

Let's talk about Gaza

An interview with Heba and Basel about debates in Gaza: a celebration of knowledge

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Heba and Basel are debate coaches working on the Debate Dialogue Discussion (DDD) project in Palestine.



How did the debates start in Gaza?

Basel: I took a training course in debating skills at Persperg in the USA for almost ten months in 2011, at a very small school in Oregon State. The program included political thinking, public speaking, research methods and research for debates. A competition was conducted by the school and I won second place.

I came back to Gaza and I wanted to continue the debates. It has become a habit for me. Unfortunately I didn't find anyone interested in joining me, so I started teaching how to debate in order to have someone to practice with. Heba, Yasser Ashour and I started a small debate group in 2013. Our first debate concerned the Jewish people's right to live in Palestine. We were very happy to have had a productive debate from day one in the Arabic language.



Heba: We hosted the most intellectual and intelligent people from Gaza, so the audience was not easy to deal with. For us, it was very impressive; to have the chance to research and to work on topics that enable us to stand for something so important to us.

Basel: After that first debate we started teaching and coaching to promote official debate in the Gaza strip under the name the Dewan Debate Club; Dewan Debaters. It started with 40-50 members from a

variety of backgrounds. It was a very healthy and productive environment for us to build on and equip ourselves with skills of public speaking and critical thinking.

Heba: We froze our activities when the 2014 war took place, then we resumed with a public debate session on the role of social media in war times. We garnered good media attention during that particular debate. We had coverage from local media agencies, newspapers and news channels from Gaza, including Al-Jazeera, which drew more attention to our club. We don't enter into debates with a specific agenda; we are committed to this core idea of accepting others, of being able to appreciate differences between each other, as individuals and as groups of different ages and genders. And this actually is something that we can apply in any institution or any organization with any group of people - so we started giving trainings inside those organizations. The debates started to be more customized and based on different topics; economic s, women's rights, local, social and sometimes political debates.

What obstacles have you faced?

The first problem we had was that we didn't have many materials available for teaching debate skills, so we had to translate some of the English material from our training courses and taught in both Arabic and English, because both of us were taught in English. It was very helpful for us to have some material available, and challenging at the same time to have to translate all the English material, which is time intensive work.

Also we had some logistic and financial problems, but we are not doing this work for money, and we're not doing it for sake of getting a certificate. We're not doing this to earn academic credits or qualifications, we're doing this because it is a passion, a for passion, for knowledge, for fun, to contribute to helping each other build a good society

Our trainings simply ask people to learn the principles of good debate and to develop the skills of active listening to ensure we really hear each other.



How debates affected your lives?

Heba: Knowing that there's another perspective, another side of every argument is crucial to me. This realization changed my life, on professional, academic and personal levels. Knowing that there are other people on the other side of every argument, every situation, who have their own positions they want to defend. It changed the way

I look at the world, it helped me change a lot, and to better defend my own causes as a woman and as a Palestinian citizen.

We don't ask a lot from participants. We give them space to sit at a round table and let them express themselves, and make sure to shake hands when the debate ends, whether they win or lose the arguments.

Their roles are not defined as protagonist or opposition; positions within debates are very human, normal and organic. Let's say that the goal is the transfer of knowledge between two people with different opinions who know that it's more important to understand each other than to win.

This really changed my life on different levels. I now can stand in front of people and conduct all types of speeches. It helped me gain respect from the person I debate with, for my sake, my country's sake, for the people's sake.

I have become a better person, and I know I will be even better. I will be able to make informed decisions and to achieve a lot of things, including my higher education.

Basel: I believe it did change me because it's the thing that I love the most, and am most passionate about. I don't do it for business or anything else. I just do it for the joy of teaching and helping the community around me.

When you master the skills of public speaking, you become a charismatic speaker, which helps you in any area in life. It covers everything that you can imagine. I think for me, and even for Heba, watching the kids grow up and become effective and influential people in the community are priceless.

What encourages you to continue?

First of all, it was passion and fun. Everyone was doing something new. We wanted to research and to compete, but after a while you see that what we have been investing is actually resulting in far more than we anticipated. Like seeing a young student who used to be fearful of standing in public walk up to the podium during a ceremony and make an amazing emotional speech is incredible. I think this is where we feel most proud and that we actually did something positive for the community. Also I like that it's not just an academic course - it's something that can truly change people.

We had one story about one student that I believed in. He has been my friend for seven years. For three years I've heard him saying that he feels that he's bad at everything he does. He was completely surprised that he could compete in debate sessions, and even won second place! No one expected that from him. Now he features in every debate that we conduct. He has perfect English language skills, and uses his public speaking skills to sing and rap because now he is not fearful of anyone. He has become a person who thinks in a critical way. His life has changed because he won the competition; it gave him confidence and belief in him. So I think it can make a huge impact on people. When you see yourself as one of the reasons behind this impact, it feels really important.

It's also important to us that we have been awarded by two international agencies for our debate work in Gaza; the U.S. Department of State and Stanford University.

Through our work we have met the assistants of Senators, public figures, the Secretary and Minister of Foreign Affairs who shook hands with us and told us that we did a great job and that we should do more of this.

It's a funny thing, because the country that taught us how to debate, now seems to really need debate itself!

This is actually impressive, because to us and to them, debate is always a tool for communication and for accepting others; it's not a tool to beat or neglect or lose each other's voices.

Heba: when we started we had two things; passion, and vision. I used to be a loud person when I expressed myself. I used to give very fast judgments on people around me. After learning debating skills, I improved hugely! I learned that snap judgments are not how things work and that we have to go slowly, and work things out carefully before you judge.

When we started, I really wanted to know how to listen to people better and to understand how I can refute and defend my arguments as well. Also, we had a vision that we wanted this way to engage people to last. However, we didn't have an agenda. At first, we didn't have in mind that we could engage a hundred or two hundred people in such a small city like Gaza. The passion we had, turned out to be something that really moves the community itself and affects everyone around. It's becoming a culture.

Also it's important that we don't just focus on advanced discussions and the philosophy of the topics, but on the skills.

This reflects the primary need of this community. It's what motivates us all the time - we see that this community needs debate and we're committed to facilitating that every time we have the chance. Even if our activity changes just one member of the group, we're happy that we're making a change.

What is your message to your community?

Basel: That anyone can do it. We don't keep it secret, so anyone who's interested can join us. If you want to conduct a debate, you can do it yourself; you don't have to wait for someone to teach you. I think it's very healthy for people in this society to start learning to accept each other, and most importantly to listen to each other. They need to be courageous to stand for their opinions, and not hide on social media with fake names. Chose people who are as passionate as you are, so they can help lift you up, not bring you down.

Heba: Truth is a cube, and there are different faces and ways to look at it. We could have 6 people in one room with 6 different opinions. What you believe in is not exclusive to you. Every person has a different point of view, and we have to stand together and respect that.

One of the most memorable things that astonished me is that after standing in front of someone, trying to defeat them, I will eventually end up shaking hands with them, whether I won the debate or was defeated by them. It's a celebration of new knowledge.

My last message is as a Palestinian: I discovered something amazing during this 4-year journey. Everyone who entered the room where we had the debates was able to help me discover that we have great capacities for tolerance. We Palestinians have been through years of injustice, decades of occupations and wars, and now there's something new I see inside us; a huge capacity for tolerance. That's why we ought to learn that there are different points of view. People can see the same things in very different ways than you do. They can see your cause and your rights in different ways too. So when we allow people to discover what they have inside themselves, they turn out to be amazing debaters, even during small debates which last for just one week, one month, one year, a year and a half, on every scale, in every way, you're able to see at least someone or the whole group being able to understand this very amazing principle of tolerance and the benefits of listening to others.