

Editorial  
Beyond the argument culture

Robert Costanza \*

*Director, University of Maryland Institute for Ecological Economics and Professor,  
Center for Environmental Science and Biology Department, University of Maryland, Box 38, Solomons, MD 20688-0038, USA*

Accepted 6 April 1998

Deborah Tannen is a sociolinguist who studies the way language shapes our lives. Her latest book (Tannen 1998) is an insightful description of the many ways our current patterns of language represent and reinforce what she calls the ‘argument culture’. In this culture, even the most complex problems are cast as polar opposites. All discussion is cast as a debate between these two extremes in which one side is right while the other is wrong. The media, the law, politics, and especially academia are all caught in the argument culture, and its influence and control over our lives is increasing. The problem is that, while there is nothing inherently wrong with debate and direct confrontation on some topics, it does not work for all topics. Certainly, the complex problems that are the focus of *Ecological Economics* require a more multifaceted, complex approach—one that encourages real dialogue and does not cast every discussion as a zero-sum, win-lose, either-or dichotomy.

The current structure of academic disciplines reinforces the argument culture, and it takes con-

stant vigilance to resist it. There is an almost obsessive desire in academia to stake out intellectual turf and defend it against outsiders, because that is the kind of behavior which is most highly rewarded. As Tannen notes:

“Throughout our educational system the most pervasive inheritance is the conviction that issues have two sides, that knowledge is best gained through debate, that ideas should be presented orally to an audience that does its best to poke holes and find weaknesses, and that to get recognition, one has to ‘stake out a position’ in opposition to another” (pp. 261).

The argument culture encourages defining and protecting disciplinary territories on the intellectual landscape. Sharp boundaries between disciplines, unique languages and cultures within disciplines, and lack of any overarching view makes problems which cross disciplinary boundaries very difficult, if not impossible, to deal with. There are also large gaps in the landscape which are not covered by any discipline. From within the argument culture, one might think that

---

\* Tel.: +1 410 3267263; fax: +1 410 3267354; e-mail: costza@cbl.umces.edu

the main role of ecological economics would be to fill in the empty space between the mutually exclusive territories of economics and ecology. One of the most frequently asked questions about ecological economics is: ‘how is it different from these other disciplines?’ The best answer is that it transcends the argument culture and its territorial disciplines. It tries to create an intellectual culture where the boundaries between disciplines have been eliminated and the problems and questions are seen as a seamless whole. This culture can coexist and interact with the conventional disciplinary structure (which is still a necessary and useful way to address many problems). The transdisciplinary view provides an overarching coherence that can tie disciplinary knowledge together and address the increasingly important problems that cannot be addressed within the disciplinary structure. In this sense, ecological economics is not an alternative to any of the existing disciplines. Rather it is a completely new way of looking at the problem that can add value to the existing approaches and address some of their fundamental deficiencies. It is not a question of ‘conventional economics’ versus ‘ecological economics’ in the typical dichotomy of the argument culture. It is rather conventional economics as one input (among many) to a broader and richer transdisciplinary synthesis, which is ecological economics. This transdisciplinary way of looking at the world is essential if we are to achieve the goals of a sustainable society.

The argument culture is so pervasive in the world today that it is difficult to break from its grasp. Even within the ecological economics community, some continue to argue that what we should be doing is differentiating ourselves from other disciplines. For example, some argue that there is ‘too much of this discipline’ or ‘too much

of that conventional approach’ appearing in the journal. They imply that if an article overlaps substantially with some existing discipline, it cannot also be ecological economics. This only reinforces the argument culture and misses what truly differentiates ecological economics—that it is a transdiscipline.

Tannen concludes her book with a summary of what’s fundamentally wrong with the argument culture. She notes that:

“What’s wrong is that it obscures the complexity of research. Fitting ideas into a particular camp requires you to oversimplify them. Again, disinformation and distortion can result. Less knowledge is gained, not more. And time spent attacking an opponent or defending against attacks is not spent doing something else—like original research” (pp. 289).

She goes on to challenge us to find ways to go beyond the argument culture:

“It will take creativity to find ways to blunt the most dangerous blades of the argument culture. It’s a challenge we must undertake, because our public and private lives are at stake” (pp. 290)

Ecological economics has taken up this challenge and, indeed, it will take continued creativity and diligence on all our parts to make it work. We have made tremendous progress in the last 10 years, but we still have far to go. We must continue to find ways to transcend the argument culture because, as Tannen says, both our public and private lives are at stake.

## References

- Tannen, D., 1998. *The Argument Culture: Moving from Debate to Dialogue*. Random House, New York, p. 348.