

Public Participation Project One: Rational-Critical Debate

After carefully considering the pros and cons of the online public forum, I feel that this kind of digital space echoes Cass R. Sunstein's description of an online republic: "Perhaps above all, a republic, or at least a heterogeneous one, requires arenas in which citizens with varying experiences and prospects, and different views about what is good and right, are able to meet with one another, and to consult" (Sunstein 222). My experience in participating in an online debate rendered proof that some form of Habermas's model can exist in cyberspace, as long as the participants have a similar focus—that being, democratic progress.

I decided to participate in a public forum because a forum allows for equal participation, where anyone can start or contribute to a debate on any topic. I chose the site "Debate Politics" because the site incorporates four main components required by the Habermasian public sphere: open accessibility; a disregard of status and rank; voidance of government influence; and open accessibility to additional media and multiple modes of information (such as links, audio, etc.). As far as the discourse goes, the "hot topics" were of common concern, and many participants seemed to provide articles and examples to back up their arguments.

My chosen debate revolved around the call for vouchers for private school education and the demand for the abolition of the Department of Education. Because I believe vouchers pose a dangerous threat to our society and future generations, I decided that this debate was of common concern and necessary to discuss. Looking back on my writing, there are various points throughout my discussion where I failed to recognize the objectives and the "shared" and "unshared truths" of the other participants. However, for the most part, I feel that I did engage in

rational-critical discourse, particularly in the places where I brought in logic, rationality and ethos.

To be specific, my argument seemed most rational in the places where I used specific examples and analogies. Such examples as the *Gideon vs. Wainwright* case, the comparison between public health care and education, definitions of the terms “privilege” and “right,” and models of successful public schools supported my claim that education is a necessity and a universal concern. However, these examples could have been stronger and more critical if I had provided source material and citations to back up these arguments. In her book “Everything’s an Argument,” Andrea Lunsford expresses the importance of visual evidence: “Providing appropriate evidence ought to become a habit whenever you write an argument. The evidence makes your case plausible; it may also supply the details that make writing interesting” (82). In my case, citing the legal case study, or the site where I took certain terms and definitions from, would have been helpful in securing my argument, as it would have added to my credibility.

In addition to my failure in providing outside material, I began my participation in the debate by failing to recognize an “unshared truth” among the participants. Immediately, in the first sentence of my first response I assert: “Education is a right, not merely privilege.” For someone who disagrees with this warrant, he or she may stop reading the response altogether. Although I believe this statement to be true, I should have eased into this argument after discussing the issue at stake. I wrongly assumed that my opponents understood my reasoning—that I was arguing on the basis of their premise—but clearly, this was not the case.

After the first post, I realized that I needed to address the premise and the issue at stake; thus I made an effort to think about Andrea Lunsford’s notions of logic and stasis theory (Lunsford 23). I tried to analyze the debate through a natural and qualitative lens—looking at

what was actually at stake. Most of the time, the nature of the issue—the philosophy of education—seemed to be the underlying dissonance between those in opposition. When this occurred, I tried to bring in definitions, specifically regarding privileges and rights. At other times, the quality of education seemed to be the focus; thus, I discussed and compared the public school system to a free-market education system. For my own understanding of the debate, this worked well; however, my opponents continued to resist my “logic.”

To make more of an effort to foster an actual debate, I decided to project a certain persona through my language. In Andrea Lunsford’s chapter on Ethos, she notes: “...authority can be conveyed through tiny signals that readers may pick up almost subconsciously. Sometimes it comes from just from a style of writing that presents ideas with robust confidence” (Lunsford 69). Because I was debating predominately conservative participants, I made an effort to use certain terms and phrases that seemed more in line with conservative values and beliefs, phrases that my opponents used repeatedly. For example, I used terms like “social contract,” “Constitutionalist,” “free-market system,” “efficient distribution,” etc. From my opponent’s point of view, these terms may have helped my argument’s credibility. In addition to using language as a persuasive strategy, I made an effort to appear respectful and knowledgeable of my opponents’ arguments, as Lunsford encourages her readers to do: “use language that shows respect for readers” (Lunsford 71). I always started my response with an opponent’s quote. This did two things for my argument: (1) facilitated the direction of the debate, and (2) showed my efforts to interact with the ongoing conversation.

Another aspect that added to my Ethos was my ethical appeal. Although I did not overtly state my concern for the an inclusive educational community, specifically in regards to multilingual students, lower-class families, and non-traditional and non-mainstream groups,

many of my responses alluded to my concerns for issues relating to race, class, and social demographics. I also posed several questions relating to “underrepresented groups” and my opponents seemed to purposely ignore some of those questions. If they did acknowledge a question, their response was similar to: “not every student deserves an education.”

Although I exercised several of Lunsford’s argumentative strategies, I still feel that the discourse was not very productive. Personally, a productive debate would have consisted of valued arguments and responses, with a purpose of aiming towards a consensus (even if the consensus is never reached). My opponents seem disinterested in my responses, and somewhat ignorant to what I had to say. I received many one-sentence responses, such as “Survival of the fit is the rule whether or not you want to believe it” or “Not every person is able to be educated. That is the real world.” In my opinion, my opponents were not looking at my claims or my warrants. They were instead, jumping immediately to their defense. They also failed to acknowledge what was actually at stake—the underlying reasons for our debate. It seemed that their desire to implement a free-market education system was at the forefront of every comment and response—it did not matter what I had to say about the consequences of abolishing the public school system.

I also found that many participants in the debate went off topic. Usually this happened when someone else joined the discussion with a different purpose. This kind of interruption or digression, made a consistent discourse and deliberation hard to achieve. At times I felt that many of the participants were there simply for the sake of arguing, especially my opponents. Most seemed disinterested in reaching some sort of consensus.

That being said, I still believe that the public forum has the potential to function as an altered form of the Habermasian public sphere. I use the word “altered” because there are many

different aspects that we must take into consideration, specifically relating to discourse. As one can note from my personal experience, most of the components of the Habermasian public sphere existed within my site: open accessibility, voidance of status and rank, voidance of government influence, and access to relevant information. However, the rational-critical discourse was not very productive, in the sense of positive deliberation and action. Because I believe that the public forum can function as a public arena, where any citizen with any view can participate in public discourse, I feel that the main issue in question, regarding the Habermasian public sphere, is the kind of discourse that occurs in these forums, and the ways in which we can learn about, encourage and facilitate rational-critical debate.

In Christian R. Weisser's article "Social Theory, Discourse and the Public Sphere," Weisser mentions an important aspect of the public sphere that I believe is a key component when thinking about rational-critical discourse: "the public sphere was a neutral site where the actions of the state were brought under scrutiny" (Weisser 69). Like the topic of education, it is important to approach public issues with a purpose—whether the purpose is to scrutinize a law or policy, or to discuss new approaches to a larger, common issue. If forums offered a statement of purpose at the beginning of each thread, maybe participants would be more inclined to think about their contributions. For many, I feel that a public forum is just a place to engage in meaningless arguments and lash out on opposing parties. In his article, "The Future of Rational-Critical Debate in Online Public Spheres," Matthew Barton points out that he believes members of public forums "assume that their conclusions or discussions are relevant to the public. At all times, the members of these forums are 'conscious of being part of a larger public' (Habermas, p. 37)" (185-186 Barton). While I agree that members are usually aware that they are participating in a public space, I disagree that all members are conscious of their "part" in a larger public. If

all members were conscious of their partisanship to a larger public, I believe their responses would have more value and weight, rather than a trivial response like my opponent, Dav:

“Funding means bull poo if a school is so crappy it doesn’t know what to do with it.”

The issue at stake lies in the definition and the act of redefining rational-critical discourse for the online democratic debate forum. Again, I think it would be helpful if public forums displayed a statement of intent or purpose at the beginning of each thread; this way, participants would be aware of the purpose of the debate, rather than defining it individually. The requirements of the Habermasian public sphere are already in place, it is just the discourse that needs attention and evaluation.

Work Cited

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