

Prepared for: **For the Sake of Argument**

For the Sake of Argument: Cultivating Understandings, Skills, and Emotional Resilience

September 2024

Executive Summary

Background. Launched by Robbie Gringras and Abi Dauber Sterne, For the Sake of Argument (FSA) is an innovative educational project aimed at harnessing the energy and interactivity of live disagreement for the health of the Jewish People in general and Israel engagement in particular. Since its launch, Gringras and Dauber Sterne have been committed to studying the impact of their efforts. Most recently, they partnered with the Rosov Consulting team to measure the impact of “dosage,” the amount of time spent in FSA sessions, on the outcomes produced.

Study design. The study was conducted over the course of two blocks of time as part of collaborations with Limmud UK and UJA Federation of Greater Toronto. At Limmud, participants took part either in a 45-minute, one-off session or a series of four 45-minute sessions over the course of four days. In Toronto, they participated in either a one-time 90-minute session or two 90-minute sessions. 190 participants completed a survey at the start of their first FSA sessions and also at the end of their last one; 15 session participants were also interviewed about three months after their sessions.

Findings. Data collected in these ways suggest the following conclusions:

1. Both shorter (90-minute) and longer (180-minute) dosages of FSA programming are associated with **positive gains in participants’ understanding of different types of arguments**. FSA provides participants with a cognitive map that helps them approach such situations with greater confidence and composure.
2. Longer exposure to FSA is associated with **strong skill-building outcomes**. Shorter exposure has a weaker effect in this respect.
3. **Positive emotional outcomes** (confidence to participate in arguments and emotional resilience) are produced both by shorter and longer exposures to FSA. Shorter exposure matches the impact of longer exposure.
4. Both survey and interview data suggest that **enhanced cognitive outcomes contribute to enhanced emotional outcomes**. Becoming smarter about arguments seems to help people become closer to those with whom they argue.
5. Survey data point to **strong gains in knowledge about issues in contemporary Israel** and in participants’ interest in learning more, thanks to participating in FSA sessions. Greater knowledge gains are also correlated with higher levels of interest to learn more.

Background

“For the Sake of Argument is an innovative educational project aimed at harnessing the energy and interactivity of live disagreement for the health of the Jewish People in general and Israel engagement in particular.” This is how Robbie Gringras and Abi Dauber Sterne describe the initiative they launched in 2022 with the support of the Jim Joseph Foundation. The initiative is underpinned by three pillars: a curriculum of carefully crafted stories designed to provoke disagreements about issues central to the State of Israel and the Jewish world; a newly developed “pedagogy of argument” to help learners gain the confidence and know-how to have healthy arguments; and a pool of trained facilitators, led by Gringras and Dauber Sterne, with the ability to maximize the potential of the stories and the pedagogy.

Since the start of the initiative, Gringras and Dauber Sterne have been committed to studying the impact of their efforts. They have sought to pinpoint the specific outcomes created by exposure to FSA resources and pedagogies, measure those outcomes where possible, and then identify the conditions and content (the inputs) that make a discernable contribution to the outcomes produced.

Since early in the initiative, the FSA team has partnered with Rosov Consulting in an evolving experiment. In the first phase of our work, by observing FSA sessions and interviewing FSA participants, we documented some of the outcomes generated by participating in an FSA experience and examined some of the inputs that seem to moderate or intensify FSA’s impact. Some of the outcomes identified included the ability to discern different kinds of arguments, greater willingness to discuss previously avoided topics, enhanced readiness to change one’s mind amid a disagreement, and knowledge of controversial issues in Israel today. The moderating variables encompassed the background knowledge of participants, their personal connection to the content, session context (whether opt-in or required by an educational institution), and participants’ relationships with one another (for example, whether or not they knew one another prior to the session and their comfort disagreeing).

In the second phase of the study, the research team focused on measuring the contribution of one specific, controllable variable that the first phase of research suggested has an important influence on the outcomes produced by an FSA experience: dosage, or the amount of time spent in FSA sessions. More time means greater exposure to FSA’s pedagogy and more FSA stories read. This “input” was selected for examination not only because it can be controlled in the context of an empirical study, but also because the FSA team hopes these research findings would help determine the intensity of the programming it should offer partner organizations to achieve a minimal desired impact. Could they feel confident that they would have a desired impact on participants if those participants took part in only one or two sessions, for example?¹

This report describes how the second phase of research was conducted, with what content, in what contexts, and with which populations. It reports the findings gathered and then provides reflections on the meaning of those findings in relation to published research literature regarding the use of argument as a learning vehicle

¹ This phase of the research also sought to explore the extent to which the age of participants (specifically whether teenage or older) was associated with differences in the outcomes produced. Unfortunately, challenges experienced while convening teen groups and collecting data from them meant that this comparison is not possible at this time.

(a central feature of the FSA approach). Finally, the report considers the implications of the findings for the future work of the FSA team.

Study Design

The study was conducted over the course of two separate blocks of time as part of collaborations with two distinct partners: Limmud UK and UJA Federation of Greater Toronto.

Limmud UK: In December 2023, Limmud participants were invited to take part either in a 45-minute, one-off session with the FSA team or a series of four 45-minute sessions over the course of four days. Those who participated in the one-off session experienced the facilitated reading of one FSA story; those who participated in the four-session option experienced the facilitated reading of four FSA stories. The participants included the full gamut of individuals who attend Limmud UK, with a wide range of ages, political opinions, and familiarity with Israel. Because of the many competing attractions at Limmud, participants were offered a financial incentive of £120 if they took part in all four sessions.

UJA Federation of Greater Toronto: In March 2024, UJA Federation advertised opportunities for Jewish community professionals and both Jewish and non-Jewish adults more generally to participate in an in-person experience with the FSA team. Those who registered opted to participate in either a one-time 90-minute session or two 90-minute sessions. Participants in the one-time session experienced the facilitated reading of two FSA stories, and participants in the two-session offering experienced the facilitated reading of four FSA stories.

In addition, UJA Federation recruited students from local Jewish all-day high schools and Jewish afternoon high school programs to participate either in a one-time 90-minute session where they read two stories or two 90-minute sessions where they read four stories in total.

In all instances, the sessions were constructed around the same set of four originally composed stories drawn from the book *For the Sake of Argument*. Participants typically devoted the same amount of time to each story, meaning that if they took part in more or longer sessions, they did not spend more time on each story but read more stories. See Appendix A for a list of the stories used and a summary of their content.

Data Sources

All participants were asked to complete a survey both at the start of their first FSA experience and at the end of their last one, whether that was at the end of one, two, or four sessions. As seen below, the survey was designed to capture changes in:

1. Participants' understanding of different types of disagreement and the possible outcomes associated with each type.
2. Participants' confidence and ability to participate in different types of disagreements.
3. Participants' emotional orientation to and experience of such disagreements.
4. Participants' understanding of and interest in the Israel-related topics they explored during FSA sessions.

Due to logistical challenges, not all participants completed both pre- and post-experience surveys. In total, 190 individuals completed both the pre- and post-experience survey (i.e., were matched pair respondents), as specified in Figure 1:

Figure 1: Research Sample²

	Number of Matched Pair Respondents	Number of FSA Stories
45-Minute Exposure (Limmud Only)	14	1
90-Minute Exposure (Toronto Only)	76	2
180-Minute Exposure (Limmud and Toronto) ³	100	4
TOTAL	190	

Between three and five months after the FSA sessions, all participants were invited to a 30-minute interview designed to explore why they had taken part, what they had learned, and in what ways their learning and experience with FSA had informed their stance toward and participation in disagreements or arguments. A small subsample of 15 participants were interviewed: five Limmud participants, five Toronto teens, and five Toronto adults. In the following sections, findings from these interviews are integrated with those from the survey responses. We treat these data with caution because of the small sample size. Nevertheless, the findings are still useful for helping to establish themes we will explore more broadly in one more survey to be distributed to all participants about six months after their FSA experience. This additional survey will explore the longer-lasting contributions of the FSA experience to the ways in which people participate in disagreements and to what people know about Israel. The data collected at that time will be reported in a separate memo.

² While we display the data from the 45-minute exposure group throughout the report, it is important to note the small size of the group and the limitations involved in interpreting and generalizing the data from this group.

³ Nearly all of the Toronto participants in the 180-minute exposure group identified themselves as Jewish communal or educational professionals. Very few of the Toronto participants in the 90-minute exposure group identified as such. We unfortunately do not have these data about the Limmud participants.

Findings

Motivations to Participate

Participants were not randomly assigned to the session dosage they experienced; they chose how much time they wanted to spend engaging with FSA. Interview data confirm that they did so for a variety of reasons. Some took part because they were intrigued by the advertised content and thought it could be useful to them, others because they had enjoyed previous educational experiences with Dauber Sterne or Gringras and presumed that what they offered would be valuable, and, in a couple of instances at Limmud, because the financial incentive was highly attractive.

“I wanted to take up this opportunity ... to learn more, especially during heightened times, about how to conduct conversations and arguments.” (Toronto, teen)

“We’re having a hard time. I’m married to someone who’s not Jewish. I have a lot of family who are not Jewish, lots of friends, mixed life and lots of different things. Like my one brother has converted to Catholicism. My other brother is Orthodox Jewish. So, I have a lot of people I have to talk to that I love, but I don’t know how to interact when they bring up a topic that’s difficult.” (Toronto, adult)

“I know Robbie Gringras’s work from many years ago and know that he’s a good presenter and thought anything that he’s involved in is probably interesting.” (Limmud, older adult)

“There was a £120 gift card attached to it, and I’m not making any money this year, so it helped offset the cost of Limmud.” (Limmud, young adult)

Concepts to Work With

The FSA team seeks to help people distinguish between different types of arguments in the hope that, by developing a conceptual map of arguments and disagreements, they might help people find ways to better understand one another and more readily interact with those with whom they disagree. Knowing about different possible types of argument might result in people bringing different, more constructive, goals to their disagreements. Specifically, Dauber Sterne and Gringras introduce participants to differences between three types of disagreement: **debate**, **healthy argument**, and **negotiation**.

The pre/post surveys asked participants to consider their ability to distinguish between a debate, healthy argument, and negotiation, and to rate their skill level accordingly. The survey data in Figure 2 show that overall, participants better understood the differences between these concepts following participation in the FSA session(s): fewer participants considered themselves “novices” or “beginners,” and more participants considered themselves “advanced” or “experts” after their participation. In addition, the magnitude of change in participants’ understanding of the differences between these concepts was greater the more time they spent in an FSA session. There was a noteworthy increase over time in the proportion of participants who considered themselves “advanced” among those who participated in the 90-minute exposure groups, and an even greater increase in the proportion of participants who considered themselves “advanced” among the 180-minute exposure group.

Figure 2: Self-Rated Ability to Recognize Different Types Of Arguments

	Aggregate (n=190)		45-Minute Exposure (n=14)		90-Minute Exposure (n=76)		180-Minute Exposure (n=100)	
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST
Novice (have never tried)	15%	3%	14%	0%	20%	5%	11%	1%
Beginner (starting to develop)	27%	11%	7%	21%	29%	16%	29%	6%
Competent (can do the basics)	39%	43%	43%	36%	34%	49%	43%	39%
Advanced (can do skillfully)	17%	40%	36%	29%	14%	28%	17%	52%
Expert (complete mastery)	1%	3%	0%	14%	3%	3%	0%	2%

Interviewees elaborated on these changes in their own words:

“The seminar simply gave me an architecture, a framework which has the advantage of being comprehensive, and makes space for all the variants rather nicely. The fact that there’s only three categories is also a big fat plus; three is a magic number of things that a person can remember easily.”
(Toronto, adult)

Interviewees also explained why this learning was personally significant, and why it was not just an insight with little practical application:

“Most of the time, I think of argument in what they call debate terms. I convince with the aim to win. But a healthy argument means we grow, gain additional perspectives, learn, and enjoy. So that I found really good ... just a sort of different framing of what argument is. Like they said, argument has the potential to make us smarter and bring us closer together.” (Limmud, young adult)

Two additional points are worth making about these concepts. First, it may be sufficient to grasp that there are three different types of arguments than to fully or accurately know what those three types of arguments are. As the following (misremembered) response indicates, simply knowing that not every disagreement must result in a winner or loser—that there are different types of disagreement—may be useful in and of itself.

“One of the key things I came away with is that there’s three different types of conversations, and I can’t even remember really what they were. One was a compromise, one was a debate, and the other one was, which I can’t even remember, which is the thing I embraced, is having a good radical conversation or a conversation [where] you can both have your views.” (Toronto, adult)

Second—and this may only be a coincidental artifact of our sample—none of the teenage interviewees mentioned this conceptual framework or its utility as one of their takeaways from the FSA session. Other features of the FSA experience (such as practical skills for participating in healthy arguments) resonated with them, but not their learning about this conceptual distinction. These conceptual distinctions spoke most strongly only to young adult or adult interviewees. This is a pattern that calls for further exploration across a larger sample.

Skills and Know-How

FSA’s implicit theory is that people need to learn how to conduct themselves in ways that can produce healthy or productive disagreements. Such behaviors are not intuitive and have been inhibited by contemporary cultural norms. People need to learn and become practiced at these skills if their disagreements are to become healthier. To this end, two linked skills that FSA seeks to cultivate are those of “gathering new perspectives” and “allowing space to hear other people’s opinions.”

The pre/post surveys asked participants to consider their abilities in each of these areas and to rate their skill level accordingly. Here, too, the survey data in Figure 3 show that, overall, fewer participants considered themselves “novices” or “beginners” after an FSA experience, while more participants considered themselves “advanced” or “experts” afterward. In addition, the greatest magnitude of change, in these respects, occurred among the participants who had the greatest exposure to FSA’s principles, stories, and methods over the course of 180 minutes. These participants display the most noticeable and dramatic increase in the proportion of “advanced” participants compared to their starting point. In fact, the changes observed among the 45-minute and 90-minute exposure groups are fairly minimal and are concentrated in their ability to “allow space to hear others’ opinions.”

Figure 3a: Self-Rated Ability to Gather New Perspectives

	Aggregate (n=190)		45-Minute Exposure (n=14)		90-Minute Exposure (n=76)		180-Minute Exposure (n=100)	
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST
Novice (have never tried)	2%	0%	0%	0%	3%	0%	1%	0%
Beginner (starting to develop)	19%	9%	0%	0%	25%	18%	18%	3%
Competent (can do the basics)	40%	43%	29%	29%	39%	49%	43%	40%
Advanced (can do skillfully)	37%	44%	57%	64%	33%	31%	36%	51%
Expert (complete mastery)	2%	5%	14%	7%	0%	3%	2%	6%

Figure 3b: Self-Rated Ability to Allow Space to Hear Others’ Opinions

	Aggregate (n=190)		45-Minute Exposure (n=14)		90-Minute Exposure (n=76)		180-Minute Exposure (n=100)	
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST
Novice (have never tried)	2%	0%	0%	0%	3%	0%	1%	0%
Beginner (starting to develop)	20%	13%	7%	0%	25%	23%	18%	8%
Competent (can do the basics)	46%	39%	21%	29%	49%	44%	46%	37%
Advanced (can do skillfully)	30%	42%	64%	71%	21%	31%	32%	46%
Expert (complete mastery)	3%	6%	7%	0%	3%	3%	3%	9%

Again, it is instructive to see how interviewees described these shifts in their own words, and how, in particular, they highlighted the acquisition of listening skills or learning “to take turns” in a disagreement. In some respects, their reflections point to a broader set of skills cultivated by these experiences that were not fully explored by the pre/post survey and that should be examined in future research. In contrast to what was noted above, it was mainly the younger interviewees who emphasized having gained these kinds of skills from the sessions, a suggestive pattern that again calls for further examination.

“The information they gave us about when you’re in a conversation with someone, to try to make sure that you’re listening to them, and that you’re using certain key phrases—I found that really actually worked. I have problems with talking over people. And so, it did actually help to recognize, okay, if I’ve been talking for a long time, you might want to end off with, ‘But I want to hear what you have to say’.... Now I get to actually hear other opinions.” (Toronto, teen)

“The active listening that was used, I think, in some of the sessions and the skills around active listening. I found particularly helpful the speech mirroring kind of thing, saying, ‘So I understand from what you’ve just said to mean X, is that right?’ That I use all the time.” (Limmud, young adult)

“Even if I disagreed or even strongly disagreed, I definitely waited until they finished. I wanted to hear what they had to say. So, I think just simple conversations with friends, even with family, I think all areas really, I’ve used FSA to help with that. Yeah!” (Toronto, teen)

“The main thing I took away was it doesn’t hurt to listen without interrupting. You can get your turn in, but you can wait. ... I use what I’ve learned in the sessions mainly regarding listening. ... In the past I would probably have just gone for the jugular, and now I might just nod and go, ‘Aha, maybe we should talk about that sometime.’” (Limmud, older adult)

Confidence and Comfort

The FSA team aims that people not only develop skills with which to participate in healthy disagreements but that they should also feel more comfortable and less frustrated with being in disagreement. Fortified with both relevant skills and higher levels of comfort, the goal is that people will be more confident about entering situations of disagreement.

Various measures of the participants’ emotional states indicate that such outcomes did indeed develop across all the exposure groups, that is, whether individuals participated in the 90-minute or 180-minute sessions. (As noted earlier, it is a little difficult to meaningfully interpret the data from the 45-minute exposure group given the small sample size.) The responses in Figure 4 show that at the end of the session(s), participants felt substantially less frustrated about not changing other people’s minds and reported benefiting from engaging in an argument, whether that meant feeling smarter after the argument or closer to the people with whom they disagreed.

Figure 4: Attitudinal and Emotional Outcomes

Answer options included: *strongly disagree*, *disagree*, *neither agree nor disagree*, *agree*, and *strongly agree*. The percentages of participants who selected *agree* or *strongly agree* (top two scale points) are displayed here for the first three statements; *disagree* or *strongly disagree* (bottom two scale points) for the last two statements.

	Aggregate (n=190)		45-Minute Exposure (n=14)		90-Minute Exposure (n=76)		180-Minute Exposure (n=100)	
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST
I felt smarter afterward	39%	54%	50%	36%	36%	51%	39%	59%
I was enriched by the conversation	56%	89%	64%	71%	59%	89%	52%	91%
I felt closer to the other person	26%	68%	29%	64%	27%	72%	25%	66%
I felt frustrated because we did not reach an agreement	24%	66%	36%	57%	19%	71%	27%	64%
I felt frustrated because I did not change the other person's mind	20%	68%	29%	71%	19%	64%	20%	70%

Interviewees shared some of the real-world expressions of these emotional shifts:

“Actually, since this session, I reconnected with two old friends that completely went off the rails on the antivaccine stuff. ... All of a sudden, it’s like, oh, I can agree on one thing and disagree on another. ... Like it’s not always happening ... I’m putting myself out there more.” (Toronto, adult)

“Literally last night, I was just with friends, and we were very close friends, so I definitely felt like I could say my thoughts and opinions. And things came up just about politics and different topics, like pretty classic discussions that come up with politics. And I was very open to hearing my friends’ opinions and hearing them out and listening.” (Toronto, teen)

A series of survey questions probed changes in a specific set of positive and negative emotions associated with four features of being in an argument: (1) expressing a view about contentious matters, (2) disagreeing with others, (3) articulating something about which one is unsure, and (4) changing one’s mind. Consistently, across all four features, respondents’ negative emotions (“being uncomfortable,” “challenged,” and “nervous”) declined and their positive emotions (being “willing” and “confident”) increased from the pre-session to post-session survey, as shown in Figure 5. For the most part, we observed these changes across the gamut of participants, irrespective of how lengthy their exposure was to FSA. These patterns suggest that individuals’ general emotional orientation to taking part in arguments improved, with the greatest change in all four instances occurring in respect to participants’ level of confidence.

Figure 5: Emotions Involved When Engaging with Various Elements of Arguments (Aggregate; n=190)

	Uncomfortable		Challenged		Nervous		Willing		Confident	
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST	PRE	POST
Changing your mind during or after a conversation	21%	8%	48%	27%	15%	7%	45%	69%	9%	27%
Discussing controversial or contentious topics	35%	17%	34%	31%	24%	15%	36%	63%	21%	32%
Expressing when you are uncertain about your ideas or opinions	30%	11%	25%	16%	20%	14%	40%	62%	20%	31%
Sharing when you disagree with the group	27%	14%	29%	22%	25%	15%	38%	58%	18%	35%

Cognitive Change Feeding Emotional Change?

Interviewees helped surface a suggestive relationship between cognitive and emotional outcomes: interviewees proposed how gaining greater clarity about what to expect from a disagreement (the conceptual map mentioned above) and knowing how to conduct oneself in these situations (acquiring skills) can feed a changed emotional state—and specifically enhance confidence to be in disagreement with others. The following explanation includes some confusions, but it highlights how enhanced knowledge and skills fuel greater confidence:

“[The session] sort of gave me some tips on how to ensure that you are remaining civil. ... So I think I’m more confident in my ability to do that. [And in terms of what people would get from the session], if they lack confidence in discussing controversial topics [or in saying] their opinion, they’ll become more confident in that way. And also just the skills to have those conversations. I forget exactly what it was, but there were bullet points with different points. Also keywords like how to move in between topics or say you respectfully disagree.” (Toronto, student)

An adult, quoted earlier regarding the many challenging family situations she faces, gave voice to a similar emotional shift, presenting herself as becoming braver about such situations. As with other patterns surfaced by the interview data, this is a phenomenon worth exploring further:

“I feel braver now ... my problem is always, I listen and I hear everybody’s perspectives and I understand, but I don’t always speak what I think. ... I am realizing I don’t have to be saying, ‘Oh, I agree with all of that.’ ... I can have different views. I don’t have to be liberal minded on everything. Some things are bad. Like people coming in on October 7 and destroying a community, that is bad.” (Toronto, adult)

Knowledge and Interest

Until now, the FSA team has developed content (specifically newly composed stories) to support conversations about aspects of contemporary Israel that are often so charged that people struggle to engage in civil conversation about them. The pre/post survey explored how knowledgeable participants perceived themselves to be about various contemporary Israeli issues both before and after the session. In this instance,

dosage was not relevant since all participants explored topics only once; those who participated in more or longer sessions simply explored more topics. (As indicated below, responses are shown only from those who explored the particular topic, not from the full sample of respondents.)

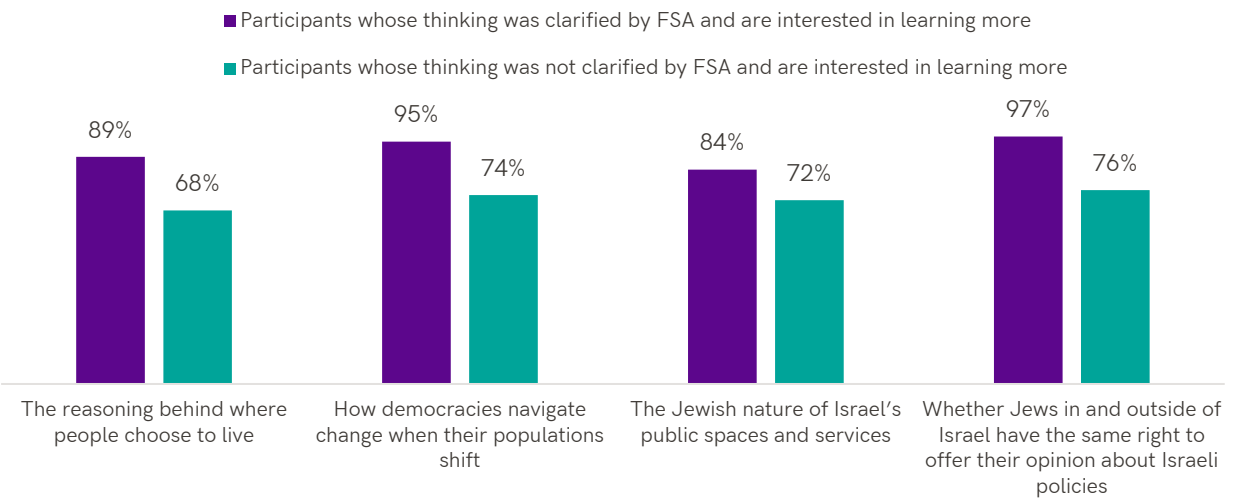
As seen in Figure 6, respondents rate their knowledge as being greater in the post-session survey for all of the topics covered in the sessions. With the exception of the first topic (internal displacement during the Israel-Hamas war), these increases were found to be meaningfully different. It is possible that respondents already had a fairly high level of knowledge in this first topic area ahead of their FSA session(s) and therefore did not exhibit much change in this area.

Figure 6: Self-Reported Knowledge About Specific Topics
Participants were asked how much they know about certain topics. Answer options included: *nothing*, *a little bit*, *some*, *a fair amount*, and *a lot*. The percentages of participants who selected *some*, *a fair amount*, or *a lot* (top three scale points) are displayed here.

	PRE	POST
Internal displacement during the Israeli-Hamas war (n=190; covered by everybody)	65%	72%
Immigrants’ integration and rights in their new country (n=100; only covered by 180-minute exposure group)	48%	67%
Religion in public space in Israel (n=176; only covered by 90-minute and 180-minute exposure groups)	53%	75%
Israel-Diaspora relations (n=100; only covered by 180-minute exposure group)	61%	85%

After their final session, between one-third and two-thirds of respondents reported that their thinking about the topics raised had been clarified by the sessions. Presumably, this response is related to becoming better informed about the issues. Furthermore, still higher proportions (at least two-thirds) of participants expressed interest in speaking more about the topics and learning more about them. Additional correlational analysis shows a relationship between an increase in knowledge and an increase in interest; those whose knowledge increased were also more likely to express interest in learning more, as shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Relationship Between Increased Knowledge in Specific Topics Areas and an Interest in Learning More



It is only in respect to gains in knowledge about Israel that survey data diverge from interview data. As seen in Figure 6, pre/post survey responses indicate a substantial increase in participants' knowledge about contemporary Israeli issues and, as seen in Figure 7, in their interest to learn more. Few interviewees by contrast reported gaining new knowledge about Israel; many more highlighted their acquisition of new understandings, skills, and readiness to participate in arguments. In fact, about half of the adult interviewees noted that if the goal of FSA is to change the way people participate in arguments, then the content does not need to be limited to Israel-related matter. They saw the Israel-focused stories as a means to an end—not an end in themselves. As one older interviewee put it, “[The content, or conceptual architecture of argument] has merit way beyond the Jewish or Israeli community.” Some made this point more critically, arguing that they were confused about what the sessions were seeking to accomplish.

“Because all the examples and everything they do is a way of talking about the complexities of life in Israel, that felt like, oh, that’s the real content, it’s the complexities of life in Israel, not how do you have a healthy argument.” (Limmud, older adult)

Another participant raised similar concerns while signaling that he did nevertheless come away with new knowledge about Israel:

“I learned some things about Israel. I’ve never visited Israel, and I did learn about transportation and which city is the only city that has public transit on Shabbat? I think that’s Haifa. And a little bit about that. And my concern initially in the sessions was it was too particular to Israel. If you are going to be working throughout the world, you have to have, in my opinion, you should be using dilemmas that are applicable everywhere.” (Toronto, adult)

We caution against drawing strong conclusions from these interview responses, especially when they diverge to such a degree from what is suggested by survey data. Either way, these responses suggest that the FSA team needs to better clarify the relationships between gaining subject-matter knowledge and improving the quality of arguments. Both outcomes are positively influenced by the FSA experience, but some participants see these outcomes as part of a zero-sum game.

Application of the Learning

Interviews were conducted between three and five months after the sessions took place. Many of the comments included above indicate that, over the course of those months, participants have utilized insights and skills they gained from the sessions in personal and professional contexts, whether with friends, family, or colleagues. As described in the last sections, there is evidence that thanks to the insights and understandings they gained, some of the participants have felt more confident about engaging in challenging conversations and more emotionally resilient when finding themselves in situations of disagreement. And as will be clear by now, these disagreements have not been limited to disputes about Israel.

Interviewees who could not point to strong examples of applying their learning tended to offer two explanations for why this was the case: first, they described being already familiar with other approaches to conflict resolution, mediation, and negotiation. FSA, they explained, reinforced things they already knew rather than initiating them into new ways of navigating disagreements. Their familiarity with other approaches was part of what drew them to the session(s) in the first place. The following interviewee conveys this sentiment well:

“I feel like it just sort of built upon stuff I had already been doing intuitively or hearing from conflict mediators or peace and reconciliation facilitators or other sources. ... I think someone who has less of a background in conflict mediation would perhaps get a lot more out of it.” (Limmud, young adult)

Other interviewees cautioned that the sessions were quite brief, and while they were informative and inspiring, they did not set them up to begin acting differently in their lives.

“I remember at the time thinking some of the principles or some of the tools were like, oh, that’s really interesting. It’s really smart. And I wrote it down on my piece of paper, but I didn’t internalize it.” (Limmud, older adult)

“I mean, the FSA was one day and a couple of hours. It didn’t have that deep of an effect, which isn’t to say that it didn’t have an effect. ... I mean the impact is there, but it’s not, at least it doesn’t feel that significant at this point.” (Toronto, adult)

As already mentioned, our follow-up survey with the full sample of participants will help establish how representative these responses are as well as what factors enhance the longer-term impact of an FSA experience.

Contextualizing the Findings

These last comments help contextualize FSA’s accomplishments in relation to published research about other efforts to cultivate democratic deliberation (Samuelsson, 2016), “open political and social dialogue (Campbell, 2006),” and productive dissent (Brohinsky et al., 2022)—a variegated field that Campbell (2006, 2019) broadly characterizes as Civic Education. The outcomes tracked by pre/post data from FSA sessions compare favorably with other educational interventions and experiments, especially in FSA’s cultivation of cognitive, behavioral, and attitudinal outcomes: a conceptual map, practical skills, and a changed emotional orientation to disagreement. Studies of other interventions have tended to focus on either their cognitive outcomes or their interpersonal or social–emotional outcomes, rarely on both.⁴ The FSA team is surely on to something important by weaving together attention to both the cognitive and emotional dimensions of arguments.

Almost all of the studies reported in research literature on these matters assess the impact of interventions that run over the course of a semester or academic year—much longer periods of time than the 45 to 180 minutes of exposure to FSA explored here. The interventions being studied seem to have been designed or were expected to have a cumulative effect over time, while often supported by extensive scaffolding.

If some of the interviewees described the longer-term impacts of the FSA sessions as having been modest, that was surely related to the limited dosage experienced by these interviewees, something they noted themselves. In the next month, our team will be conducting a follow-up survey with all previous survey respondents to explore how widespread such patterns are.

⁴ See, for example, Ersoy, 2018; Yang & Rusli, 2012.

Conclusions

For the Sake of Argument has been launched at a time when people find it increasingly difficult to participate in civil conversation with those with whom they disagree. There have been many accounts of families and communities finding it impossible to talk with one another about Israel because of the heat and pain created by such conversations. In the least bad cases, people simply agree not to talk about Israel; and in really bad cases, they cease talking with one another about anything.

The data presented here suggest the following conclusions:

6. Both shorter (90-minute) and longer (180-minute) dosages of FSA programming are associated with **positive gains in participants' understanding of different types of arguments**. FSA provides them with a cognitive map that helps them approach such situations with greater confidence and composure. These gains are significantly higher among those who experienced longer exposures to FSA pedagogy and content.
7. Longer exposure to FSA is associated with **strong skill-building outcomes**. Shorter exposure has a weaker effect in this respect.
8. **Positive emotional outcomes** (confidence to participate in arguments and emotional resilience) are produced both by shorter and longer exposures to FSA. In this respect, shorter exposure matches the impact of longer exposure.
9. Interview data suggest that **enhanced cognitive outcomes contribute to enhanced emotional outcomes**. To adapt one of FSA's own taglines, becoming smarter about arguments seems to help people become closer to those with whom they argue.
10. Survey data point to **strong gains in knowledge about issues in contemporary Israel** and in participants' interest in learning more, thanks to participating in FSA sessions. Greater knowledge gains are also correlated with higher levels of interest. Interview data are mixed on this issue.
11. Interview data suggest that **the age and life experience of participants might also have an impact** on what people take away from sessions. Older interviewees tended to emphasize cognitive gains (acquiring a conceptual map of different types of arguments, for example); younger interviewees tended to emphasize the skills they gained.
12. **The data on the longer-term outcomes produced by an FSA experience are patchy**; they come from a small subsample of interviewees who argued that people need more extensive exposure to FSA content and pedagogy for new learnings to consistently take root in how they act in situations of disagreement. Even three hours of exposure over the course of two sessions is a limited dose in the face of powerful social and cultural forces. Other Civic Education initiatives usually involve much more exposure to positive interventions.
13. Finally, interview data suggest a possibility that while FSA is making an important contribution to contemporary Jewish life by foregrounding Israel-focused content in its stories, it might further enhance the case it is making for how to change the way people approach disagreement by also including some content that is not related to Israel. Doing so would help broaden the compelling case FSA seeks to make in relation to conversation about Israel.

Questions for Further Study

This study indicates where greater exposure to FSA content and pedagogy enhances and does not enhance the FSA outcomes produced by shorter lengths of exposure. In the course of exploring these issues, additional questions surfaced that merit further exploration:

1. To what extent do younger and older participants derive different benefits from participating in FSA sessions? Interview data suggest that older participants are more likely to derive cognitive benefits while younger participants are more likely to derive skill-building benefits.
2. How much new knowledge about and interest in issues in contemporary Israel do participants gain? Survey data suggest that this is a strong outcome of participation. Interview data are mixed.
3. To what extent do participants apply their learnings and gains from FSA participation to the ways in which they participate in arguments and disagreements? Interview data are unclear on this question.
4. How do gains in skills and understandings contribute to emotional resilience and confidence to participate in arguments? The interplay between cognitive and emotional outcomes may be a special contribution of FSA.

Appendix A: FSA Stories Used in the Study

Participants in the study read one or more of the following For the Sake of Argument stories:

I Was Born Here

A child is angry at her parents for choosing to live somewhere dangerous. Her parents feel that this is the only place they can live, because of their family history and values.

Musica Cubana

A private social club for Cuban expats suddenly has to cope with non-Cubans wishing to participate fully.

Shabbat Mornings with Savta

A grandmother doesn't want her granddaughter to come visit her on Shabbat by public transportation. The grandmother believes a Jewish state should not have buses running on the sabbath, but the granddaughter feels this is hypocritical.

Delete Your Truth

A group of gap-year students argue over who has more of a right to express their opinions about war in Israel: Israelis or Americans.

Appendix B: References

- Brohinsky, J., Sonnert, G., & Sadler, P. (2022). The devil's advocate: Dynamics of dissent in science education. *Science & Education*, 31(3), 575–96. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11191-021-00264-5>
- Campbell, D. E. (2006). What is education's impact on civic and social engagement? In R. Desjardins and T. Schuller (Eds.), *Measuring the effects of education on health and civic engagement: Proceedings of the Copenhagen symposium* (pp. 25–126). OECD.
- Campbell, D. E. (2019). What social scientists have learned about civic education: A review of the literature. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 94(1), 32–47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956x.2019.1553601>
- Ersoy, A. F. and Pehlivan Yilmaz, A. (2018). An alternative method to resolve the classroom problems: Mock trial. *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research*, 18(78), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.14689/ejer.2018.78.1>
- Samuelsson, M. (2016). Education for deliberative democracy: A typology of classroom discussions. *Democracy & Education*, 24(1). <https://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol24/iss1/5>
- Yang, C. H., and Rusli, E. (2012). Using debate as a pedagogical tool in enhancing pre-service teachers' learning and critical thinking. *Journal of International Education Research*, 8(2), 135–44. <https://doi.org/10.19030/jier.v8i2.6833>



Questions?

info@rosovconsulting.com

Website

www.rosovconsulting.com

USA

Tel 510-848-2502

ISRAEL

Tel 972-2-582-4322

© Rosov Consulting