Jim Lehrer, author of *Tension City*, provides more than just insight into the workings of presidential debates. This esteemed moderator is truly a citizen leader model for first year students. He emulates the foundations of citizen leadership: personal responsibility and critical thinking. Lehrer’s *Tension City* sets a foundation so that Longwood Seminar and individuals can delve deeper into what it means to be a model citizen.

Citizen leadership is the outcome of various characteristics, but Longwood focuses on personal responsibility and critical thinking as major themes. Personal responsibility could certainly be described as keeping up hygiene, managing time, and finding intrinsic motivation to work harder, but Jim Lehrer proposes that there is a larger aspect that must be addressed. For him, he felt his personal responsibility was to promote politics and the importance of every citizen’s concerns and questions. He uses debates and moderating to be the platform in which he formulates intense, and typically specific, questions to represent the concerns of citizens, despite knowing that he would face criticism for his bluntness and style. In 1988, Lehrer asked “the polls say the number one domestic issue to a majority of voters is drugs. What is there about these times that drives or draws many Americans to use drugs” (page 32). This question, he admitted, was great for a “think-tank” panel, or a deeper discussion, but terrible for an opening question. Despite his poor timing, the question did attempt to bring a high-profile domestic issue to the forefront so the public could see how the candidates viewed the state of society. As citizen leaders, Longwood students have a personal responsibility to raise their own concerns and ask questions about society. And even still, students should pose questions within the classroom and participate in personal research to achieve a personal responsibility for their education.

During Lehrer’s various debates, both the candidates and he were struck with moments of well-prepared comments and questions and of ill-prepared comebacks. For Lehrer, a moment of great critical thinking came when he was moderating the Kerry/Bush debate. Caught in a moment of panic, he abandoned his strategically organized plan for a more free-form debate; he focused on relevancies and the debate itself to formulate his follow-up questions, rather than a rigid, prepared structure. He claims this to have been one of his smartest moves (page 126). For any student reading this, there are two major takeaways. One, spontaneity has value and therefore change is good. Two, analyzing an issue or situation can have great benefit, and thus, critical thinking is a worthwhile skill to develop and use, in and out of the classroom.

Citizen leadership, a large part of Longwood’s mission for its students, is when citizens are responsible and make decisions for the betterment of society. As college students, many struggle with making the right choices, or choices at all, because they feel they have no say. But like voting, every voice matters. Citizen leadership is not a genetic trait, but it must be developed through personal growth. For college students, to be citizen leaders they must first take personal responsibility and find what they value. Additionally, students must be able to think critically about the problems society is facing and the ways in which they can resolve these issues. Students can be citizen leaders through politics by voicing their opinions on domestic and foreign affairs. By presenting their opinions, they are giving society educated point-of-views that could very well have an impact on thoughts and actions. The effects may be staggeringly beneficial if done with personal responsibility and critical thinking in mind.

Tim Lehrer emulates these ideas. By being a fluid moderator, he is making sure the people feel they are heard and that the candidates are listening and responding to their needs. In one case Gore presented himself as unlikeable, even to his own supporters, because of how he continuously sighed and sneered whenever his opponent was responding. Lehrer’s accidental obliviousness is what allowed Gore to continue making a show of himself. Thus, Gore lost the debate, and public approval, from his Big Sigh fiasco (page 96). Furthermore, Lehrer’s debate provided a forum in which voters could make their own assumptions and decisions because Lehrer acted as a citizen leader.

Students can also be citizen leaders in the classroom. By taking a personal responsibility for their education, they emulate attitudes towards education that other students could draw from and become inspired. Similarly, citizen leaders in an academic setting will read and solve problems by drawing upon critical thinking skills to look below the surface of the basic information. They will reflect and analyze, thus creating more personal and intellectual understandings of concepts.

Lehrer’s first year reading presents a model of citizen leadership built upon personal responsibility and critical thinking that students can emulate both in society, on campus, and in the classroom.

Citations

Lehrer, J. *Tension City: Inside the Presidential Debates.* Random House, New York, 2012.