

Time for Oxford in Warsaw

I have been teaching science for many years, but it was only three years ago that I learned what Oxford-Style debates are. I was enlightened by Magda and Kasia, teachers at Public Primary School No.30 and Public Junior High School No.5 in Warsaw, who invited me to such a debate on genetically modified organisms (GMOs). An Oxford-Style debate is subject to the following rules:

✓ The subject of the debate must be precisely formulated as an affirmative motion and an opposing motion (e.g. "GMOs are harmful to consumers" vs "GMOs are not harmful to consumers").

✓ The two motions are defended by chosen speakers, and the audience is divided into supporters of one motion or the other. During the debate, audience members can "switch seats," thus showing that they have been convinced by the arguments of the opposing side.

✓ Time limits for speakers are strictly observed, according to rules agreed on by both sides.

✓ Expert witnesses can be called on to throw light on any unclear aspects of the problem, without taking either side of the debate.

✓ Speakers can only use substantive arguments.

✓ At the end of the debate, audience members vote, e.g. by attaching a slip to one of two colored boards.

It should be stressed that an Oxford-Style debate requires precisely formulated OPPOSING views.

In this rather formalized exchange of opinions, an effort must be made to understand the views of one's opponent (not enemy!), although not everyone must come to the same conclusion. It is not a question of winning and losing; everyone who takes part is a winner. They enrich their knowledge, which enables them to take a more considered position on the question under discussion, and learn that it is possible for them to discuss diametrically opposed views without shouting and tearing each other's hair out. I am reminded here of a certain radio "discussion" program, which ended with the guests simultaneously shouting at each other and using offensive words, where even a presenter renowned for his equanimity was unable to separate the two "fighting cocks." True, one of them apologized the next day, but what was said was said.

I am writing about all of this because of a growing fear felt by many in Poland that on all social issues, a division is steadily developing between two ENEMY camps, who do not listen to - and even cannot hear - each other. And because of the helplessness felt by those who want to present their arguments calmly, yet have no opportunity to do so.

This strange, hate-filled polarization has its roots in politics, but has quickly spread even to academia, which by definition should be an arena for substantive discussion, not quarreling. It is also present in areas which were previously held sacred, for instance in talking about the dead. They too are given no peace - we insult them, and ascribe to them views which they are in no position to deny...

In one recent television discussion program, two wise individuals articulated the fear that Poles are unable to distance themselves from the language of hatred, from an aggressive division into "us" vs "them." It is essential to find a way out of this situation, because it threatens to cause a serious breakdown of society, unraveling even bonds of family and friendship.

While the division into two enemy camps has occurred relatively quickly, reversing this trend will take much longer and require great effort from, among others, those with authority in the role of conciliators. (Incidentally, a sad observation: because of such ruptures, we have ever fewer authority figures; the only ones we have, in fact, are those who are no longer living. What is happening to the authority of the church hierarchy, professors, doctors, and teachers?) But however hard it might be, I am convinced that it is still possible to put an end to this polarization.

Going back to our starting point: it is high time for us to conduct Oxford-Style debates on all subjects. There has already been a first public trial-run - a debate held at the Polish Theatre, broadcast by Polish Radio RDC, on the motions "Poland needs more nationalism" vs "Poland does not need more nationalism." And it turned out that it was possible for people to discuss important, controversial issues in a civilized way, keeping to the allotted speaking time and listening to their opponents, without shouting or walking out of the room.

Although many see it as a sign of naivety, I am an advocate of small steps, and so wholeheartedly support the organization of Oxford-Style debates, and urge the organizers of science and art festivals and educational events, teachers and academic societies to take this small step. If we learn how to debate, we may even be able to discuss the most contentious issues constructively. ■



People with opposing views can indeed listen to one another, without shouting or walking out of the room

Prof. Magdalena Fikus

PAS Institute of Biochemistry and Biophysics, Warsaw
m.fikus@ibb.waw.pl