OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS

TRANSCRIPT

"HUMAN RIGHTS AND AN ALTERNATIVE TO TRADITIONAL DEBATE"

A Conversation With Johannes P. Wheeldon

ANNOUNCER:

You are listening to a recording of the Open Society Foundations, working to build vibrant and tolerant democracies worldwide. Visit us at OpenSocietyFoundations.org.

KIMBERLY O'HAVER:

I wanna-- introduce-- Professor j-- Johannes Wheeldon from-- Norwich University. And-- he-- was-- part of a program-- a grant that we gave to-- a group in Washington State-- who did a project on prison debates at the Coyote Ridge Correction Center in collaboration with-- was it Walla Walla Community College?

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

Yep.

KIMBERLY O'HAVER:

Walla Walla Community College. And it was-- a really innovative project for what was then the youth initiative because it took us out of the realm of traditional competitive debate into debate that had a larger purpose and the Human Rights Initiative where-- hider and I are-- are now working-- is exploring how this methodology might be able to you-- to be used in-- fulfilling their strategy and how we might be able to take-- the methodology that-- Johannes has developed and apply it in the context and geographies that we're working in. So-- so I'll turn it over to-- Johannes.

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

Thank you, Kimberly. And thank you all for coming. It's delightful to-- to be here at the mother ship. As you'll find out I've done a variety of kinds of work. And it's-- it's fantastic that you're interested enough in it that I can try and-- try and show some of what I've been doing and-- and the direction that I'm going.

So very briefly I'm an assistant professor-- first year on the tenure track at Norwich University, small liberal arts college in-- northern Vermont, central Vermont. I worked in Latvia after getting my master's degree at the University of Durham.

And I'll tell you a little bit about my experience there developing-- working to develop the-- the first probation service in that country. Most recently I worked-- in the prison-- eastern Washington state. And I'll talk a little bit about-- some of the things I learned there and why I think-- the method that we've developed in partnership with correctional educators, with students-- has value and import beyond maybe just building debate capacity.

So the first thing I need to do is-- no, I don't think I need to make the point about why debate's important or why respectful disagreement's important. I think I would say that we're in this time right now where we have these very cynical views of what information is or should be from talk radio and-- and certain-- so called news channels-- on-- on the one side. And on the other we have-- the satirical look that's often mocking.

And I-- I enjoy that. I mean, for example, I think what John Oliver's doing right now is-- is utterly brilliant. But it-- it-- it-- it seems to me it-- it leaves or it closed the door for the opportunity to have a more meaningful discussion.

If we're in the middle of mock outrage on the one hand or simply-- making fun of people on the other, there's no middle ground it seems to me. And-- and I wanna return to thinking about some of those things. The first thing I need to do and I always feel a little guilty doing this but I need to be critical of traditional debate models.

And-- and there's lots here to be critical of. But let me just say there are a lot of really good people doing really good work. And anytime you're inspiring students to research and speak and consider counter evidence and other views-- you're doing a good thing.

But my concern right now with-- with forensic competitive debate especially as it's practiced in this country is that we turn everything into a competition to be judged. And we miss out on the broader potential for people of diverse perspectives coming together and thinking through a contentious and difficult issue.

So-- this is a quote from-- a *Wired Magazine* that did a bit of an expose-- on debate. The point is is that young people are getting-- getting trained to speak as fast as possible because the more information you get out the higher you will score, doesn't matter the quality (LAUGH) just that more is better. Well, that's-- that's-- that's limited I think in-- in some important ways. I also think the thing that frustrated me

is when I looked at some of these-- texts, you really got the sense that what mattered was how much information.

And the quality of the information was less important than how you presented it, how you dressed it up. And if you think about our-- our current debate and political debates when we-- when we watch these things if we're brave enough to do so-- the misrepresentations are just enormous.

And the focus on actual evidence is scant. How can you sell a position? How can you market a political vision? It's-- it's irrelevant to whether that information is-- is accurate or not. So again I think it's important to say that while I'm critical of traditional models of debate, I think it's important that we recognize that good work is being done. But I just think that the-- the model at present is limited. And it's-- it's limited by the competitive impulse to win. Right now-- forensic debates, so called rewards argumentation skills, cross examination, speed speaking, indeed some of these manuals if you read them-- they talk about-- you're not trying to prove one position. You're trying to destroy the other one.

Well, that doesn't leave very much room for-- cooperation or consensus or respect. I truly believe if debate's seen as a winner take all proposition then we're missing the point. We're missing the value that may be there. So what I wanna do is-- is talk a little bit about-- my experience-- both in Latvia and-- and in Washington state and-- and talk about-- in a macro sense the sort of values and principles that I think came out of that-- those experiences.

So I was just-- an intern. I had just finished my masters in international law, European legal studies at the University of Durham. I was all set to go to-- Brussels. I had a job lined up. And I went there. And they're these incredibly beautiful people, male and female, who all spoke four, five, six languages.

And I was like what in the world am I gonna do here? I don't know anything about this. I can't-- just at that time someone forwarded me an email that the Canadian International Development Agency was funding internships-- all over the world to support their-- convention on the rights of the child reporting.

And so I ended up applying and was accepted and went to Latvia ostensibly to work with the Center-- for Children's Rights-- in Liga and eventually got-- brought into this large scale justice reform project that was funded by the Canadian government in cooperation with the World Bank and Soros Sloan, Latvia. So I know we all-- we like outputs and outcomes. So-- so-- just-- we're all clear, we ticked all the boxes. The most important work that I saw was-- was the personal and the interactions between individuals.

And watching-- what was neat about the model is that we invested in pilot projects and communities first before the central government was ready to even move. And then as those pilot projects demonstrated success we were able to come to-- the Ministry of Justice or Prison Administration and say, "These are what we have going on. How-- how do you think we should proceed?"

And the result eventually was a working-- a probation working group or eventually a

set of laws and amendments that gave probation legal effect. And then the probation service was established in 2003. It still exists despite the economic downturn. It hasn't been subsumed by prison administration which is a big deal in terms of orientation philosophically and practically. So the headlines-- reduced prison populations, expanded community corrections and again a standalone probation agency based in communities.

I feel strongly that probation agencies should be based in the community and not the court-- simply because when we base it in the community the natural tendency is the build community resources. And so you're able to not direct everything out of the courthouse.

But you can build volunteer activities-- mentorship. And that was some of the things that worked in our most successful regions in Latvia. Just a reminder of some of the-- situation the-- the-- as part of Latvia's accession to the EU there were a number of human rights reports. And-- the conditions of the prisons were condish-- were routinely addressed. They made every report I think from '97 through 2001, high rates of TB, Hep C, very little support. I write about a little bit in my book the-- the first time I went to what was called the best prison in Latvia.

And I was with-- I was with-- my-- my mentor actually-- Dr. Liz Elliot who's-- who passed away. But-- at one point she wanted to leave. She was like, "We gotta get out of here. I can't be here anymore." I was like, "You wanted to come. We are here now. We're going. We're gonna see this."

And-- it was awful. If I never have to tour another prison again that would be fine with me. Ironically I ended up working in one for four years. But-- in terms of-- in terms of what mattered in the Latvia project and I've written about this in a number of context and articles and-- and in a book.

But really what mattered was relationships. And the way that relationships were established were through interactions in which you could break these expert learner dichotomies. And you could really get into the normative differences that sometimes remain hidden.

One of the challenges in Latvia was that-- some of the community folks that we had brought to the training wouldn't speak until the government folks had spoken. And one of the challenges was being able to get a real sense of where people were at and-- and what they thought were possible.

One of the neat things that-- that I saw work were-- was the application of restorative justice principles. And even things like starting and ending a training session with a circle-- really broke down some of those-- hidden, I think, sometimes impediments to real reform.

That's one of our-- our training groups. The big thing again was-- was mutual respect and getting the sense that we didn't have an all knowing expert who was lecturing at a know nothing learner. And part of that was we got lucky with the Canadians that we brought over.

They just were good in a way that-- that others weren't. And-- I've written about this. I've-- I conducted a number of interviews-- 50 interviews over three years to really try to understand what happened in Latvia. And-- and this was something that came back again and again and again and building this beal-- building relationships and why.

And out-- the-- the thing was-- the-- the top quote, we had to participate in sometimes strange activities. But it was okay. It was good. And the reason it was okay and it was good is because people felt safe-- within the training session. And that can be challenging especially when you're talking about criminal justice and human rights and assumptions that people have about what is and what isn't valuable. What I took from Latvia, what my experience really showed me was that you have to find ways to bridge the theory practice problem.

People who need to personally experience and reflect upon the underlying values at issue. And change is only possible once people start to challenge-- let's say once they start to identify, first of all, their own unconscious bias-- are given an opportunity to grow beyond it.

And it sounds very, very simple I realize. But the-- the impact I would argue is profound. So-- I finished my programming. I went to work in Ottawa at UCC. I ran a number of projects in Africa-- and southeast Asia-- in the Philippines-- in Bangladesh.

And then I decided to go to a Ph.D. And I wrote about my experience in Latvia. I ended up getting a job at George Mason University-- running their internship program and then headed out west. My wife-- yeah, my wife at that time got a position at Coyote Ridge. She was the medical director.

And she took a 500 bed facility to the largest prison in the Pacific northwest. I think it's at 2,500 right now. And that was-- that was an incredible experience for her. I was the tagalong. And I-- we were interest-- duced to people.

And-- there was an opportunity to go and teach in the college program, in Walla Walla Community College. And I had tried to get into the prisons when I was doing my Ph.D.-- up in-- in Vancouver and had no-- had no luck at all. And here were people within the prison saying, "Hey, come teach for us." So-- really this debate program is my ex-- the result of my-- of teaching there and being a challenged in a way I'd never been challenged before. Sometimes people assume that-- that incarcerated individuals aren't intelligent or don't-- you know, don't know things.

That was not my experience. My students read everything they were given. They came in with question after qu-- well, what about this? Well, what about this? The big thing is they all wanted to argue with me. At first that was a challenge because, you know, I'm all knowing and I'm-- I'm the-- the one that's paying me to be here and you guys don't know anything.

I had to quickly move beyond that because it wasn't going anywhere. Well, what I realized if-- if I could harness that desire to argue to some pedagogical purpose we could use that time in a more valuable way. So as some of you know-- we were able

to get a grant-- through-- through OSF and Walla Walla Community College taught-- the-- the-- the-- the program in the prison. We had partners with Washington State University who brought students in-- and Coyote Ridge Correction Center, believe it or not, were really amenable.

This was our biggest question. Would the prison say yes? And I was-- I had doubts all along. But they-- the superintendent there really saw the value of it and-- and got behind it early and-- and continued. So now is-- I'm gonna in a second present a little video.

But I just wanna give you a little background to what the model is and-- and why-- why is this debate model any different from traditional models? And I would say there-- there are four big differences. The first is you accept responsibility to abide by the principles of the model. And that means respectful discourse. That's-- that is the minimum standard before you can participate. You have to say, "Yes, I'm-- I-- I agree to abide by these principles." There's a commandment to use scholarly sources not whatever could be Googled the night before, scholarly sources. You also agree to potentially have to argue and-- a side of an issue that you don't personally agree with.

This is-- a well-worn technique used in liberal arts colleges all around. As soon as you-- as soon as you make a statement that you feel very strongly about capital punishment or abortion or some other contentious issue-- some smarmy college prof somewhere will say, "Okay, great, write your term paper on the other side of the argument."

That's what-- that's what these guys had to do-- as part of this program. You didn't know what side of the debate you were gonna get. So you had to prepare both sides. The final thing and-- and I really think this is the most important thing is embracing humility, embracing the idea that you might be wrong. I know it's an unlikely possibility. I know we're-- we're all very, very smart. But there is a small chance that you might be mistaken. And so as part of the model you have to acknowledge the best argument on the other side before you conclude your case.

So-- this one-- the documentary's called *The Walls*. It won a special jury prize-- the social impact media awards. It was great to work with Gonzal and Nacho (PH). They-- it was really neat to see the project through somebody else's eyes especially when you're so close to it. And, you know, it was-- it was really neat to watch what they watched. So it-- it's a 14 minute video. I-- I-- I don't think we'll watch the whole thing today. But if you are interested it's on-- YouTube. I'm happy to send out the link.

(VIDEO CLIP PLAYING)

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

Yeah, so obviously-- if my career as a practitioner academic works out I can go on the road as a comedian because that's hilarious. I honestly don't remember saying that. The-- the-- I-- I said the video's 14 minutes long. And-- if you're interested in

watching the whole thing it's-- it's on YouTube.

It was really neat to be-- it was really neat to be involved up-- with the process in which artists came in and looked at what we did and reimagined it. And it-- it was tough for a control freak like me to be able to, like, let go.

But I think the results speak for itself. I think it was-- a great project. So-- so what unites these things? How was-- how was-- justice reform project in Latvia in-- a prison debate project the same? And I would argue that at the root there are fundamental core values which animate and-- and connect these two ideas. And both of these projects were experiential, creative, contentious and normative. You couldn't succeed in the training environment unless we had some way of respecting the different communication styles where people were coming from. The trainers who came in felt really strongly about presenting a buffet menu of different options as opposed to saying this is the one true way to do it based on my experience in Ontario or Quebec.

The big thing is is that in both cases you have facilitators who set the stage and then step away and allow people to figure out for themselves-- what the next step is. And that-- I wanna argue is-- is fundamentally connected to a view of how-- of how to do development whether it's international or-- or domestic.

The Latvians spoke about in my research this difficulty of staying quiet when they were listening to someone they didn't agree with and that it was important to realize that they had to. That was in the context of the-- you know, the famous talking piece in the circle, right, whoever has the talking piece has the floor. It's similar to a debate style where whoever has-- whoever's making that two minute speech again has the floor.

I think that for-- for some p-- for some within the training session, they really felt like the learning only happened when they could speak about their own experience. It wasn't the tailored training program of this is what we're gonna do today.

They're-- the Canadian trainers had to have some give and take to make it work. One of the activities we did in-- in the prison was-- was have people-- the students complete-- surveys about the first time they met their counterparts-- in the first meeting in the prison. And I just-- this quote to me is so telling-- it-- it just speaks volumes that-- that it would be-- that if you wanna-- if you wanna be heard you have to listen. It's-- it's so simple. And yet again it-- it-- it-- profound in some way. A lot of people really appreciated that they were equals in the process. So the first meeting, they come in.

And we say, "Okay, what are our topics gonna be?" And we solicit topics. And we vote on them. And then the top three topics are listed. And then teams are broken into groups, half Walla Walla Community College students, half-- Wasu students. And they need to come up with the best arguments for why we should do that topic.

And then they present those arguments. And then we vote again. And then the topic that wins is the topic we use. So that was the-- there was no-- no one got to say, "Well, I'm more important. Or I'm more this." Everyone had one vote. And as I

always said, "I get to vote, too. But my vote is not worth more than anybody else's." The final thing I wanna try and do is-- is anchor those principles in-- in-- in one view anyway of-- of human rights and-- and theory of practice and-- and how that makes sense in a pro-- programming point of view. When I was doing my international-- when I was doing my master's degree, I had a great law prof who-- big bear of a guy with, like-- grizzly hair and-- you know, would always sort of growl and bark at us in that British way that-- only-- I don't know, the-- to me there's always this-- I have a strong memory of-- of this particular point.

And he would say, "What's the most important human right?" And everyone would say, "The right to life, not to be tortured, the right to speech." And he would say, "Nonsense, if we don't respect people's rights equally, none of them matter. If you can say we're gonna treat this category of people differently, then none of those rat-- mat-- rights mean anything."

And his point was always that-- if you look at international documents, if you look at the European Convention on Human Rights, equality, an equality of recognition of rights is one of the most important. I don't wanna get too academicy (SIC). But I wanna point out one thing that I really like about-- the OSF model of-- of-- of programming.

And that is what Paul Nepper calls the distinction between the evidence based model and the reflexive model. The evidence based model, of course, is drawn from medicine. It's the idea that we can if we have a large enough sample-- conduct experiments to find out generalized truths that can be applied everywhere equally.

The reflexive model is-- one that Nepper associates with-- with OSI. And it's the idea that it's essentially that we create space for people to figure out for themselves what works and that that process of social interaction and tinkering is actually what creates sustainable reform. What's interesting to me about these models is both of them consider equality but from very different perspectives. The evidence based model says, "We're all equal. Therefore-- a tested program should apply equally to everyone 'cause we're all equal."

The reflexive model says, "Yes, we're all equal but that means that we need to respect the differences that exist regionally, culturally, temporally and that we need to make space for-- people to take the time to figure out what they wanna do on their own."

Another way to look at these projects is through the lens of moral development and psychology. And essentially this is the idea that-- that I think a lot of the quotes bring out that part of being able to develop as an individual is being able to see that you might be wrong, to be able to see the flaws in your own argument, be able to recognize that-- equality means extending respect to people that you don't agree with, in fact, that you vehemently disagree with. For me this debate model is an opportunity for people to-- come into an environment, commit to a process of respectful dialog and then engage contentiously around a question the result being maybe not the answer to all the world's problems but in that moment the best and most justified argument is made.

And I think there's value in that. There's value in these contingent truth claims that get made by individuals who are working together toward a common purpose. So I-- I know it's death by PowerPoint and I-- and I wanna wrap up here-- pretty quickly.

But I-- I-- I wanna show you just how I think D3 or diagonic debate and dialog can be applied in-- in other settings. The first I hope is obvious. We could simply use debates and-- and-- building debate capacity to help people participate in policy debates. And this would be focused on marginalized populations. It would focus on the traditional tools of debate about identifying and engaging arguments, preparing them, speaking them, acknowledging counter evidence.

There's lots of places in what it-- which it could work. I've worked in schools and universities and prisons. But there's no reason that organizations can't adopt these sort of principles to figure out strategically where they wanna go.

The goal of course is that people better understand and can participate in the debates that-- that shaped and influence their lives. I-- I hope that's a pretty fairly straightforward application of what could be done here. But I-- I wanna encourage us to think a little bit broader about how these things might work. What I'm talking about really recasts technical expertise. It's not about me saying, "I'm the expert. I know it all. Now if you wanna-- adopt my program you have to do it." It's about me saying, "Here are two leading views, what do you think? Here's the best evidence I can find for the view that I'm partial to. And yet I'm gonna acknowledge the best counter argument to the view that I think matters.

"Now what do you think?" It becomes collaborative in that way. I also think this-- this approach expands the idea of experiential learning. You're creating environments for people to disagree. The trick is they may be arguing something they totally don't agree with.

But in that moment they're participating in a process. And again the most important thing is is that it embraces humility. We are not humble. America-- if you think of America do you think-- is-- is humble-- is modesty the first word that comes to your mind, maybe not.

But I think we would do better just to be a little bit more aware of the fact that we don't know what the right answer is. We're doing the best that we can based on the best information that we have. The final thing is that I think integrating these-- these principles can assist project management and project strategy.

So I really think in-- investing in people first and projects later is val-- is-- is a valuable way to think about this. Who's best able to model these sort of values? Who's best able to engage? I also think that, you know, balancing the what works perspective, the evidence perspective with the reflexive model, the need for local ownership is forever attention in any grant making organization that's doing work because there will always be a tendency to try to account for change.

But the problem-- the problem is is that most of these results based accountability and results based management are defined in ways that don't allow for local creativity. And so there's a tension there that I think integrating these principles may

be able to if not resolve, better frame.

Finally, this-- this RBA framework, how much, how good is anyone better off? This is the new language of evaluation. I am skeptical about some aspects of evaluation. But overall we have to find ways to be able to show what it is that we're doing and-- and how it is that we're impacting real people.

And-- and so again that tension between what we prioritize, what outcomes matter. So just to conclude I-- I really think debate models can succeed when they bra-- embrace the underlying values of human rights. And this is more than civic engagement. It's more than teaching people to-- make better sense of arguments and participate in policy debates. It's also about recognizing the value of people you disagree with and engaging in a process in which controversy's okay but humility is always prized. Where am I going with all this-- very briefly-- we were lucky enough to obtain-- a little bit of additional funding for next year.

The-- Washington State prison debate program will continue. They're in plans to do a debate again next year. I think it'll have to be in the spring-- based on how-- my understanding is currently. What I'm gonna try and do up in Vermont is-- build networks with-- the correctional facilities there and-- and target incarcerated veterans.

For me debate is simply a means to connect different populations. There's lots of great things about the potential for debate. But really what you're trying to do is bring different populations together to have more meaningful conversations. And if the debate is a model to do that-- so be it. I wanna also just tell you a little bit about my current research which-- which I hope is gonna shed some light on was happening within this debate project. Michael Sandow, I don't know if anybody's-- watches his PBS.

But he has a justice program that periodically they show, most popular course at Harvard. And really it's a philosophy of justice course. He presents four theories. What I've done is established a survey and-- establish a baseline among the students and then looked at how student's perspectives change after using this debate model and Michael Sandow's readings on those four perspectives.

I don't have any results to report today. But what's neat about it is by getting a database of views on questions like this students can do more interesting things. One of my students right now is doing documentary photography and combining-- pictures of people at various positions-- through the core of cadets at the university with these quotes on justice to try and have a better and deeper explanation of-- of rights. So what I'm hoping is if-- if there is interest-- we can attempt to do a little debate. But before we do that-- I wonder if there are any questions or comments. Yes.

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

Were there any incentives that were-- given to the inmates?

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

Debate certificates of participation.

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

Or-- or what was-- what was their incentive to-- to join? Was there--

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

Just to do it.

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

Just to do it.

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

In fact the debate club existed before we knew that we'd be bringing students in from the outside. So this was a way for-- students who had graduated with their associative of arts-- what happened at Coyote Ridge is once you had graduated with your AA you couldn't go back to school anymore.

So you had a lot of guys just sitting on their hands who had now been expo-- exposed to higher education and they're hungry. They want more. But there's nothing to do. So I created the debate club to give them something to do. So once a week I went in on Wednesday nights.

And we would talk about stuff and we'd have a debate every week. And that was a way to keep them connected. And then we had the opportunity to get-- bring students in to do stuff. And of course membership spiked let's just say. But there was no-- there was no incentive in the traditional sense.

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

And the students weren't taking it for course work. They were just volunteers?

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

They were volunteers, yeah. I integrated the-- the-- I developed the model-- out of my course work. But it wasn't-- as-- as part of any additional course work.

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

Did you find any relationship that-- continued-- after the program ended with--

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

Well, it's--

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

--between the students and the inmates at all? Or-- or was there any-- were you able to kind of track it a little bit or follow it up or?

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

One of the things that we had to agree to is that the students and the incarcerated individuals would not stay in touch afterward.

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

You did not stay in touch.

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

That was a big deal for-- DOC staff. And that was a promise that we made and-- and had the students make that same commitment. I can tell you that through this video-- some of the-- individuals who were-- who were featured are now eligible for-- early release under a new program Washington state has put forward.

If you were tried as an adult when you were a juvenile and you served half of your sentence and you've made-- you know, satisfactory progress, whatever that means, you could be released. And so some of the individuals who were featured in this video-- are-- are eligible now for that and in fact are using this video as a way to say, "Look, see what I can do? What-- the-- I-- I'm not a waste-- I'm not a wasted human being. I have things to do and contribute."

MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

This facility-- maximum security facility.

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

Medi-- medium security.

MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

Medium security facility. Okay, so that's a big difference.

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

Certainly, certainly. There's only one max in Washington state.

MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

To piggyback on Eldon I was gonna-- if it was a max I would say the incentive then would be just to get out of the cell.

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

Yes.

MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

That's really a great idea. So there's always some kind of a tradeoff, you know, especially when you're talking about prisons.

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

Yeah, it's an interesting point. And-- and one of the things that-- some prison programs-- there's-- there's one I believe out in San Quinton about-- or I'm not sure where it's based. San Francisco-- outside-- I'm not sure. But the-- there was-- an attempt-- and-- and this is part of a program called-- college behind bars or university behind bars.

And they work with-- people who are in for life. And we felt very strongly that we wanted to work with populations that were gonna be getting out within the next five years the idea being that if you can identify these folks through internal programming and then connect-- transition programming and reentry programming you're giving them a much better start not to come back.

Now you could make the argument that-- that from a harm reduction point of view or from a human-- humane point of view that the folks that really deserve interaction are the ones that don't see anybody. But I'm comfortable with the choice that was

made there to work with people that are getting out and-- and to-- to really focus on building those skills-- to help them succeed once they--

MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

I was interested in seeing one of the-- one of the-- prison staff-- social-- I guess it was a social worker or a probation worker in lat-- Latvia. The comment was-- that they've not-- they were not used to this type of-- you know, they're used to just punishment. You know, you did the crime now you have to serve the time.

And you should be punished. And they weren't comfortable with programs that would help people not come back. You know, so I found that statement-- quite interesting too because how would you-- you know, because the-- even in New York, you know, 99 percent of the people who are in prison are coming home. You know, so they-- how do you want them to come home because they may be your neighbor? You know, so how do you want them to come home?

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

Yeah, and I mean, what's fascinating is that that view is not exactly unique to Latvia, right. We have a lot of people who are lock them up and throw away the key. And it's a very emotional and-- for some people reasonable if they're a victim of a crime, you know, initial reaction.

But it doesn't take you very long to realize that that's not much of a solution. And we've been experimenting with mass incarceration for 25 years. And the-- the-- you know, the-- news flash in case anybody was wondering, it's-- it was a failure. It did not work at all. It made everything worse. We lost an entire generation-- for-- incarcerated parents and who are growing up with that same challenge. And so finding the-- I mean-- what's interesting to me about the prison work is-- is finding a way to draw those commonalities and breaking down the walls which is the title of the film.

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

Can I ask the-- when you look at the groups that you were engaging in the debate process-- both the students and-- and-- the prisoners, I mean, did you see a sense of-- so did the students come in with a set of biases that were undone? Do you see the prisoners come in to the process with a set of biases undone? And can you talk us through what that looked like and what the kind of time frame is to expect something like that to happen.

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

Oh, that's a great question. There's a Ph.D. student named-- Amber Moorecheck at Washington State University. And she's looking at some of this stuff-- because she was the-- Wasu connection on main campus. I was based at the prison.

So I didn't spend a lot of time on main campus. So she's done work around serving-- I don't think-- I think she wants to do this last group and then look at changes between groups and times-- and connect that to the topics because each topic was very different. One was gun control. One was trying youth as adults. And each of them have their own dynamics. I think, you know, I have to defer to-- to people who-- who have worked in this area for a lot longer than I did.

But-- Loretta Taylor who's the education director-- said this amazing thing. I think it was-- was it at dinner? It might've been at dinner the night before the second debate. And she was like, "In 20 years of this work I've never been involved in something that's more interesting."

The-- the-- the-- the change that she saw in the guys, in the students that were incarcerated she said was amazing. And she-- she told this story about-- one of the male students were-- was talking to some of the guys. And they said-- you know, "It's-- it's really good about-- it's really good. I-- I-- I've-- I really changed my perspective on who's incarcerated and why. You know, I'm hoping to go into law enforcement. And I really hope I can bring that to the table." And one of the-- one of the guys incarcerated-- went and found her the next day.

And he said, "I've been up all night. You need to tell that guy that not all prisoners are nice." He was someone incarcerated for 25 years who was telling a free student, "Hey, look, some of these guys aren't real good." That just blew her away that-- that someone would-- that someone would make that leap.

In terms of hard numbers, do we see changes? I-- I-- I can't tell you. The-- the big problem is-- and this is why I developed this-- this justice survey is that I don't know how you measure-- don't know how you measure justice. And-- and one of the things I've tried to do is use this Sandow stuff to at least be able to get a sense of whether somebody is more utilitarian, more libertarian, more egalitarian or more just deserved civic virtue and then look before an intervention and then afterward to see if any change happened because if we're doing this work and people come in with a set of-- of views that never change, then I think you-- you-- you'd say, "Well, we may be doing great stuff around bringing different groups together.

"But ultimately we're not having an impact." But if you can show that people are moving in orientation from one view to another and they're challenging themselves and thinking differently, then I think you can say in addition to the other valuable aspects of this interaction we're showing-- we're cha-- showing meaningful change now.

People are conceiving these core concepts. That is-- ambitious research program. Luckily I'm just about as young as I look. No, (LAUGH) but I mean-- but I mean,

that-- that's the question right. That is the central question. Are we doing things beyond-- what looked great in the video? I would say anecdotally from-- from what I've seen, absolutely. I need to be skeptical about projects that I'm involved in. And that means that I need to find other ways to-- to measure and think about that.

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

Yeah, from the anecdotal perspective only at this stage-- I mean, definitely in terms of the students coming in as well, I mean, I had ti-- I-- I visited-- one of the tournaments-- last year and had some time before it started to really talk to some of the students from Washington State.

First of all there were a lot of students who weren't involved in the program currently but had been involved in the previous that would come back and would-- and so I was talking to some of them about how they were taking the experiences into sort of their career choices and into what they were looking at. So there could be some opportunities I think to even measure the impact as an educational program, how it's sort of affecting criminal justice students who will be working with these populations in the future and thinking how do they programs affect sort of their career choices, their-- their programming choices down the line and things like that. Again, it would take a longer time. But I think there are, like, areas to suss out in terms of that as well.

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

Yeah, that's a good-- that's a good reminder about the students that came back. I was-- I was shocked that so many had chosen to--

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

Yeah, yeah, there were quite a few. And they were-- yeah, and the-- it was interesting to see them interacting and talking with the current students and giving them advice on-- on how to sort of approach it all and things like that. So there was a lot of kind of knowledge share-- within their population.

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

And I mean, one of the big-- the great speech or the-- the knockout response to a question. But for some of those students just getting up and speaking for two minutes was a big deal. I mean, they were in a prison in front of 150 people. And now they were gonna speak for two minutes. Just that for some was-- was-- was pretty profound.

MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

Could you debate the conditions of the prison? Or is that off limits?

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

Good question. We-- we did have-- some of those suggestions. What we-- what we would do is-- debate stuff like-- to punish or rehabilitate. So get at some of those ideas. And you know-- some people could argue that we should make the prisons more awful and terrible because that would of course deter people because when you're committing a crime the first thing you're thinking about is how good the conditions are gonna be in the prison. It's nonsense. But-- but-- but that is a possible argument that could be made.

Yeah, you know, some-- and the other thing that happened in the prison is some people would say, "Okay, well, you know, I got into a beef with a CO and I used my debate skill." And I'd be like, "Okay, I appreciate that, you know, that's one of the things that's happening here. (LAUGH) Ultimately for the success of the program-- "

(OFF-MIC CONVERSATION)

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

But those things do happen, right? They definitely happen. It's-- it's-- for-- for a lot of them it was just-- just-- the idea that you could argue-- that you could come in with one view and leave with a different view. And that was okay. And one of things about-- about prison is that you have to be very careful about appearing weak. And adopting another position could be seen to some people as a weakness. Most of us would consider that to be a strength that you could change your perspective. But that's not necessarily always the case.

That was the-- that was the thing that one of the-- one of the students said-- you know, I wasn't-- he was-- he talked to me the next week. And I was like, "You know, I don't-- I didn't like how the audience voted." And I was like, "Oh, well, you know, that's how it goes. The audience votes."

But that doesn't mean that they're right. It just means that that was their view on the day. And he was like, "Yeah, me and my cell mates-- talked about it for three and a half hours." And then someone said, "This is what Wheeldon was trying to do the whole time." So it-- there was a cognitive recognition that, look, the-- the result of the debate-- that didn't solve the problem of what to do with juveniles that commit hay-- heinous crimes. But it allowed people to voice different perspectives and think about it in a different way. Again, you know, it sounds simple in many ways. But-- in my experience it can be profound.

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

Again, I'm just curious-- I know you've-- you've talked a lot about this in the context of criminal justice and-- but you make the proposition at the end of your presentation that this could be taken over to other context. I mean, can you elaborate on that? Do you have a sense of what other kinds of context you're thinking of where this could be a useful tool?

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

The-- I think-- for-- for me the value of it is that it can be applied in a lot of different ways. So when I write-- an argument paper, for example, I always create my strongest argument. But then I have to acknowledge the strongest counter argument. And my-- the idea is that-- as someone who's-- claiming some knowledge about a topic, my job is not to advance one perspective but to-- to compare two different perspectives. So when I think about technical expertise and-- and-- I don't know enough about-- how you approach that question.

But what I saw a lot of was people that would fly in and stay at the nicest hotel and do a two day training session and fly out. And-- they-- you know, the same PowerPoint that they were given the week before. What-- what I'm trying to suggest is that part of learning is engaging with that audience.

So it's less-- important the subject matter and it's more important the overall method or approach. So I mean, the-- for-- for me the obvious-- one of the obvious appl-- possible applications-- would be-- in situations where people were not having rights respected-- for a variety of reasons-- based on gender, based on ethnicity, based on age. And-- and building that skillset not necessarily on one substance area but building the ability to look at an issue and identify the key arguments, arguments of fact which are empirical statements, arguments of value which are ethical or moral claims and arguments of policy which is what we ought to do about it.

And through that process-- they become more not only aware of their rights but more able to activate them. So in terms of specifics-- one of the things that-- that I'm fascinated by is this-- and I don't know enough about how-- what-- what's gonna happen with the youth initiative or youth exchange or what-- how that's all gonna work.

But it-- it seems like you have this incredible network of people who have done really interesting things. How do you leverage that into other programs? And so one of the-- one of the ways might be to-- have programs look at different models and make choices based on what they think would work best in their program. So reframing that choice as a debate of sorts, these are the strengths of this kind of programming.

This is the target of this kind of programming. I think-- I think really what I-- what I-- the big takeaway for me is I-- I'm looking for a partnership to advance these ideas. And I don't necessarily have a clear idea of how that should work part-- partly

because-- I wanna encourage people in-- in-- within the network and within-- within other areas to think through how it might matter to them.

I mean, I think it was fascinating I-- I learned that there's-- efforts to establish debate programming in Latvia for example which is like-- to me is incredibly awesome because I spent-- I lived in Riga for a year and Chasis and Volmir and traveled all around and-- and-- and worked with Soros Funds on a number of-- of projects there. But to-- to me the value of this debate is that it changes expectations. The expectation for-- for people participating in this is not-- I need to advance one argument. It's that I need to make sure that the person claiming expertise can acknowledge counter evidence. And that's not part of my expectation when people try to convince me of something. Does that make sense?

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

Yeah, I'm still trying to get my head around how we use it in other-- in-- in other areas. So who-- who those people are that were-- you know, that we're engaging, I mean, you gave the example of-- of-- the (UNINTEL) marginalized groups. You know, I don't think you need to talk to women's rights activists, (UNINTEL) rights activists or any kind of activist and explain to them what are the arguments about their rights.

So it's about how that community then is engaging with other communities to make their case for their rights. So I'm just trying to get my head around who my audience is, who-- how I'm structuring it and the-- you don't have to take the whole group into this (LAUGH)-- in this--

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

I-- I-- yeah, but I actually had a thought about that today. I was in a meeting right before coming here-- with-- a young man and his mother from Kiev who are working on LGBT rights. And he noted that within their community they're so-- used to discrimination and oppression that they don't even realize that there can be another-- many young people don't realize that there can be another way to look at things or that-- to actualize their rights or-- the way he put it was really interesting.

And-- and I was thinking, well, maybe among some groups that are activists but there are different levels of activists that doing an exercise if we all learned how to do it, something like this at one of these seminars or conferences that we hold and can view-- you know, it wouldn't have to be focus of the whole thing but make it one exercise and see if we get anything out of it-- or how we can make those connections. I don't know. That was off the top of my head. But it kind of became a little bit clearer to me when we were-- we were talking, so.

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

I guess one of the ways that I see-- I mean, I-- and I think that's really interesting as-- as a possible venue, I mean, speaking to those groups-- or individuals I would say, "What's the best counter evidence? Okay, you're advancing LGBT rights in Ukraine or Kazakhstan. What's the best argument against what you're trying to do?"

Until we identify what that best argument is, it seems to me the impediments is-- is unconscious but right in the way. So is there any view that could possibly justify the extension of rights? Well, I've debated same sex-- marriage in prisons. You know, in-- in-- in that environment, very traditional norms. And the argument that gets made in-- in the prison anyway is that people aren't ready for it. That's not a very good argument especially when you look at how fast rights have advanced, same sex marriage and the recognition anyway of LGB-- GBT issues.

So it's-- I think-- I think the power of it comes in acknowledging the counter evidence. I think one of the things that's challenging in-- in-- in some of these circumstances is that we get so locked into our own perspective to advance-- a particular view or cause that we can't step back and see where the-- where the unconscious impediments might be.

And that's what I think part of the value of-- of the model is. And by bringing people in who'd be willing to-- conduct such a debate, be willing to argue against their own view, you're modeling a sort of flexibility that you wanna see. You're building a skillset toward the recognition that even those that stand in the way of LGBT rights-- have a perspective. You don't like it. You may hate it. But-- but it-- it still exists. And it has to be at least acknowledged, maybe not accommodated always but acknowledged.

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

Yeah, I mean, just to sort of add on-- on to this conversation-- I mean, one of things in-- the work on debate that-- that I was starting to see with-- with methodologies like this, with methodologies like fusing hip hop in debate was that-- this kind of act of, like, taking different sides on-- on an issue and-- and kind of in-- in-- encouraging young people or whatever, sort of the constituents who would be sort of the passive-- youth or the passive adult even in that matter to sort of engage on these issues in a kind of different sort of way, like, sometimes even kind of fun sort of way is-- is part of the strength of it, that there's actually this-- this-- you know, we talk a lot about tools for engagement. Like, you-- how do we use the arts to engage? How do we use forensics to engage with people in-- in a kind of more exciting way rather than just reading a paper and a more live interactive way? And I think what's interesting about debate is then it grounds that work in-- in a really, like-- obvious sort of like, okay, we're looking at two sides of a critical issue.

And-- and in all of the things that you were saying about kind of the value in-- in getting people to kind of look at the other side of the issue, recognize what the strong

argument is on that side so that then they can kind of come back and-- and better construct their evidence to counteract that argument. But so I think there's some-- there's a link for me somehow in how debate can be used within that and how it's more grounded in that as well.

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

That's interesting. And the performative aspect of it.

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

Exactly.

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

We all wanna be--

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

'Cause young people like doing it. I mean, that's-- and I-- and I think other-- you know, I've only seen it in the case of youth. So I don't know how it would translate to other audiences. But in terms of youth and I think Hydra could speak to that as well his work in Menna how youth somehow-- even youth you wouldn't expect really find this as this kind of very empowering tool because it's allowing them to have a voice and a space and a public presence. It's not so much about the win. It is about that kind of public space to be listened to.

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

You have two minutes to make the best case you can. And everyone has to listen to you.

MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

Yeah, and I-- and I think-- and I think there's the safety of that space is-- is-- is a big deal. And as you said a lot of times these conversations do happen. Or there's conversations around-- you know, ethnic, religious, social-- disagreements. They do happen all-- you know, you take a cab anywhere and you can-- you'll get into one of these conversations.

Or you know, you go to the supermarket. And-- but I-- I think a lot of the times it's very unpopular to take-- a position that does not support the majority. So even if you

have these thoughts, you don't have the space to express it. And I think debate because when you join a team or when you're part of a team you're-- and you know what's expected, everyone is there expecting you to take this position. Then you feel empowered to take it and go all the way with it.

And-- and in going back to-- to what you were saying, Emily-- one of the projects that we do is called the Younger Voices which is a debate based project. And in-- in-- in Egypt-- there was an incident in-- in southern Egypt in a town where two gay men were-- caught in a park engaged in sexual activity.

And it escalated very quickly into them being-- eventually killed and dragged on the streets. And there were people chanting around them. And it was filmed. And-- it was-- it was very-- it was-- it was playing out in the media. So Younger Voices organized a team from-- Cairo University-- of young debaters-- who were members of-- of the project to go down to that town and have a debate with the city council members around-- violence against-- LGBT members.

And going into the town-- they were very concerned 'cause they were escorted by police for-- for their safety. And there were people around-- at the entrance-- throwing stones at them and cursing them for even-- 'cause they knew they were coming and to take that position of the debate. And during the debates-- the debate was not-- again, it's-- it's about knowing what-- what your wins are. They didn't go in expecting to change the community's mind into accepting-- you know-- LGBT members.

But it was into going and-- and denouncing any violence against them. And after the debate by the time they were-- they were exiting-- a lot of the-- the members of-- of the-- of the local council-- asked the police-- told the police that they were actually provide the protection that police is not even needed at that point.

I mean, the police stayed. But still you had local council members escort all the-- all-- all the students out afterwards. And-- and there was all this follow-up as well. So I think it's-- it's context like these where-- you know, it's-- it's-- it's-- it's providing a platform where it's safe to take a position and you're expected to take it and you're empowered to take it. And you're gonna have the time and the-- and-- and the protection to express it. And the other is gonna have the obligation to listen to it and engage with it-- whether they agree with it or not.

I think it is that's-- that about debate is what's different than-- than other types of conversations or dialogues that happen. And it removes a lot of the cultural barriers. And-- and many of our-- one of our biggest challenges was that, you know, the-- the youth were not expected to sit on the debate with senior politicians or officials and challenge them as a peer.

They're like no-- they're-- even they were like how dare you. Who are you to talk back to me like that, you know, whether because they're elder and you have to respect the elder and because they're more senior, 'cause they're more powerful, 'cause they're more influential. And I think giving-- giving-- providing a space where they both are equal like that-- it-- it-- it-- it breaks down a lot of cultural barriers as

well.

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

I was just thinking of-- yeah, Emily's question about applicability of this methodology. And you got me thinking about a lot of the post conflict and transition countries where we're working where you have people who are on different sides of a war and are in one mission and are trying to make sense of the past. Who's history? Who's true-- what has justice meant in-- in context like this. It seems a useful methodology for me not just in terms of fostering connections, also just mediating power, having a conversation of power-- who we are (UNINTEL PHRASE) yeah.

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

I agree. And-- and that the equality in the space from coming to an agreement to participate means that you're-- you have to leave a little bit of your traditional authority or whatever at the door. And you're sitting in your-- and-- and you're talking and your voice is no more important than others. What matters is the quality of the justification that you make.

And when you turn it to quality of justification suddenly all kinds of doors open up because-- it-- it's-- it's-- you don't necessarily have to be the oldest or the smartest or the person in traditional power. If you have a good argument and you can convince that you can move audiences.

I think the big thing is-- is not to look at it as we're gonna have one debate and all the-- the problems are gonna be solved but the idea of-- of-- a commitment to that as a process to where people get used to the idea that this should be-- it's very Duyan, John Duyan and-- and-- democratic education, the idea that people should be involved in this process in a practical sense and a real sense. I think one of the challenges that-- that I've seen in-- in-- in some of the human rights stuff is that it stays very abstract. And one of the things that I love about OSF's work is-- is really bringing it to the ground. What does this mean in practice, for whom, when?

And what I wanna suggest is that debate offers a structured means for people to discover their rights and the power of voicing their views and properly supported can-- can-- create the conditions by which people can actively participate in these decisions in another way.

MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

I have a question. When-- when you decided to take the-- the money that you said-- you-- you have more money to continue-- in other areas-- with the debate-- you said that you were-- you wanted to do-- incarcerated veterans. Was there a specific reason why you chose that population?

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

Norwich-- is the oldest private military college in the U.S. It's got an interesting history of very traditional on the one hand and very progressive on another. I-- for me after spending some time there I think it would be really valuable for those students to work with incarcerated veterans partly because the views there based on my research are very punitive-- and very libertarian.

And-- I think there's potential for interesting conversations among the incarcerated veteran population because they have some commonality. Both-- both of them are focused on service at least nominally. And-- I think there's a potential for interesting conversations there.

I think the big-- for-- for me the big lesson out of Washington state is it takes time to build networks. It takes time to meet the right people and make connections. And so-- I'm still getting-- coming-- getting to speed with what's going on with correctional education in New York state, in Massachusetts, in Vermont and trying to liaise with people who are doing good work currently because, you know, without Loretta Taylor-- at Coyote Ridge this project wasn't happening. And so it's-- it's finding those people who are able to-- make those connections and-- and facilitate those projects that are really key. So that's where I'm at-- I'm at right now.

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

Did you-- did you find a mindset change among the court officers-- with the debate program, importing a debate program?

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

Own-- only anecdotally. We didn't-- surv-- survey them-- per se. There's-- it's quite complicated to get through research protocols in the prison. And-- thing we would be looking at numbers of four and five or something. So it's-- it would be sort of very personal. I-- I'm interested in looking at it. But-- there is a general frustration in the facility because they're offering community college courses and associative arts degree. And the COs, most of them have high school education. So incarcerated individuals are getting a better education for free than the correctional officers.

I-- at the early days pitched-- classes with COs and-- incarcerated individuals together-- back when I was very naive about how things could work. But-- but there is a natural tension there. But-- but, you know, the correctional officer population is like any other. There's good people. And there are very, very bad folks in there who-- who-- who make life as bad and miserable as possible.

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

And how about the impact on gang violence. Did it-- did it have any impact at all? Did it heighten it? Did it decrease some of the intra gang violence that might happen in a prison surrounding?

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

I would-- I would have to-- I would have to sort of defer on that question only because we only did it for a year. Certainly you could look at institutional data. One of the things that-- that I'm hoping to do in the future is look at individuals who are involved the associative arts program and the prison debate program and look at their infraction list before the program and afterward.

What the superintendent has told us is that we love the AA program because you settle everybody else down and that the students actually become mentors in the units themselves. And this was the case-- I mean, after the first debate we-- you know, we had 25 people who wanted now to be part of the debate club. And I was just like-- you know, we'd love to be able to do that. Is-- is it feasible, no.

And-- and so we had to sort of come up with-- with a way to-- to manage those numbers. But, you know, the-- the mass incarceration problem in this country could be turned into-- into a human resources solution if properly motivated and if properly thought through.

But I-- I-- I do think the-- the core principles that are at stake, the applied philosophy, the idea of taking these-- abstract ideas and making them real and concrete in an experiential way. That's the thing that excites me about the potential for it. And the application-- I think there's been some very interesting ideas-- around the table. I'm hesitant to pitch this is the one way to do it. You know, because the part of the-- part of the strength of it is is that it's malleable. It's flexible. It can be applied depending on how people see it.

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

It just struck me in the telling that there was something really important about being in the prison system and bringing the students into the prison system and having that exchange, so the experience, right. And so some of the other kinds of examples we've talked about you-- you-- you're not getting that-- that piece of a lived experience there.

I was thinking a little bit about in-- a number of countries where we work on criminal justice in Africa, a piece of that work is really about supporting paralegals who go into the prisons and engage with the prisoners. And they do a lot of theater-- to help prisoners prepare for defending themselves in the justice system because there was no lawyers.

But-- and I was just wondering, you know, could a piece of that-- could you also work with those paralegal groups to be thinking about how you can introduce some debate into those prisons? The numbers are challenging because usually it's like all of the prisoners in the courtyard of the prison-- so you don't really have 25. You sort of have the prison population all at once. Or at least that's how I've seen it happen. I don't know-- if you all-- had other kinds of-- (UNINTEL PHRASE). I don't know. So I'm just trying to get that-- that my-- a handle on the experiential part and how you then translate that to maybe other areas where you don't have the prison walls kind of providing that-- that space.

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

I think any time you have an us and them, any time you have this-- this division that-- at least is partially normative that put-- puts up blocks to where people are working together, there is the potential for having this to-- not-- maybe not save the day and change everything, but to-- but-- but to give people an opportunity to reflect on what they think and why.

And what the (UNINTEL PHRASE) literature suggests is that when given those opportunities in an experiential way and a pro social way, people do change. They do-- other thinking does evolve. That's what I wanna-- that's what I wanna show over the long term here. And so the question becomes-- I-- I-- I think you're right. How do we practically apply it? But I think there's ways on the ground at the project level.

But I also think there's ways at the program level and the strategy level to be thinking through-- how it is we value difference, how it is we bring different people together and why the v-- that value of structured debate and the focus on humility is so important.

MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

Yeah, I-- I-- I-- I agree. I think-- I think in-- I see I'm at least going in terms of the-- the actual experience and-- and exposure to someone else's world and what that entails and-- and getting into that mindset. But I think even-- even if you talk about exchanges of people going into-- you know, populations that are suffering from poverty and going into their world-- or, you know, populations-- who are very conservative setting or very conservative cultures and going into that world-- I-- I don't know if that's-- if that's similar to what you are referring to in terms of experiencing-- just a setting which is part of the mindset and the mentality-- and-- and if that can change.

One challenge we had with a debate and-- and I would be curious to see how-- what kind of models we develop to get around it is as you said it does have all these great benefits. It tends to be very heavy on individual investment however-- when-- even when you're talking now about, you know, debating usually is depending on-- on-- on

the model, you know, three or six people on a team-- over the course of working with them for a year or two years to potentially maybe change their minds about something seems a little bit-- of-- of, you know, a heavy individual investment.

And-- and when you talk about resources and choice making, we did find some ways that we could multiply that effect. But I would be curious to see how-- how you've-- you've experienced that and what ways have you figured that could-- that could-- widen the impact.

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

Yeah, it's a great question. And-- and I would combine that with the concern that in order to debate you need to be able to read. And you need access to information. And you need that ability. So-- so one of the things that we did-- and Ricardo Travez who was in the-- the video, he teaches in the GED-- program at the prison.

And all prisons in the U.S. have GED programs. It's mandated. It's-- it's very in-- important-- I would argue post-secondary correction education is more important. But GED stuff is very important. What he did was-- develop a library of arguments-- from reputable sources with the proper citations and then organize them by fact, value and policy and then would assign five people, for example, are gonna take the fact argument. And you need to write a two minute speech based on this-- information. So you're not now reading 100 pages in journal articles. You're now reading maybe five pages of summarized material.

And that would be for the sort of people who were just beginning to get into this next phase. But we would have more than one person prepare the same-- type of argument so that if somebody got cold feet or got thrown into SEG or whatever else happened someone else could step up. And honestly the-- the process of going through and reading that material and then making it your own through a two minute speech even if you don't get to give your speech it's still valuable in the sense that you're articulating your best view. At least in the prison context that was really-- really valuable for them. Does that make-- does that-- does that answer your--

MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

Sure, part-- part of-- part of my question.

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

Part of it, yeah.

MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

Yeah, I mean, the-- the-- the other part again was about how do you make sure that the benefits-- and the impacts, all the great things that we mentioned will not be limited to the members of the debate club or, you know, below ten, perhaps below 12. But it could-- it would reach a wider group.

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

So-- so in the prison-- we have-- we had five and five-- three members from Wasu, two from Walla Walla Community College, three from Walla Walla College, two for Wasu, so mixed teams and 150-- audience members. And so they-- the-- they make their presentation. It's 50 minutes or so. And then they're not allowed to speak anymore.

And then the facilitator or the chair takes audience questions. So what was the best argument that you heard? What would-- would have changed your view if they have said something? Who came in with a fixed view? How did it change? And-- you-- you-- you saw that last part of that. And you-- you have people who take turns standing up and speaking about how they reflected it.

And then you watch people nod their heads or they think about it. The last part of it is people vote on who had the best argument and why. And so it's participatory in the truest sense of the-- of the word because the audience vote wins. And you don't have to agree with the audience vote. And the-- it doesn't mean that they've created a new-- thing that we all must adhere to now. But-- it's not just watching. It's actively engaging.

MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

Who were the audience?

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

Incarcerated individuals.

MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

Oh, okay, so that--

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

COs, program staff.

MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

That adds even more value because-- because now you have-- you have incarcerated individuals in the audience watching their possibly cell mate sitting up there.

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

Encouraging them.

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

And like-- exactly, and not only that but you're giving them other tools now because-- men-- in prison have a tendency-- you know, you're all-- like you said yourself, you have to display that masculinity-- for the most part of you'll be looked at as weak. So it gives-- it gives somebody an argument in-- in-- in a prison where you have to argue same sex marriage. You know, now do I really wanna do this because now I have to go back inside the prison. You know, and it might get around that I argued this.

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

That's right, I was told million-- many, many, many times that you could never argue same sex marriage in a prison. And I did it a number of times.

MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

But I admi-- I would applaud the person who said, "I'll argue it."

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

Well, that's right.

MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

You get what I'm saying.

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

Sure, and-- and those are the people that are-- even if they don't-- what I like is people that don't agree with it that are still willing to argue it and volunteer to do so. So one of the things that-- that's really important to do and this goes to your point around safety is saying at the beginning, "People have been assigned positions to

argue. They may not personally agree. But you're evaluating them on the-- the best argument that they can make for this position." And it's that cognitive dissonance of replacing that competitive desire to be right with the competitive desire to make the best argument you possibly can.

It's like a law moot in many ways, right. But it-- but we're breaking it down and making it accessible to other people in different kinds of ways. But at its-- at its core it's creating-- it's taking contentious issues-- and creating space for conversations for people who disagree and having that be okay. It's okay to disagree.

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

Yeah, one of the really things I really liked about the model that you-- that you sort of created that, you know, was applied there but I think could be adapted to other communities was that it had these multiple approaches. So there was the development of curriculum that supported the debate club. So even though there's the five students on the debate club, the debate instruction was integrated into other parts of the AA program and to the GED program. Especially the GED program work was really fascinating to me because that was reaching the entire popula-- well, not the entire but, you know, a large subset-- of the population that wouldn't be affected by just this sort of debate training.

But then also the sort of audience participation element was also really impressive and interesting to me because it wasn't just about-- having an audience to listen. The audience was really actively engaged in their own debate after the sort of debate club presented.

So people were coming up with sort of written down arguments on pieces of paper and presenting them and-- and debating with each other in a microphone. So it sort of opened up the space so that people who weren't on-- in this club were also able to kind of engage-- in a more deep way with these-- this conversation. And then they had that sort of opportunity then to vote on what they thought.

And some of them changed their opinion even after the fact when they were in this sort of public debate. So that was sort of the interesting piece of it that it wasn't kind of just focused on these individuals, that it was a really sort of integrated model that thought about how to expand beyond that. And I could see that being adapted beyond sort of a prison setting, like, with-- you know, another specific community or group.

MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

You also said that you wanted to take the competi-- you wanted to take that-- you wanted to remove that part-- that piece of it.

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

You can't-- you can't remove it because anytime you put people together, there is always going to be some element of that. But it's harnessing that drive toward a pedagogic purpose. Rather than just being right for right's sake, you have to be-- do your best within the model. And part of the model requires that you might have to argue against yourself.

Or-- it means you can't just make up whatever you want. So one of the neat things for me was-- and it was kind of frustrating but-- in a good way-- after some of these debate activities, I'd go to teach my class. And I'd have somebod-- you know, somebody go, "What's your evidence for that claim?"

"Well, what's the best argument against it?" You know, so that was-- they were-- that was building expectations about what is it when somebody makes a truth claim, what is the basis for it? How is it justified? Right, right, right. And-- and, you know, they might even smile a little bit at the same time. But-- but that was good.

MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

Did you ever see the debate that was done in Sing Sing here recently?

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

Unh-uh (NEGATIVE).

MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

You might wanna-- you might wanna YouTube that. That was-- Hudson Link which is--

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

Oh yes, I know about Hudson Link's work.

MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

Hudson Link-- yeah, they just did-- it was either last year or the year before. And-- the actor Ice T came into the prison. And he was one of the judges. And they had students come in. And it-- it's all-- it's-- it's-- it's in Sing Sing Prison, you know. So something that you might wanna look at, too.

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

Could you speak to sort of how you could adapt it? I mean, I could see it sort of-- I mean, going back to sort of what Gladys was saying about in the post conflict setting if-- if there was sort of a youth led group within a refuge camp for example and there was a community space, perhaps a community space could sort of develop resources to support a debate club that the-- that is being run but, like, by a group of youth in the refugee camp.

And then they do public debates within the camp space. Something like that would be, like, a way of thinking about adapting it. Like, thinking about sort of where are these large spaces that OSF engages. And how could you work with different partners within those spaces to sort of--

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

I think-- I think I get that.

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

--build out.

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

I think it's-- it's the-- the-- for me, what's-- what's-- the challenge is finding the space and finding NGOs working in those spaces--

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

And finding the partners.

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

--that are interested in using this methodology without us necessarily telling them they have to. Or-- I mean, I-- because they'll get money from us if they do. I think there are a lot of complications about how it's gonna work.

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

I mean, I-- I-- I-- I'm also wondering about the flip, right. So we talked about the students going into the prison which was an-- I'm sure an incredibly enriching experience for the students. But the prisoners were still in prison and the audience

which were incarcerated individuals as well. So I'm wondering about the flip.

Like, what if you had students in a student setting pulling in people from these communities whether it's-- prisoners or other kinds of individuals and having debate there. Your audience are the students. And-- and-- and-- you know, is-- is that creating that space? Is it a bet-- I mean, are you getting the same kind of enrichment?

Is it-- I mean, it's depending on who your target is, right. Your target is trying to really target the-- the incarcerated individuals. But if you're trying to maybe target the students as trying to kind of get them to understand some of these issues around rights issues that they might not have been thinking about, do you need to bring those people into their space and have that-- I don't know. I mean, I'm just trying to get my head about how you're doing--

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

No, I-- I'm doing the same thing about, like-- and all these scenarios in which you have-- like, what's a model or a pilot or something we could try. And I mean, 'cause you're--

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

How do we work it out and--

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

It was very helpful for you to mention the point about being able to read because I think in a lot of the prisons where we're working outside of here literacy rates would be a lot lower.

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

Sure, so then are we looking at-- other visual means of communicating, key points. Are we-- are we thinking about other ways to support that learning so that they can participate? That becomes-- a way to-- to jump into that-- that later prize of participating in a debate becomes-- building those skills to be able to learn which we will-- which they need to do anyway, right, I mean, which is-- shouldn't-- needs to be a focus of-- of whatever those populations are.

I think-- I mean, I think about your point about you don't wanna tell-- you know, here's our great new debate model. Now do it and-- that's-- I think one of the things that I'm really interested in-- in is giving people options and letting them think through what the best option is for them.

So the first debate I would argue in any-- project like this should be should we adopt this debate mode? That's the first debate. And all you need is this book 'cause it tells you the competitive debate and it tells you this debate. People can decide for themselves the direction that they wanna go.

But it-- it opens doors. And I think it-- it goes back to this idea about we really wanna make sure that we know what we're getting. And-- but at the same time there's that tension that-- that part of the reflexive process is making room for mistakes, making room for things that don't work, making room for longer term lessons that grow out of those initial steps. And-- and I really think that-- that's an essential tension international development. I don't-- there's no way to get away from it. And yet I do think there's a strength in the Soros model in that we don't need to-- we-- we don't need to take one model and apply it everywhere. We need to take principles and encourage people to make those principles make sense to them in a practical way. And-- and hopefully I've been able to touch on how some of those things might be done.

(OFF-MIC CONVERSATION)

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

One of the things that we do-- that I've done in the past is-- it's a debate on the role of higher education. And it's the first debate that-- debaters do. And there's-- there-- there are articles there-- which we use to sort of generate our units of fact val-- value and policy. And then people get an opportunity to actually do it.

And I will tell you that-- working with professionals even in higher education it-- it's interesting to watch because suddenly-- the-- the old mechanisms that they use may not necessarily succeed anymore. And they've got to adapt themselves to the model.

So when we're talking about-- equalizing the playing field and getting away from experts and learners-- I think there's value there. I think the other-- the other piece of this one that's really good for-- for low literacy folks is that we use concept maps and mind maps and these visual techniques of learning. And there's lots of evidence out there that-- even people who struggle-- with reading can-- can succeed when we were present-- information visually. And this doesn't have to detract from the quality of the information.

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

Have you ever seen it used in-- a group of people with intellectual disabilities?

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

I have not. But it'd be interesting to think about.

MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

Can I ask you this about-- if-- that's valuable. I-- I recognize the value in that. But in preparing for debate reading is not enough. You also have to know how to research. So how do we get that piece of it from visual? How do you teach that piece of it from visuals?

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

So one of the core-- the-- the core starting points is you have to use credible sources. So the immediate question in that is, well, what's a credible source? But then that allows for an opportunity for teaching about why the thing you found on your internet that some dude in their basement wrote last night may not be as good as something published in a peer review journal.

MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

But we're not talking about reading. We're talking about a person who's not--

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

Critical thinking. Right, and-- and figuring out what information's credible is the first step. And so part of what I've tried to do is take away that-- that you have to make a decision. If it's published in a credible source, it's good to go.

It doesn't have to be the perspective I agree with provided that there's a legitimate source for that information, you're good. Some people don't like that by the way, right, because that means you could debate climate change because like it or not there are, not very many, but a few peer review articles that doubt it.

We've done the climate change debate in the prison. It-- it's about-- it's about letting the other side have its moment and not being afraid. I think one of the things that were-- and-- and we see it right now with-- I don't know how you feel about-- all these controversial commencement speakers and-- and, you know, people rising up and saying, "No, and we don't want them there." And I have a complicated relationship with this because I-- I-- I find honorary degrees really annoy me. We tell students that you have to spend all this money to get a degree and then we just give them away to whoever.

That's-- but-- but the-- but the-- there's a bigger point about whether universities are still the place where people can have these difficult conversations. And I think one of the things that we can't do is push off certain kinds of speech or certain kinds of ideas and try to shove them away and try to pretend they don't exist because then they grow.

If you look at the United Kingdom right now and the UKIP party, people ignored them forever. And what are they doing right now? Most parties in the European parliament from the United Kingdom are UKIP. And some of those folks frankly have-- have ideas that could've been more, I think, effectively challenged if we let them in the debate initially. It's scary. It's scary, right, 'cause we have to let go of control. But I-- I do think that if speech is good, it's good. And we need to create conditions by which even unpopular positions are debated.

That demonstrates sort of the flexibility that we say we want other people to adopt in a very practical sense. It means some uncomfortable moments but-- provided that we ensure that dialog follows debate and that we may-- me-- be sure that we put what's occurring in that room in some sort of context.

People come away with it with-- changed perspective. We might not be able to change everybody's view through one debate. But at least we can give them the tools to consider why they think what they think. And I think that's a lot. That's a lot if we can succeed.

MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

You asked a question earlier about how do we do-- how did you measure justice? And that's a good question. But the bigger picture is in terms of debate, let's say we have N.R.A. on one side and the Sandy Elementary School parents on the other side. Now we're talking about perspective here. And now we're talking about justice. So justice for who, you know, for you, not justice for me. So that's-- that's-- that's the difficulty in-- in-- in-- in debate.

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

And-- and you're getting at a core limitation of the model which is that people have to be willing-- the N.R.A. member has to be willing to argue from the perspective of the sandy heli-- Sandyhook Elementary parent. And the parent has to be willing to argue from the N.R.A. perspective. That's very hard.

And that's-- and that's kind of the purp-- that's the point, right. It's-- it's that we've gotta get away from this idea that just 'cause we think it it must automatically be correct. And then one of the best ways to do it is by pushing people out of their comfort zone and arguing something they may not agree with because the process of coming up with a credible argument even if they don't agree with it will open them up to certain points of view. Sorry.

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

So-- I-- I-- I think we need to move the (UNINTEL) for our work. I think we have to move beyond just--

(OVERTALK)

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

(UNINTEL) it's practical.

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

Points of view, yes, very much. So it has to-- it has to not just suggested an opening of-- another-- the other point of view or new point of view but to suggest action or limitations in the action that-- in some of our grantees in-- from these marginalized populations might be taking.

Like, so-- in what ways can the opening up to another view or to the other side that they're not-- perhaps not questioning inform how they organize their work to make progress whether it be on affecting whether or not unpopular legislation makes it through, you know, (UNINTEL) parliament or something like that? So how-- for me, that's the next step is how do you translate that?

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

But I'm just wondering-- sorry, Kimberly, very-- like, we're having, like, a weird program conversation here. And then you're all taking part in it. But I mean, I am wondering, like, is-- if you can use it as a tool to create that accepting that there's another view and-- and beginning to create the space, then does that create that space for then the NGO to actually come in and do some of their-- some of their normal kind of work that they do?

(OVERTALK)

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

The pr-- the problem is is that normally our-- our partners will do advocacy. And nobody will listen to them. And nobody will hear them, right. So do you use the debate as a tool to kind of open up the space so that then subsequently there's an-- greater chance of hear--

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

But does it also change their-- the way they do their tactics to make them more successful.

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

One would hope so. Well, it can't-- it can't--

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

Is that-- that'd be interesting if that worked.

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

So it's the lawyers answer, right. Before you go into the court you know the best argument on the other side. And you then tailor your argument to address what the biggest weakness is on your side or the biggest strength is on their side.

So in terms of advocacy work, you need to know what that other perspective is. You may think you know. But the debate at least-- offers an opportunity to open up the discussion to where you might be able to say, "Oh, that's a sticking point. Oh, there's a problem." And then that might be able to inform-- where you put resources or how you design your next campaign or strategy. Not all-- not all law stuff is bad in terms of-- (LAUGH)

MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

I mean, I think a lot of it depends on what-- what's really your-- your end goal is with the debate. I mean, a debate is by the end of the day a vehicle. And it's just where do you want it to take you. And--

(OFF-MIC CONVERSATION)

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

So I-- I think we're coming to the end, though. Does anyone have any final questions and--

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

I had an abstract question if-- if I may.

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

Sure.

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

I-- I-- I've been working a lot on books on various kinds of debate. And it seems that your model seems the most logical one because it--

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

Thank you.

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

--it emphasizes the need to acknowledge-- different perspectives. Have you ever thought of moving your model into the context of more academic-- forensic debate particularly at a lower level, like the high school level or junior high level.

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

I haven't. I-- I guess my-- the sticking point I worry is that the-- the current infrastructure is so gamed toward this competitive model. You know, your top schools in the country give out-- scholarships for it. There's a whole infrastructure in there. Do I wish that-- that I could change the focus from this competition where people-- I mean, YouTube some of these debates. It's unbelievable.

Where I have started to move into work is-- is work in-- constitutional areas. So-- I've been surveying-- surveying Canadian constitutional scholars since 2009-- about the 2008 prorogation which doesn't mean anything if you don't know about pol-- parliamentary politics.

But it was-- essentially a coup d'état in Canada. No-- no one really-- in Canada-- things work in practice but not in theory. And-- and one of the-- the thing that I've been looking at is how to frame those debates around-- the 2008 prorogation in a way that people will understand because just like in this country, Canadians are constitutionally illiterate. They do not understand their system of government.

And one of my assumptions is is if I can break out the arguments and do a series of debates you could use that as a civic engagement tool. Right now I'm working-- or I'm starting a project with Samara Canada who's been doing some of the stuff around civic engagement.

And it's-- it's not debate per se. But it's creating-- I have a paper coming out-- a review of constitutional studies where essentially I apply this model to 2008. And I identify four leading positions and two debates to have. And it's all the same stuff that's there.

It's just applied to constitutional questions. So in Ukraine right now there's an argument about whether what happened with the president-- where essentially

parliament-- essentially said, "You're not the president anymore," after the president had-- had flew to Russia. Well, it seems to me that is another example of where-- this mod-- model could be useful. What are the leading arguments for parliamentary supremacy in that point of view? What are the leading arguments for executive authority under a presidential model? How do people understand that process?

I appreciate-- I appreciate the-- the idea about-- applying it to youth. And I'm-- I'm not opposed to it. I get-- I'm a little bit-- I'm a little concerned that I-- I don't-- you know, this-- it's-- it's a pretty direct critique that I make on some of these traditional debate models.

And-- and I don't want it to be that I'm denigrating the work of people who are volunteering hours and hours and kids that are trying really hard. It's just I think that they're moving in a direction that undermines cooperative consensive-- building and rewards-- you know, not everything's a baseball game, not everything-- depends on the score. There are more important things. And debate to me is-- is one of those things. So right now I'm-- I'm based at the university and-- and trying to encourage this debate as a way to start conversations between populations. Debate as you-- said I think very-- with great clarity is it's a vehicle to begin other processes. But I appreciate the question. I'd love it. I'd love to make that happen.

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER:

Because what you're-- what you would be doing is you would be training the best and the brightest of the-- of the classes. Those are usually the debaters not to attack, attack, attack but think, think, think, acknowledge the other.

JOHANNES P. WHEELDON:

Right, and-- and maybe this is something that we can do-- abroad, right, the Latvia debate program or other kinds of debate programs-- in other countries-- especially in people that-- that don't have the advantages that we do-- don't take-- some of these things for granted. Maybe there would be a willingness and an openness and an interest to start a more consensus based participatory debate model. Thank you.

(OFF-MIC CONVERSATION)

* * *END OF TRANSCRIPT* * *