

What is the Ideal Setting for Inquiry?

“The function of education...is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically”

—Martin Luther King Jr., “The Purpose of Education,” 1947.

Question: How often do you change your mind because of someone else’s argument?

If you’re like most people, the answer is probably “rarely, if ever.” *But that’s weird, right?* On reflection, you’re willing to admit that you don’t have all the answers, and that other people know things you don’t. So why is changing your mind so rare?

The answer, I think, is that intellectual discussions *very often* occur under bad circumstances, where peoples’ emotions are riled up, and rationality is foiled. But what exactly is the ideal setting for discussion?

Well, having learned about biases, it seems an ideal psychological “environment” for inquiry is (at least) one where *no one’s ego is threatened, wishful thinking is rejected, and laziness is stomped out.* Yet how does one create such a setting?

1. Preventing wishful thinking and laziness

Since I’m not a professional psychologist, I can’t say too much about how best to root out wishful thinking or laziness. It actually can be a complex psychological affair.

But let me just say this. **BE HARDCORE.** Have the courage to face reality, avoiding wishful thinking. Be honest and know when you are fooling yourself or just going for easy answers. Have the passion to get the facts straight, to figure things out carefully, without taking shortcuts. Be *fuckin hardcore*, dammit.

“Ah, wisdom is sharper than death and only the brave can love her.”

—George Santayana, *Obiter Scripta*, 1936.

2. Preventing threats to the ego.

Since ego protection causes many biases, it is crucial that no one feels at risk. This means (a) not threatening anyone else’s ego, and (b) not feeling like your own ego is threatened.

Strive for (a) by being respectful and courteous (obviously), and by being charitable to what people say. (A good way to insult someone is to commit the strawman fallacy against them...) Above all, avoid an aggressive tone. Establish in your mind and in your behavior that your goal is not to “win” the dispute, but rather to *collaborate in a mutual endeavor to seek the truth.*

One way to signal this commitment to your audience is by active listening. “Active listening” means not only paying close attention to others, but also *repeating* what is said to check your understanding and to show that you are listening. Also, if at all possible, *find the grain of truth* in what they are saying. This establishes that you are open to learning from your audience. (And once people see this in you, they sometimes naturally reciprocate.)

If you sense that someone is starting to feel threatened, you can counteract it by *complimenting* the person when s/he makes a good argument or notices something you hadn't. You can also give reassuring nonverbal cues (e.g., nodding in an affirming way), even if you disagree on the issues. It shows that you at least understand where they are coming from, and that you see them foremost as a fellow human being. Also, humor is good for relieving tension.

**Of course, active listening, etc., should be done *sincerely*; you should not just be trying to manipulate your audience into being more open to *your* fixed opinions!

Another strategy is using non-confrontational language. For example, try raising counterpoints in the form of *questions*. Rather than “You're wrong because of X, Y, and Z,” say instead “Given your point of view, I'm curious...what you think of X, Y, and Z?”

I don't mean to suggest that you should be spineless or not stick up for what you believe. These are just techniques so that the discussion does not escalate into a crude and useless battle of wills (where opinions get entrenched and no one changes their mind).

If you are still worried about appearing weak, I might note that you gain more credibility and are more persuasive if you proceed in a calm, non-threatening, and empathetic manner. (Paradoxically, you often *gain* authority by *letting go* authority.) Again, if you are sincere in your empathy, it indicates you have *control* over your emotions, that you are more concerned with the *truth* than bolstering your own ego, and that you want *reason* guide your remarks rather than irrational psychological forces.

I admit, sometimes (a) is not feasible. Sometimes a person is just too aggressive or ego-driven to engage in a reasoned discussion. However, I find that following the steps in (a) often makes a dramatic difference. People who initially seem impossible can suddenly become quite co-operative, once they know that their self-worth is not at stake.

Strive for (b) even though it may sound self-centered. It is in fact *essential* that you feel comfortable as well. After all, if you are feeling threatened, you won't be able to give your full attention to the discussion, and you'll be less likely to promote the ideal climate.

If you tend to feel uncomfortable in an intellectual dispute, you are not alone! This is *far* more often the case. (This is not entirely bad: If you experience discomfort, it is easy to sympathize with others who feel the same discomfort.)

Whenever I start feeling apprehensive in a debate, it helps to admit out loud that I may be wrong, or that I don't have all the answers. (Again, sincerity is key in this.) It often helps diffuse the "competitive" atmosphere—and that usually makes the conversation more fruitful.

You may worry that this makes you seem lacking in "confidence." But it takes more confidence to admit fallibility than to stubbornly pretend you are infallible. Alas, some people may *interpret* your tasteful modesty as weakness, but that's their problem. (I am stunned when people interpret pig-headedness as "confidence.")

"A very popular error: Having the courage of one's convictions; rather it is a matter of having the courage for an attack on one's convictions"

—Friedrich Nietzsche, Nachlass (Musarion edition, 159).

"[T]he trouble is that in the modern world the stupid are cocksure while the intelligent are full of doubt."

—Bertrand Russell, "The Triumph of Stupidity," 1933.¹

I am also less anxious in a discussion if *other people* do not feel threatened. So if I am feeling particularly uncomfortable, I consciously take the steps in part (a) to make *them* feel more at ease. Not only is this a sign of good faith, but it helps calm everyone down.

The Point: Having a productive discussion requires lots of self-awareness and awareness of others' states of mind.

In sum: Take heed if your emotions are being provoked and preventing you from thinking clearly. Catch yourself when you resort to thinking in lazy ways. Notice when fear goads you into wishful thinking.

Similarly, notice these things in others. Proceed cautiously if someone else is getting caught up in their emotions. Try to de-escalate the situation by using the techniques in (a). Call someone out on their laziness. Tell them to be *fuckin hardcore*. And note if someone's remark smells of wishful thinking. (They may be saying something true, but it's good to recognize when their judgments are likely to be less reliable.)

"To become a critical thinker is not, in the end, to be the same person you are now, only with better abilities; it is, in an important sense, to become a different person"

—Gerald Nosich, *Forward to Critical Thinking*, R. Paul (ed.), 1990.

¹ Also relevant: "It is the mark of an educated mind to be capable of entertaining a thought without accepting it." This is standardly attributed to Aristotle, yet I was unable to find an exact match when searching his works.