

4 Because it will make you lots of friends

Now there's a funny idea. Arguing with people helps you to make friends with them? How does that work?

Here's how.

A little known fact about debating is that it is a team activity. You do it in a team of two, or sometimes three. That's a small team, but it's still a team. There is nothing more intense, more bonding, than working under pressure as a team; supporting each other, helping each other, respecting each other, balancing your weaknesses with your team mate's strengths, her strengths with your weaknesses. When you have fifteen minutes to prepare to speak to a crowded room on a topic you know hardly anything about, that's when you find out if you can rely on someone. When what you're saying is interrupted every thirty seconds by someone telling you you're wrong, that's when you know who your friends are. And they will become friends, your team mates, because you will have been through that experience together.

Not just your team mates. If you're lucky, your school will have a debating club with many members, who get together on a regular basis to talk and argue and set the world to rights. You'll meet people from other year groups, other backgrounds, other political opinions, other faiths. You won't always agree. Arguments may get very passionate. One of my students got so excited in a debate that she suddenly started talking in French without even realising she was doing it (her parents were French speaking). You'll give as good as you get, but it will all be done in an atmosphere of mutual respect and courtesy. You'll get to know each other very well. You may well become life long friends.

If you take debating further, you may go on a residential course or debating competition where you'll meet people from other schools and other parts of the country. You'll spend all day (and quite possibly much of the night) arguing with each other, and you'll love it. One of my students told me that a weekend debating competition she took part in at the other end of the country was the best weekend of her life. I didn't inquire too closely into what she got up to, but I imagine it involved making friends. I have seen debating romances blossom at some of these events (what happens when they have their first argument?).

So of course debaters have lots of friends. Why wouldn't they? They're lively, intelligent people who love sharing their ideas with each other, and love listening to other people's ideas. They're fun to be around.

**Debaters
are fun
to be
around**

5 Because debating will help you to understand other people better

June 24th 2016 was one of the most extraordinary days of my life.

It was the day after the referendum in which Britain voted to leave the European Union, but it actually felt more like the day after some horrific terrorist attack.

In my first lesson, a student walked into the room, slammed her folder down on the table and said, 'Mr Bell, I am so angry!' As her friends arrived, they all got angry together. And angrier. And angrier. We were supposed to be studying the poetry of Wordsworth, but Wordsworth got pushed to one side, as they would talk about nothing else but the referendum vote. They told me about their parents crying at breakfast, worried about what would happen to their children. They told me about their fears for their future. They told me that they couldn't believe what had happened. How could they have done this? How could they have been so ignorant? How could they have been so stupid?

It went on like that all day. In my lessons. In the staff room. On the Tube. Talking to the neighbours. Talking to my family. Everyone, everywhere, looked like someone had just died. No, not just someone: hundreds of people; maybe thousands; maybe millions. One member of my family, who is the kindest, gentlest, most tolerant person I know, texted me to say: 'A victory for ignorance and stupidity.'

If everyone thought leaving the European Union was such a stupid idea, why did Leave win the referendum?

Because not everyone thought that. A lot of people thought leaving the European Union was a very good idea. 17.4 million of them, to be precise. The trouble was, neither I, nor my students, nor my colleagues, nor my friends, nor my family, nor the people I sat next to on the Tube, knew any of them. Or if we did, those people were keeping very, very quiet on June 24th 2016.

I teach in an independent school in London, the most cosmopolitan city in the world. Almost without exception, my students go on to Higher Education, and many of their parents went to university too. Some are from international families – often from the EU – and the majority can afford holidays abroad and are well travelled.

I went to university. My wife went to university. All our friends went to university (we met most of them at university). We travel a lot, because we can afford to.

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