Understanding How Conversations Change Over Time

“Understanding How Conversations Change Over Time” was written by Michael Charlton.

Writers do not make their claims in an enormous blank room where no one else is and nothing else has ever happened. Writers make their claims in the real world where people with other opinions, values, beliefs, and experiences live. To make a claim is to enter into a conversation with these people. The rhetorician Kenneth Burke once famously described this as a parlor or a party to which you have come late to find out that people are already in heated discussions about a topic. Everyone has been in these kinds of arguments.

For example, you arrive somewhere to meet two friends and discover that they are discussing where to go to dinner or what movie to see. Each friend presents his or her argument, setting out evidence for why this restaurant or movie is a good choice, and each friend pokes holes in the other person’s argument, pointing out why you would not enjoy that restaurant or movie. You are expected to take a role in this discussion. Maybe you take a stand with one friend over the other or maybe you try to reach a compromise and propose a third restaurant or movie that everyone could accept. This can lead to even further discussion.

This discussion between three friends is somewhat like Burke’s idea of the parlor but there are differences. Eventually the conversation between the three friends will reach an end: they will go to dinner or a movie, perhaps, or they will all go home. Everyone entered into the conversation, made his or her claims, responded to other people, and went on with their lives. Burke, however, was talking about the conversations and arguments that take place in the larger culture and the world as a whole. In his metaphor, the conversation never truly ends. A writer enters into it at a particular place and time and tries to react to everything that has come before. He or she may even be influential in changing the direction or tone of the conversation by looking at it from a new angle or focusing on a different aspect of it (for example, maybe the three friends need to consider whether there is a certain type of food or movie one of them dislikes or maybe the three friends need to consider a different activity).

For most complex social issues, the conversation never truly ends. It may, however, change over time. This can happen for many reasons. It may be that social values change in the larger culture, such as the growing focus on children’s welfare that led to an increase in child labor laws and child protective services in the early twentieth century. It may be the impact of large historical events, such as the impact that the 9/11 attacks had on public perceptions of airport safety and screening procedures. It may be
that new scientific or other sorts of data raise concerns, such as the shifting dialogue over climate change and global warming. It may even be that new groups of people enter the conversation, such as the increased prominence in recent decades of advocates for equality based on sexual orientation.

For example, one of the most widely discussed social trends in American society is the increasing prominence of women in the workplace after the Second World War. At the time, this was a controversial development for many people, who felt that women were leaving traditional gender roles and the home in order to pursue work conventionally identified with men. (Although, as some historians have noted, women have always played an important role in businesses from agriculture to manufacturing and so this conversation is far older than the mid-twentieth century.) Today, most viewers witnessing this 1959 educational film entitled *The Trouble with Women* find its depiction of female workers to be so incredibly dated that it is almost comic: [http://archive.org/details/trouble_with_women](http://archive.org/details/trouble_with_women)

Changes in social values have rendered the film’s discussion between two men about female employees ridiculous. Both the “con” side (with his insistence that female workers are inherently inferior) and the “pro” side (with his argument that what he calls “gals” or “girls” can be just as good) have no mainstream place in contemporary discussions of gender in the workplace. The entire question up for discussion (can women fit into the workplace?) is one that has been answered by fifty years of history in which women have fully integrated into the American workplace and social values around gender issues and equality have changed.

However, this does not mean that the conversation has ended. Rather, the conversation about whether women should be allowed in the workplace has morphed into a discussion of how both genders are treated in the workplace. Contemporary discussions are more likely to focus on income disparity, the balance between family life and childcare and the workplace, why certain professions are still dominated by one gender, etc. Among other factors, the increased prominence of women and the rise in social movements like second wave feminism gave women a greater voice in the public sphere and a greater ability to steer the conversation.

Conversations do not change overnight. Consider the following two videos which address women’s rights and women in the workplace. The first is from a 1975 speech by First Lady Betty Ford. The second is from a video created by Google promoting the role women play in leadership positions at the company. What changes in the conversation take place between the educational film and Ford’s speech? What changes in the conversation take place between Ford’s speech and what is essentially
a public relations commercial for Google? What might it say about the current conversation around women in the workplace that Google felt it necessary to create this video? How has the presentation of female professionals changed from 1959 to this 2011 spot? Why might this speaker (Google) be less interested in contemporary issues like income disparity?

[Click here for “First Lady Betty Ford delivers revolutionary speech on the need for equal rights of women in 1975” (Youtube Video)]

[Click here for “Women in Leadership at Google” (Youtube Video)]

Turn to your own writing. Consider your own specific topic and the conversation surrounding it. Chances are this topic has not suddenly arisen without any prior history or discussion. As you enter the conversation, ask yourself some questions about the history of this particular conversation. Integrate these questions into your research process and seek out answers in your writing. At the same time, think about the present state of the conversation and what you have to contribute.

What came before I entered the room?
- Who are the major groups or points-of-view talking to each other?
- When did these groups start talking to each other?
- What values or beliefs did these groups argue about at the beginning?
- What events started this conversation?
- What sort of data or evidence did these groups present at the beginning?

What is happening in this room right now?
- Is the conversation still between these same groups or points-of-view? Have these groups changed their minds at all? Have new groups entered the conversation?
- Are these two groups still arguing based on the same values or beliefs?
- Have new events caused this conversation to change in any significant way? What events would those be?
- What new data or evidence do these groups present to support their arguments?

What do I think will happen in this room next?
- How likely is either group to change its point-of-view in the near future? Why might this happen?
- Is there any indication that the groups are shifting what values or beliefs they promote?
- What upcoming events are likely to change this conversation in any significant way?
- What could my argument or part in the conversation do to shift this discussion?
Works Cited