

Of course we all voted Remain. Why wouldn't we?

We (by we, I mean all the people I know) like to think that we voted for the EU because we're open-minded, tolerant, liberal people who welcome diversity, co-operation and sharing. What we don't like to think is that we voted for the EU because it suits our own interests.

What has this got to do with debating?

Quite a lot, actually.

In all the conversations I had about the EU referendum, and in all the conversations I overheard about the EU referendum, I never once heard anyone make the case for leaving the EU. All I heard was a kind of frantic competition to be the most worried (before the result) or upset (after the result) at the prospect of leaving the EU, and to be the most outraged at the ignorance and stupidity of Leave voters.

With one exception.

The Monday before the vote, I ran an assembly in which I staged a debate on the EU. Students had to listen to a speech for Remain, and a speech for Leave, given equal time. This wasn't without difficulties. The student who spoke for Leave was being given a hard time in the sixth form common room. People told her that she shouldn't be doing it; people were refusing to talk to her. I had to intervene on her behalf, to tell other students that this wasn't acceptable. When she gave her speech, though, it was much the more persuasive of the two. If I had been judging the debate, she would have won hands down. She didn't make me vote Leave, but she certainly earned my respect.

After the debate, we had a vote, by secret ballot. The result was 87% for Remain. Where did the 13% for Leave come from? Did they misread the ballot paper? Or were they, perhaps, persuaded by that student's speech? Whoever they were, they were keeping very quiet on June 24th.

But at least that debate forced the school, just for ten minutes, to listen to someone who did not see the world the way they saw it. And debating does that all the time. In a debate, whatever you say will be challenged, often very vigorously, and you will have to defend yourself. Debating means you can take nothing for granted. And there's more. Because you don't get to choose your side of the motion, you will often have to argue for something you don't agree with. If you are going to do that successfully, you have to enter into the mind of someone else, someone who sees the world

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in a completely different way from you, and, just for a moment, see things as they do. Even if you are arguing for something you believe in, you have to enter into the other side's way of thinking in order to better challenge it.

In debates, I've seen students from Israeli families argue for the Palestinian cause; I've seen devout Catholics argue for abortion rights; I've seen gay students argue against same-sex marriage. They may not have changed their minds at the end of it, but at least they came away understanding the people they disagreed with a bit better.

How could they have done this? How could they have been so ignorant and stupid? That was what I heard again and again in the days and weeks after the EU referendum. But who are this 'they'? They're our fellow citizens, that's who. The people we share our country with. They're not a tiny lunatic fringe. There are 17.4 million of them. They're not ignorant. They're not stupid. They just see the world differently from me, and the people I know. Whatever the future holds for Britain and the EU (and I have no idea what the situation will be by the time you read this book), we're still going to have to live together, to get along together, to share our country. If we make the effort to understand each other, it's going to be a much better country to live in.

Debating makes you understand other people. It builds up the understanding muscle in your mind.

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Have a conversation with someone in which you argue for something you don't believe in. See how you feel at the end of it. Did anything change?

6 Because debating will make you understand the world better.

You have fifteen minutes to prepare for a debate. (Fifteen minutes, incidentally, in which you are forcibly separated from your phone, iPad or other device).

After that fifteen minutes, you're going to have to stand up and talk to the whole room about Brexit, or Trump, or climate change, or the gender pay gap - or whatever is in the news by the time you