Opinion: Why and how to debate climate change

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Crowd holding signs. Credit: Markus Spiske on Unsplash

What's the best way to debate a problem as big and complex as climate change? In his new book, Professor Mike Hulme from the Department of Geography argues that students need to develop their own well-informed position on the difficult questions raised by climate change without being told what to think.

I have used classroom debates about climate change in my higher

education teaching for over a decade—with environmental science and geography students and with final year undergraduates and Master's students. For a wicked problem like climate change, where there is no single correct position on how to deal with the challenge, nor why it should be dealt with this way, nor by whom, I have found that structured debates become effective learning devices for students.

Stylised debating positions allow the interweaving of both descriptive ('this is known') and prescriptive ('this is right') arguments. In other words, through debate students learn not only about the state of academic knowledge on a topic but also see how scientific knowledge is politically and ethically sterile unless it is interpreted using strong normative reasoning. To paraphrase Hannah Arendt, it is necessary to pass judgment on the facts to be able to act politically in the world. Furthermore, through debate students learn that such reasoning often leads to disagreement. But they also learn that disagreement, far from being innately destructive, can be an opportunity for self-reflection and personal learning

There is rising concern about the narrowness of students' educational experiences and their lack of exposure to people and/or views with which they disagree. There is also growing evidence of online echo chambers and strong social sorting feeding the rise of identity politics and populism in many societies. We owe our students a learning experience which exposes and explains the reasons for answering in different ways the challenging questions posed by climate change.

It is for these reasons that I have developed a new student textbook—Contemporary Climate Change Debates: A Student Primer, published this month by Routledge—that will help students develop their own well-informed position without being told what to think. The 15 selected debates illustrate the range of cultural, economic, epistemic, ethical, legal, political, social and technological challenges raised by

climate change. Each chapter addresses one of these debates, with invited leading and emerging scholars answering either 'Yes' or 'No' to each question, laying out the evidential and normative grounds—the descriptive and prescriptive bases—for their competing positions.

The authors are selected from 12 different countries, drawing equally across gender and from a variety of disciplinary and value commitments. Questions of perspective, identity, value, judgment and prescription are central to many of the disagreements fostered by climate change. My approach leans more on the humanities tradition than on that of the natural or social sciences, but its appeal is to students of climate change across the sciences, social sciences and humanities.

Examining these questions, and understanding how and why different scholars analyse and answer them in different ways, is a crucial learning experience for any student of climate change whether at high school, college or university. Students should be able to arrive at answers to complex questions, giving credible and reasonable accounts of their reasoning, without mere appeal to the authority of others or to calling down your own social identity. To quote philosopher Richard Foley, scholars and students alike "… should minimise the reliance on the opinions of others 'floating in their brains' and should instead to the extent possible arrive at conclusions there are able to defend on their own".

It is important in a democracy to learn to disagree well, to realise that people with whom you disagree are not necessarily misguided, malicious or out to harm you. Their own life experience, education, moral or value commitments, might just mean that they see and interpret the world differently. Being able to recognise this, being able to engage in respectful debate and to learn from your antagonist, is the essence of learning. It helps break a deepening and polarising partisanship which is anathema for democratic deliberation.

Using labels to denigrate one's opponent without considering in detail the reasons for their views, is a tactic used to 'win an argument' without in fact winning the argument. Calling out your opponent as a climate 'denier' or 'contrarian'—or indeed as a climate 'alarmist' or 'zealot'—does nothing to encourage constructive dialogue. Rather what is needed is a clear articulation of the different values that are at stake in the dispute and then to engage in political processes to explore and reach decisions about what to do. Simply listening to "the science" provides no shortcut to this challenging and often messy task. Debating with people who see, think and feel differently about climate change is essential.

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