arrangement that requires only that they sit back, take notes (or not), and refrain from snoring.   In an article in the Amherst alumni magazine, Suzanne Feigelson, a recent graduate, complained that one of the earliest lessons she learned at Amherst was to shut up.  As a freshman she had been eager to express herself and debate big ideas.  But that soon changed.  "There is a phenomenon at Amherst that students stop talking in class about midway through freshman year," she explained.  Upper-class students convey their disdain for the eager and animated freshman in various brutally effective ways.  Soon all new students learn that "it's not cool to talk in class."  This does not happen just at Amherst.

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The class in which the debate about the reconciliation agreement took place was part of a general education program called "Reacting to the Past " that I initiated  at Barnard College in 1996.  It has since spread to scores of colleges and universities (see box on next page).  In "Reacting," college students play elaborate games set at pivotal moments in the past, their roles informed by great texts.  They learn big ideas by discussing and debating them and the past by reliving it.  Barnard President Judith Shapiro immediately embraced the program: "Trying on a variety of roles not only teaches students about others, but it also causes them to reflect more deeply on who they are themselves. The more sophisticated and confident they become in their self-knowledge, the more effectively they engage with others."

Early in the implementation of the "Reacting" initiative, Barnard applied for a developmental grant  from the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) of the U.S. Department of Education.  David Johnson, a program officer,  proposed that much of the grant--well over $100,000--be spent on evaluation.  I bristled at the cost, but Johnson prevailed.  The resulting evaluation, designed by psychology professor Steven Stroessner, was ingenious.  About 100 students were assigned to "Reacting" first-year seminars and an equal number to conventional first-year seminars.  During the first week of school, all were paid a small sum to report individually to a researcher.  In one of the evaluative tests, the researcher provided each student with background notes on a contemporary issue, such as gun control.  After studying the notes for a few minutes, the student was to give a five-minute speech into a tape recorder on the subject.  Four months later, after the close of the semester, the student went through the same procedure on a different topic.  Evaluators then graded all of the speeches without reference to the date or identities of the speakers.  At the beginning of the semester, the students in the "Reacting" and the "conventional" seminars had nearly identical scores.  But by the end, those who took Reacting had improved substantially while those in the other classes had not.

 The results confirmed my own observations.  With each game, "Reacting" students acquire more skill, confidence, and poise.  Sometimes the growth is extraordinary.  Ting-Ting, a student in my first Reacting class, was a hesitant, shy girl of Chinese background.  Early in the first semester, while playing a game that explored Confucian thought in Ming China, Ting-Ting, assigned to be a supporter of the Wanli emperor, ventured a statement:

"You critics of the emperor don't understand," she said softly.  "In China, when you talk with someone older than you, you lower yourself.  When you speak to a parent, you lower yourself farther.  But when you speak to the emperor, you put yourself down, down, down on the ground."

Her voice was scarcely audible; she was staring at the table.

But in the following weeks and months, Ting-Ting spoke more frequently and more loudly.  In the final game of the year, set in India on the eve of independence in 1945, Ting-Ting was randomly assigned the role of leader of the Muslim League.  During the final session, most of the other factions--Indian National Congress,  Gandhi, Untouchables, Sikhs, Hindu extremists, and British negotiators--had agreed on a constitution for a United India.  But Ting-Ting refused to accept it.  The Muslim minority, she declared, had not received sufficient guarantees; their rights would be trampled by the Hindu majority.  The debate became increasingly acrimonious.  Ting-Ting, at the center of it all, stood up and walked to the podium.

"If you do not change the constitution," she declared, "I will call on the Muslims of India to rise up and fight!"

A dozen students leaped to their feet, howling in protest.  A civil war would plunge India into chaos; nearly all factions would lose.  For twenty minutes, Ting-Ting remained at the podium, cajoling, brokering, arguing.  At one point another professor opened the door and poked his head in, his face creased with concern:

"Is everything OK in here?" he asked.  "I thought there was a riot."

"Not yet," one student replied.

In the end, Ting-Ting got the guarantees the Muslims needed.

Ting-Ting would have found her voice without the "Reacting" class.  But she found it earlier in her college career because the class format demanded that she speak  clearly and forcefully.  A few weeks after the India game, Ting-Ting  was elected treasurer of the first-year class.  After her sophomore year, she spent  a full-year internship observing the workings of the newly formed legislature of the Georgian republic.  When she returned I expressed amazement.  "How did you pull it off?  I mean, you didn't speak Russian or Georgian, did you?"  "Not at first," she replied.  "But I've got a mouth."

The week after Ting-Ting's tumultuous session in India, the students in that first "Reacting" class were asked to complete the standard course evaluation forms.  One question left them flummoxed:  "What could be done to encourage discussion?"

"What does this mean?" one student scribbled on the form.  "Students are the class."  "The problem wasn't to get us to speak, it was to get us to shut up," another wrote. "We didn't need encouragement," added another.  "Tranquilizers would have been more in order."   The same enthusiasm for debate has been reported at other schools that have adopted "Reacting." Students are so eager to speak that they nearly always come to class.  One faculty member at Loras College in Iowa and another from Trinity College in Connecticut reported that they had perfect attendance--for the entire semester.  Students playing the "Trial of Anne Hutchinson" game at Dordt College in Iowa, dismayed that they lacked time for everyone to say what they wanted, proposed that they extend class for another hour.  Because some had to go to a class immediately afterwards, the entire group voted to begin class an hour earlier--at 8:00 AM.  And they did.

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I had clung to reminiscences and enthusiastic reports such as these to compensate for my failure with Veronica.  We talked privately after the Athens game was over.  She said that the class was stressful and the stress made it impossible for her to speak.  I asked if she spoke in other classes.  She didn't answer directly but said that she preferred to listen and take notes.  Her pet peeves, she said, were students who showed off and monopolized class time.

For the remainder of the semester, she read her papers aloud and occasionally posed a question but otherwise contributed little.  Then, in one of the final sessions of the "Trial of Anne Hutchinson," she went to the podium and read her defense of Hutchinson's theology.  The ideas and research were excellent.  After she had finished, Beth--now in the role of the pastor of the Boston Church--began to pick it apart.

"When Anne said that she had a revelation, wasn't she acting just like Abraham?"

"Well, yeah," Veronica said, her voice falling in instantaneous capitulation.

"And there haven't been any prophets in a long time, have there?"

"Well, no."  Veronica's  posture wilted and she sagged against the podium.  I winced.

Then more questions, each sharper than the one before.  Finally:   "Isn't it arrogant of Anne to think that she's a prophet like Abraham?  Isn't that reason to banish her?"

This time Veronica didn't answer.  Her eyes narrowed and her mouth tightened.

"*No*," she declared.  Her voice, though soft, had bite. "No.  That's not right.  That's not what she means.  That's not what she said.  You're twisting her words."

Everyone in the room looked at her.  Beth fell silent.  Veronica proceeded to reiterate the main ideas of her speech, but now with passion.  She lacked Beth's confidence and poise, but she scored some big points and she knew it.  When Veronica left after class, I raced to catch up with her.

"You did it," I said, "You were terrific."

She glanced at me and smiled, but offered no response.  We continued walking.  (From "Reacting," I have learned that sometimes one teaches best by remaining silent.)

"That wasn't really me," she finally said.  "Not really.  It was like this other person began speaking and I was standing beside her."

"Did it feel good?" I asked.

"When I walked away from the podium, I was shaking.  I still am.  I'm not sure that I like it.  I don't think so."

We walked some more.

"You know," she added, "I never speak in class.  Any class.  Not real speaking, I mean."

"Why this time?"

She took a few more steps, stopped, and then looked at me, deadly earnest:  "They were trying to hurt Anne.  I couldn't let them do that."

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Words can hurt and wound; they can also protect and heal.  There is a time for reconciliation, for swallowing harsh words, as the Athenians well understood; yet words, even harsh ones, clarify existing ideas and generate new ones.  Ancient Athens lives in our imagination not because its people were companionable but because they gave voice to words--brilliant and wondrously contentious words--that reverberated in the Assembly, the theatre, and the courts.

Our own democracy needs intellectual debate, but increasingly we lack the inclination and skills to have it.  Like students within their homogeneous peer groups, American citizens increasingly inhabit intellectually gated communities.  Untested and unchallenged, ideas devolve into opinion; "political discourse" becomes a contradiction in terms.

 Pundits worried that the last presidential campaign revealed a great divide in the American electorate.  We were divided mostly by the fences that marked our social and cultural grazing grounds--our "demographics," in the language of media (and marketing) analysts.  The election functioned not as referendum on ideas but as marketing opportunities for attack ads and sound bites.  What mattered were consumer "issues" of style, personality, and appearance.  What this national moment showed, mostly, was that we lack the capacity and courage to espouse clear ideas and engage in meaningful debate.

Colleges and universities function, in part, to sustain our democracy.  The silence of our students endangers their intellectual health.  But it also imperils our nation.  "Reacting to the Past" teaches reasoning and speaking skills.  More important, it pushes students into distant worlds.  There, free from the constraints of their own sense of self, they find it easier both to explore new and challenging ideas and to talk about them.

*Author's Note:  The first names mentioned in the text are those of actual students who were in the class.  "Allison" and "Veronica," who could not be reached for permission to use their words, are pseudonyms.*

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