

Teaching Slow-thinking skills in the Face of Tribalistic Ideologies

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Abstract

Recent events in elections throughout the world have illustrated how quickly people dig in their heels and refuse to consider positions from others they treat as outsiders. This role-modeling will take its toll on students who already seek to be agreeable to a favored group without reflecting on the group's shared ideologies. Too many see schooling as truth-providing. Yet this is a time when truth-seeking and slow thinking ought to be featured as the heart of educated deliberation.

Keywords: Truth-seeking, tribalistic. Confirmation bias, community of inquiry, intellectual tolerance

Introduction

Tribalists are fear-filled and unwilling or incapable of entertaining thoughts or evaluating judgements beyond those accepted by the tribe. They go along to get along. Unwarranted conclusions are acceptable and rational if they ease assimilation to the surrounding community (Wagner, 1984). The four historic professions of teaching, preaching, lawyering and doctoring have in the past, been critical to keeping tribalism under control (Wagner & Woods, 2020). Tribalism has a long history of infectious destruction. In ancient Greece, Plato warned about those who collectively look to the shadows on a cave wall to communicate. As long as everyone agrees that talking to shadows leads to success of some kind, the tribe is content. But, if a single person turns around and sees the light behind that causes the shadows and then exclaims the truth, the tribe is disturbed (Wagner & Seigel, 1988). But rather than investigate the novel claim the tribe turns instead to scorn the non-conformist (Wagner & Fair, 2020).

More than a century ago, a reverend and amateur mathematician, E.A. Abbott wrote a little book for young people titled, Flatland. In that book all the persons are geometric figures whose world is limited to a two-dimensional plane. Status is determined as it always had been, by how many sides a flatlander has. Abbott has a sphere pass through Flatland. The leadership of Flatland announce that this must be a god since it seems to have an infinite number of sides. The sphere disavows any divinity. He goes so far as to beg the people to consider his disavowal. The sphere explains to the flatlanders that the world their world exists within, has more than two dimensions. Too late. Tribalism had already taken hold in flatland. The tribe just knew the world is two dimensional. The tribe just *knew* the sphere must be a god. As the sphere continued to pass through the plane it went from getting larger to getting smaller until it disappeared. As the sphere got larger the flatlanders just knew it was exhibiting its greatness as a god. After passing midway through the sphere started to grow smaller (Abbott, 1884). Flatlanders cried because together, they just knew their god was dying. And, just as in Plato's cave everyone just knew what to believe: go along to get along (Wagner & Fair, 2020).

Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahneman as well as a host of other psychologists and economists demonstrated that something called confirmation bias affects much human thinking. Confirmation bias is the phenomenon of seeing what one expects to see or wants to see in order to confirm one's biasness (Kahneman, 2011). This bias displays the anti-intellectualism of tribalism that Plato and then Abbott warn against. This biasness thwarts the development of new paradigms of insight and critic-creative education at every level (Wagner, 1980; Wagner, 1983; Wagner, 1997).

People do not join tribes. Rather they tend to fall into them, an innocent consequence of who they hang around with. Once in a tribe it is difficult to see the world anew (Wagner & Seigel, 1988). As in the television show *Survivor*, once the tribe has spoken, its decision is final.

In the American political scene, fewer and fewer people show the courage and ability to step back, take a breadth and evaluate all plausible evidence for making decisions one way or another. The few that do often find themselves scorned by zealots on both sides (Wagner & Dede, 1983). There is hostility and intolerance for those whose reasoning leads them to conclusions independent of the encompassing tribe (Wagner, 2011). Even the concept of tolerance is used to gaslight those towards whom the tribe is intolerant.

When coming out of the Constitutional convention a journalist asked Ben Franklin what kind of government do we have. Franklin said, "We have given the people a democratic republic, now if they can keep it." Do today's students even know what form of government the United States has?

It is a democratic republic. Students' need to be taught how to discriminate valid forms of argument and to distinguish credible evidence from less credible opinion. It is imperative that students learn to see beyond the last tribal, social media post, the last podcast, and the last commercial. Students need to be taught and have role-modeled for them the importance of taking a deep breadth and slow think their way through hypotheses, evidential claims and competing arguments. Students need to learn that it takes courage to think independently. Courage must be distinguished from recklessness. Courage is willing to take risk in the face of fear. Where there is no fear there is no courage. It takes no courage to go along to get along. It does take courage to argue an independent view that may be wrong or errant in the eyes of a dominating social surround. Teachers must make epistemic virtues such as: independence of thought, passion for truth-seeking, discriminating temperament when weighing evidence and coherent development of explanations, as far more important than merely recognizing an answer to the next multiple-choice test item (Wagner, 2020).

Most importantly, teachers succeed when they teach each student to ask of self and others these questions: "How do I know what I think I know?" and "How do they know what they claim to know?"

In the end, the most skilled learners who become society's best thinkers are those who have become liberated from tribal thinking (Kahneman, Sibony & Susskind, 2021)

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