

For 25 years, I have been researching and writing about the changing political and intellectual cultures of the US. I have studied the ways in which Democrats and Republicans, conservatives, reactionaries, liberals and progressives have reconfigured the possibilities of thinking, speaking and behaving—professionally and publicly.

I have despaired over the finishing possibilities of respectful and rigorous arguments—of conversations that take disagreements seriously. I am by the way, just to protect myself, not saying that every position, every disagreement, warrants equal or even the same kind of attention.

I have criticized some of the behavior of both conservatives and progressives—as well as, I should add, some academics whose concerns are not reducible to matters of politics and ideology.

I have criticized any practice that begins and ends with the assertion of certainty, because I believe it is our function as intellectuals and academics to ask questions, to always go on thinking.

I believe, perhaps naively, that ideas and knowledge matter, and that it is our task to keep trying to improve our ideas and produce better knowledge

And I think this is true—even a necessary condition—for both the academy and the possibility of democracy

Both realms are intimately engaged with, even inseparable from education—both in terms of continuing to educate ourselves and students/public, but also in order to initiate our students into the possibilities, even necessities—and the joys—of such endeavors

I believe that knowledge, democracy and education are all woven together, and depend on the willingness and ability to engage in an ongoing conversation—a difficult one, full of contentiousness and passions, but one that also grasps for rigor and open-mindedness, one that recognizes different forms of reason, understanding, judgment and evidence.

Such conversations have to reach beyond those who already agree with us, to seek out those who disagree or, at the very least, are willing to challenge us.

When Dean Clemens approached me and said that we have an opening, an opportunity to begin to place UNC at the forefront of efforts to thinking pedagogically about affecting the disheartening state of public discourses, I leapt into the conversation—with him and other faculty (some of whom are on the program's advisory board), but also with other academic and non-academic friends. I might add that I found the discussions of the advisory board, at our single meeting, instructive, insightful and useful. I will take good ideas and good questions wherever I find them.

I have been part of a faculty group for the past 6-8 months that has been trying to give shape to the program that WE envision, that we think makes a powerful statement and that fits into the UNC culture.

The program for public discourse, as it stands thus far, is a work in progress. And it is, at this stage, a very modest effort—whether and how it grows will depend as much on the faculty of UNC as anything else. It is an attempt to gather together whatever insights and tools we can find (from any source, including UNC faculty) and find ways to use them to increase, augment and improve already existing efforts to teach and model agnostic conversations and arguments for our students.

I regret—more, I am deeply disturbed—by the idea that some people do not believe that ideas and plans have histories, that what starts from one source with one aim in mind, can get taken up by very different people and redirected toward a very different aim.

I regret—more, I am deeply disturbed—by the idea that we may be unable or unwilling to trust and respect each other as faculty, and by the fact that suspicions fester long after they have been answered.

I hope the conversations that this program seeks to foster will continue and even move forward.