[**The educated mind**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1605577/the-educated-mind)

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“IT is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it.” The last three words of this observation could also have read ‘without accepting/rejecting it’.

I was recently having a conversation with a colleague about the toxicity of public spaces such as Facebook and, especially, Twitter. For me, the language used, the way people talk to each other and abuse each other is nothing short of astounding. How can people interact in this way and think it is okay for them and others to do so, and even to imagine that this kind of interaction is productive.

I connected some of the strands of the above observation to what I see in my students and colleagues as well. My colleague felt that I should write an article on this. So, at the risk of being called an ‘uncle’ or ‘woke’ or whatever people might want to call me, here goes.

I have been writing in newspapers almost every week or every other week for 22 years now. I mostly write on issues of education and the economy: the areas I study, teach and research in. When I am fortunate enough to meet a person who has read some of my writings, a lot of times that person says: ‘I read your column. You write well and most of the time I agree with you but sometimes I do not.’

Once personality is invoked, abuse, as happens on Twitter, is not far behind.

I am always at a loss for words when people say this. First, I would be very surprised, and in fact, quite disappointed, if all the people all the times I write agreed with me. It would mean I am not writing anything that is triggering productive thoughts in people.

Second, I do not write for the sake of agreement or disagreement. I write to convey information, to make an argument, to clarify a position, to articulate a perspective or deepen a thought for myself and hopefully for some others as well in a topic. As such, disagreement would be of more value if backed by good reasoning, rather than agreement. And this would be true for me as well as for other readers.

Third, saying you agree or disagree with me has no value at all unless you articulate your reasons for both. It is these reasons that will tell me the value of your agreement or disagreement and how you have understood a piece of writing. This would be of more value to all who engage in a specific conversation.

I notice similar trends in the classes I teach as well. When I ask students to present a reading or to make an argument, they resort to ‘I agree with the author’ or ‘disagree with the author’ way too often and way too early in the conversation. Who cares whether you agree or disagree? Tell me what is your understanding of what the author is saying; give me an idea of how you have understood the author; and then go on to critically evaluate the arguments of the author. This would be more than enough to take the debate forward. By elevating agreement or disagreement and bringing it to the fore, you run the risk of personalising the debate and force others to personalise it as well. Given the weakness of training in argumentation, once personality is invoked, abuse, as happens on Twitter, is not far behind.

‘Putting oneself in the other person’s shoes’ is an essential requirement for having the requisite empathy levels for understanding what the other person is arguing for and articulating. In some ways, this attempt at trying to understand the context and position of the other person comes with or even before understanding the reasons for a person’s position. And this definitely needs to come way before judging. For many, suspending judgement is not easy. They invoke the faculty of judgement sometimes even before they have given the other person the space or time to articulate their position or complete their argument. But there is nothing inevitable about this. One can learn to suspend one’s judgement consciously, before the effort for understanding has been made. This is part and parcel of what education is or should be about. If we are not getting this across to our students, we are not doing any service to ourselves or to them.

There is also a distinction between the arguments that a person makes in taking a particular position, and the person and his or her identity. Even if you disagree with the position I have articulated and do not find my arguments to be convincing, this does not automatically mean that I am a bad or evil person who needs to be attacked as a person. Nor does it imply that you have anything worthwhile you can say about my parents, sisters and brothers. However, the escalation that happens in arguments being witnessed in the classrooms — and especially those that take place on Twitter and Facebook — is rapid and all boundaries get erased very quickly.

The civility-toxicity debate is a separate one and it needs a lot more exploration. Here, I am more concerned about the connection this has to education ie the point the quote at the beginning of this piece made. Students need to have the right attitude and skills when they engage with a reading or enter a debate. The space between understanding and judgement needs to be very consciously managed. If they are not able to do that — and for the moment, judging from my own teaching experience, the experience of my colleagues and from what I see on social media, most people are not able to manage the space for understanding and judgement well — we need to consciously incorporate training for rhetoric and critical engagement (that goes beyond critical thinking) into our pedagogy and education process.

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