

Carl Holland

Level: B2+

Targeted Skills: Preparing and running a debate; briefing participants on a topic; learning and reproducing a speech; using rhetorical skills effectively.

Overview

Rational debate, and the underlying assumption that the strongest, most convincing arguments will carry the day, has taken quite a few blows over recent years. Alternative facts, fake news, the spread of conspiracy theories, social networks and their information bubbles, have all shone a cruel light on the essential fragility of our democracies. But, at the same time, the vitality of online discussion forums, even while election abstention gains ground, shows that more people than ever want to add their voices to the debate.

This course, through predominantly practical sessions, will be looking at how to stimulate and revive a culture of debate and will pay particular attention not only to the chosen topics, but especially to the format and conventions of the debate. The idea that a debate is conducted by experts in front of a gallery of concerned, but passive citizens is less and less appealing.

We will be drawing on a range of practices that have been developed to promote open debate, from Citizens' Assemblies (as successfully used in Ireland to pave the way for abortion rights), mock trials (as deployed in films such as *Bamako* and *Cleveland vs Wall Street*), theatre-forum and reconstitutions, as well as more traditional debating forms on show during Prime Minister's Question Time in the UK Parliament for example.

Methodology

To experiment different debating formats, we will conduct practical exercises. These will prepare the ground for the debates that students will organise and run in small groups. The choice of format for the debate will be considered in light both of the topic and the aim of the debate (to reach a consensus, make a decision, share testimonies, etc.)

Alongside the debates, we will be analysing and practising different speaking styles from different periods and contexts to showcase a variety of rhetoric, that students will then be challenged to recreate.

Students will have a large say in the choice of topics that we debate, but we will also be looking to draw on historical references whenever possible.

Grading

- ◆ an individual speech to contextualise, learn and give in class
- ◆ a debate to construct and run in small groups
- ◆ oral exam
- ◆ Investment in the course – doing all pre-class work as well as participating actively in class exercises – will also count towards the final grade.