

English 101

Discussion Questions: “Learning Power: The Myth of Education and Empowerment”

“The Roots of Debate in Education and the Hope of Dialogue” by Deborah Tannen

1. What is the “argument culture” that Tannen discusses?
2. What are some of the problems of the “debate format” used in classrooms that Tannen describes in her opening paragraphs? Why do teachers use these agonistic, adversarial methods?
3. What are some of the Western historical roots of the argument culture? How, according to Tannen, do these contrast with the Chinese approach?
4. What was the role of the Christian Church in the history of science? What does Tannen see as significant about the fact that “the search for truth [is] . . . an enterprise of oral disputation in which positions are propounded, defended, and attacked without regard to the debater’s personal conviction” (§10).
5. What is Aristotle’s belief about the pursuit of truth? Why or how does this help to explain Plato’s suspicion of poets? Can you think of any modern counterparts to the “wandering bards” and the fears they raised (§11)?
6. What point is Tannen making in the section entitled “Sharing Time: Early Training in School”? What does she mean when she states, “The tendency to value formal, objective knowledge over relational, intuitive knowledge grows out of our notion of education as training for debate” (§15)?
7. What are some of the differences in the ways men and women verbalize and respond in the classroom, as described in the section “Integrating Women into the Classroom Army”? What, according to Tannen, is the difference between saying, “/Smith/ is very vague in her theory of XX. Can you explain it further?” and saying, “I didn’t understand the author’s theory. Can you explain it to me?” (§20)?
8. In §28, Tannen tells of weekly symposia (academic conferences) whose stated goals were to “trade ideas” and “learn things.” What did Tannen see as the actual results of such symposia? Why is this problematic for Tannen?
9. Tannen states, “The standard way of writing an academic paper is to position your work in opposition to someone else’s, which you prove wrong. This creates the *need* to make others wrong, which is quite a different matter from reading something with an open mind and discovering that you disagree with it” (§33). What does she mean by this? What are some of the problems with the “*need* to make others wrong”?
10. Why is it difficult for people outside a field to know which “side” to believe? How is this related to the “argument culture”? Tannen says that this situation makes it “extremely difficult

for research to influence public policy” (§34); why is this so, and why does it matter? Can you think of any examples?

11. What are some of the *benefits* of an agonistic, adversarial setting, according to Tannen? Why does Tannen tell about the work that was done to determine the cause and treatment of ulcers (§43-44)? What point is she making?

12. What are the “doubting game” and the “believing game”? How does Tannen think we can put these two “games” to use?

13. In §49-50, Tannen discusses the ways in which we have misinterpreted the Socratic method. What is the “Adversary Paradigm,” and why does Tannen see it as problematic? What does she believe the Socratic method should accomplish?

14. What is “our bias towards dualism” (§52)? How can we work to overcome it? Why does Tannen feel it is important to do so?

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In §38, Tannen discusses the lack of objectivity implied by the academic “attacks” she has described. What does she mean when she states, “Objectivity would entail a disinterested evaluation of all claims”?

What does he mean when he says “the ideology that said the era not just of government, but of big government was over . . . and markets will solve every problem”