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# The Project 'A suon di parole – Il gioco del contraddittorio'

An Educational Game to Disseminate the Culture of Contradictory Opposition in Italian High School Debates

Paolo Sommaggio and Chiara Tamanini

**ABSTRACT:** *This paper introduces the educational project for debate in high schools called 'A Suon di Parole'. The project started in 2010 following a collaboration between the Faculty of Law of the University of Trento, IPRASE (Provincial Institute of Research and Didactic Experimentation of the Autonomous Province of Trento, Italy), the city of Trento and the city of Rovereto. In the present essay, some learning models are briefly discussed and analysed to introduce the theoretical framework on which this project was built. We especially highlight how dialectical confrontation, experienced as a sportive competition, promotes the desire and the ability to compare reasoning with others and promotes autonomy. The aim of this 'educational game', indeed, is not to impose specific rules of thinking or speaking, but rather to develop the students' autonomous thinking and, at the same time, increase their ability to compare their reasoning with others to self-evaluate and to increase their interaction and social cohesion.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Contradictory opposition, Learning, Debate, Training*

## Introduction

On 25 September 2015, the UN General Assembly approved the Agenda 2030, which sets out the seventeen objectives that the organization intends to pursue

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for reaching sustainable development. Among these goals, particularly noteworthy is Objective 4, which establishes the formal commitment of the United Nations to provide quality, fair and inclusive education. We believe that the crucial point, from which any further discussion should start, lies in the question of what should be understood by the expression 'quality education, fair and inclusive'. We will therefore demonstrate why the project 'A suon di parole – Il gioco del contraddittorio' could be considered an educational proposal in line with the Objective 4 of the UN 2030 agenda.

Let us start by recalling the following well-known parable: «If a man is hungry and you give him a fish, you feed him for a day; if you teach him to fish, you feed him for life». This parable is often presented in training contexts because, by using the analogy between food and knowledge, it represents the ambition to move from a traditional *ex cathedra* training (providing a fish: passive), to a practical-problematic approach (teaching to fish: active). In other words, this parable suggests that active skills should take the place of passive knowledge and that know-how should take the place of expertise.

Like fishing, problem solving can be a model for learning that allows people to activate their search for new concepts or alternative proposals. The end of the parable sounds categorical: this second model is undoubtedly better than the first one, not least because it provides food for the whole life and not just for one day. Usually, the parable (and its interpretations) ends here: there are two models of training, the traditional one (feeding with concepts) and the new one (problem-based training). We think, however, that this story reveals much more than this. For the learner, to learn how to fish he must have already seen – and already known – what a fish is. Of course, the ability to fish that is the subject of this parable refers to the activity of acquiring fish and not (for example) shoes. Even a problem-based approach cannot ignore at least a minimal framework of theoretical notions. This means that the shift from owning a fish to learning the ability to fish can only take place if we know both concepts, without taking anything for granted. This also implies that the two models are not mutually exclusive, but are integrated. It is also necessary that, while 'fishing', the learner understands what has to be kept and what should be thrown away. Fishing does not simply consist in 'pulling up from the water'; it also consists of strategic choices to identify and obtain what the fisherman needs, by comparing different alternative outcomes. For example, catching a fish is useful if one needs to

satisfy the bodily appetite. But if one wishes to take a walk, perhaps it would be better to choose a shoe, even if it is old or broken. To evaluate the most appropriate outcome of the activity of fishing, one has to make the alternative possibilities clash, because it is only from this clash that the most appropriate choice for the fisherman will emerge. The question may therefore be: how can we teach the ability to consider alternatives in opposition so that the best one can emerge (i.e. the one that best resists its denial)?

We thus have to present another model of training: the training to make motivated choices – that is, to consider the alternatives to one option and put them in front of the preferred choice to make it stronger. To do this, one needs a debate – a comparison of the reasons for two opposing positions. Training for dialogical opposition allows not only to develop the ability to absorb notions or to face problems, but also to compare the reasons for a choice with the reasons that could oppose it. The learner and his or her classmates play the role of participant in a clash, with all its peculiar characteristics. The project we present here, although part of the tradition of the Anglo-Saxon school debate, not only educates for public speaking or teamwork, but constitutes a model of Socratic education precisely because it exercises the use of critical reasoning and ethical confrontation and enhances the ability to choose, in a motivated manner, the strongest option in this context (Rybold, 2006; Bibby, 2014).

What we present here is an educational/training proposal that we define 'Socratic' because it is the functional confrontation of a possibility with its alternatives to make that possibility stronger or to refute it – in other words, this model educates in the use of the strongest reasons to choose an alternative. From a theoretical point of view, it constitutes a *unicum* in the panorama of high school debates. Concept, problem and choice are the three keywords for understanding the three models of training we present in this work.

## 1. Concept-based training

Concept-based learning consists of a model of learning that involves the transmission of concepts or data as if they were food. There are many learning formats that fit into this model, but these learning formats have in common the transfer of notions – that is, the knowledge to be learned is based on already

established conceptual forms that are transmitted from the teacher to the student, who is a mere recipient or user (Sutherland, 1976). This method for transmitting knowledge is the basis of advanced training where the teacher (who knows) uses his ability to involve the student (who does not know) to achieve the spread of rational forms in reasoning (Exley, 2004). These models share the same conception of knowledge, which is perceived as the possession of concepts that are objects of exchange that pass from the teacher to the learner who is ready to receive them as if they were goods that have reached the final stage of production and are prepared to be 'commodified'. Knowledge then passes, pre-packaged so to speak, from subject A to subject B, who will be required to keep it and eventually to propose it again once requested. Incidentally, we note that there is always the risk that the trainer, for contingent needs, may be considered by the learner or, worse, by him- or herself, as the only source of training. Represented symbolically, this educational structure has a top-down movement allowing the learner to receive the package of knowledge transferred to him or her by the trainer and allowing the student to have the perception of owning it. The learner waits to be fed by the trainer's experience, a knowledge that, coming from above, is not subject to critical judgment and is therefore welcomed without the slightest effort. Therefore, no comparison would allow a deep and vital understanding of the material that constitutes the subject of the unilateral passage.

In summary, therefore, concept-based training is a static approach where the student does not teach him- or herself to develop skills and competences, but rather notions. Training takes place through oral or written transfer, and the mode of action that exists among the subjects involved is unique and easy to understand: communication from an issue with the knowledge to a topic without such experience. This is the traditional way in which Italian high school students experience the phenomenon of learning. It is certainly not a setting error, but could be a partial way of seeing the phenomenon of learning.

To develop or improve concept-based learning in Italy, we have to identify a philosophical background, and this can be found in the work of Carl Ramson Rogers (Rogers, 1969; 1977), one of the founders of Humanist Psychology. Rogers' perspective, detaching itself from Freudian orthodoxy, suggests avoiding the imposition of objectives on the learner since he or she is the one who must take command of the relationship and direct it. Following this approach,

it is easy to note that the trainer's task should be non-directive. To communicate notions it is better to be within a positive framework. Indeed, one of the most important aspects of Rogers' work is the idea that the whole theoretical-methodological framework is based on the 'ethical value' of the relationship. Those engaged in the relationship participate in the same connection and cannot but manifest a subjective orientation; thus the so-called neutrality in the learning relationship disappears. Discovering the ethical value of the training relationship can help to enrich the learning model of concept-based training.

## 2. Problem-based training

The second model of training is problem-based learning, which consists of dynamic formats that can be brought together, not by the transmission of concepts but rather by the ability to deal with issues (Savery, 2006). Training, in this case, takes place by supporting and developing the 'problematization' that allows the analysis of a context by focusing on the possibility of at least two alternatives. Considering every aspect of knowledge as a question and not as an answer has many advantages: the capacity to analyse and understand a concept increases, thanks to the evaluation of its boundaries and the analysis of its context. The figure of the trainer appears resized, as the trainer becomes the one who strategically organises reactions in dealing with issues.

Problem-based learning involves moving from a static idea to a dynamic idea of training. In this model, all of the attention of education is linked to the analysis of the context in which the issue is located. Here we cultivate the idea of knowledge as something that takes shape through the relationship, or rather, the problematization. It allows us to reach the concepts after a phase of attention focused on the relational context of two perspectives. For these reasons, this dynamic model can be called a bottom-up model: in fact, it is from the bottom – namely, from the study and analysis of problems – that the 'production' of concepts is obtained.

We need to clarify that the 'problem-solving' label may be somewhat misleading. Indeed, through the use of this model, one learns how to analyse, dissect and study an issue, but not how to 'solve' it or to explain it, because the possible solutions could be multiple, and it would thus be necessary to screen

the pros and cons. For this reason, it would be more appropriate to conceptually speak of problem analysis, precisely because the analysis and the study of a problem, not its solution, are the pivotal moments of this model.

The problem-based approach is crucial for learning how to deal with a complicated situation, whether theoretical, real or contingent (Lotti, 2007). Analysing a problem means understanding the heart of the matter – that is, investigating where the friction between two realities resides and the extent of its reach. This is not always an easy operation. Once the question has been identified, it is then dissected: a detailed study is carried out, aimed at understanding the various existing facets and to have an in-depth look that consists of different points of view. To get an idea of the cultural context in which problem-based learning was born and developed, one should recall the figure of John Dewey, the famous philosopher and pedagogue. In his work *My Pedagogic Creed* of 1897, Dewey argues that:

What we call reason is essentially the law of ordered and effective action. The fundamental defect of the methods we currently use in this field consists in the attempt to develop the faculties of reasoning and judgment without reference to the choice order of the means of action. It follows that we put arbitrary symbols in front of the child. Symbols are necessary for mental development, but their place is that of instruments for saving effort; presented in themselves, they are a set of arbitrary and meaningless ideas imposed from the outside (Dewey, 1897: 77-80).

In the fields traditionally dedicated to education, according to Dewey, it is wrongly considered that students are there to acquire knowledge as though they were spectators, mere intellects that receive instruction through cerebral energy. The word ‘pupil’ in fact means a subject engaged, not in having experiences, but in the absorption of knowledge. For there to be experience, and therefore thought, it is instead necessary that there be a situation that is problematic, uncertain and under development. In a nutshell – even according to Dewey – if we want to develop critical thinking in learners, we need to start by presenting problematic situations with strong affective tonality, taking care that they are real problems or, at least, perceived as such by the learners.

### 3. Choice-based training

If the first two models of training are necessary conditions for good training, in our opinion they are not enough. We must add another element that has received little to no consideration in the areas of training: learning to choose. Being trained not only means having the knowledge or ability to deal with problems, it also means being able to choose, being able to prefer an option because it has the strongest arguments. The development of this ability is the main characteristic of the debating project 'A suon di parole – Il gioco del contraddittorio' – that is, a possible playful declination of an original dialectical format. This format, in its practical exercise, trains learners in how to interact with the other party and how to support a confrontation. It is based on the opposition among arguments that is a species of the 'Socratic method' (Sommaggio, 2012; 2014).

Because the expression 'debate' in Italian is often used to designate a 'verbal brawl', in this paper we replace 'debate' with the expression 'opposition' of arguments (*contraddittorio*), recovering its legal meaning as drawn from Italian law (see art. 111 of Italian Constitution). A fundamental element of this Socratic format of debate is the confutation or *elenchus*, which allows, through a 'refining' process, to make the thesis under examination stronger and therefore less liable to denial. This particular declination of the Socratic method, experienced as a dialectical comparison, thus provides learners with the ability to formulate and then support their own thesis in a debate context. Each opponent will be able to contest and refute, as well as to defend with reasons, his or her positions, founding a truly evaluated choice because the excluded alternatives have been compared (Cavalla, 2008). This format also allows learners to strengthen their critical and self-evaluation skills and linguistic abilities.

The subject of discussion will be the learner's reasoning duly 'treated' through the refutation of the arguments that compose it. These should be dissected or isolated and, later, contested in such a way as to bring out the premises of principles that lie behind the speeches. Thus, the learner – faced with his Socrates (the opponent) – will be able to examine autonomously the possible contradictions that haste or lack of reflection had transformed, much too lightly, into convictions or axioms. The possibility of a mature and motivated choice thus arises as a necessary consequence (Sommaggio, 2012).



To add depth to our proposal, we can recall here that the Socratic approach is considered a shared reference in the horizon of contemporary practices in the training field. The reference to the figure of Socrates also appears in areas where reflection is focused on the deep problems of humanity related to ethics, morality and law (Dordoni, 2006). In this context, we better understand the position of Martha Nussbaum, in her work, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs Humanities*, in which she maintains that: «Another problem with people who fail to examine themselves is that they often prove all too easily influenced» (Nussbaum, 2016: 50).

#### **4. Debate makes strong choices possible**

Debating allows us to develop not only linguistic or public speaking, reasoning and critical thinking skills (Hitchcock, 2018), but also to obtain effects of an ethical nature. Indeed, when we try to deal with specific topics in groups – and those who have experience with young people know this well – the first model of reference is silence, abstention – silence out of fear, disinterest or, worse, incapacity. When things go better, however, and someone tries to engage in discussion, the model of reference that unconsciously inspires the bravest is the monologue, which involves sharing one's own idea or supporting one's own point of view, perhaps with passion and transport. If this exercise is positive at first, it runs the risk of being thwarted by the inability to place one's speech or reasoning in relation to the discourses and statements of others.

With this in mind, the debate, in Italy, is nowadays considered the equivalent of an arena; it is a symbolic place where each participant can 'shoot' their own reasons in bulk without any order or structure and where the ongoing overlapping of different monologues occurs. What is worse, the monologues will never engage with each other. Debate, Socratic debate, is more than this. Indeed, debate can be both a method for building civil society and an educational approach to develop a range of skills and knowledge.

In Italy, the expression 'debate' today seems over-emphasised to the extent that it has lost the contours that in other countries, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon world (Quinn, 2007), it still seems to possess. Debate can be considered a student-centred educational model, focused on critical thinking and

based on the exchange of ideas. At this point, we can enunciate an essential characteristic of the Socratic opposition among the parts in our debate format: it does not fear contradiction. This is because this particular debate format is homologous to the contradiction: it is structured as a simultaneous co-presence of the opposites in a bond, with the warning that this co-presence constitutes the unity of opposites (Chiereghin, 2004). It does not fear contradiction, because the opposition of arguments (theses) is the instrument that is able to denounce its presence, aiming to expel it from the reasoning of the parties, and thus reaching a determination as precise as possible. The ontological condition of Socratic debate allows the emergence of the pathological contradiction in the claim of each party because each party has to observe the principle of non-contradiction (Cavalla, 1983).

We can thus argue that, precisely because of the opposition between the parties, it is possible to make evident the relationship that holds them together in a place that we can call mediating or median. We will use the figure of the 'bridge', thus recalling the metaphor of the two opposite sides of the same river (Sommaggio, 2012). The opposition between parties, by progressively determining the shape of the two shores, thus allows us to draw a horizon of possibility. This can be called a bridge-form because it can connect the arguments thanks to the specifications that emerge from the mutual attempt to overcome the antagonistic position. In other words, a Socratic debate is able to become a source of mediation between parties.

## 5. The 'A suon di parole' format

In the face of opposition, the parties of a Socratic debate are able to go beyond their starting positions. At the friction point of their reasoning, we can detect the presence of something that goes beyond the partial (subjective) claims and that could be decisive both for the same parties and for a third party, whether it is a judge or a mediator (Sommaggio, 2012). The opposition makes it possible to construct a context of mediation while conducting the denial of each claim because it preserves the possibility of a procedure that does not aim to exclude the other party. Indeed, because it requires that differences are communicated and discussed with each other, they are always structured through

something familiar that cannot be ignored by either party and thus preserves the possibility of their agreement. The relationship between these opposites is not only oppositional but also mediation. How this happens needs to be clarified (Chiereghin, 2001).

In the opposition relation, opposites fight, but, at the same time, it is precisely this relation that warns us that they are as close to each other as possible. The contradictory opposition appears to be homologous to the condition that is being present in the oppositional relationship, which is also simultaneously binding. It allows the hidden aspect to act: it is the conjunction of opposites.

Every assumption, when it participates in the relational structure of the contradictory, therefore makes an act of connection – that is, a bridge form. The oppositional relation is maximally binding because, at the point of friction between the opposites, there is also the opposition concerning the disagreement itself (Berti, 1987). If that is a point of conflict, it will necessarily also contain its opposite – that is, the non-opposition – because at that point (limit), and only at that point, opposition and non-opposition are confused. This is because, at that point, we can consider that all of the opposites coexist, and we can therefore argue that the stronger the clash, the more the bond that unites the parties can emerge. It is in the clash between the parties that, secretly, a progressive construction of the common elements that form a bridge between the positions of the parties themselves also act: it is the beginning of a possible mediation.

The reasons just mentioned above motivated the elaboration and the experimentation of the educational project ‘A suon di parole – Il gioco del contraddittorio’ ten years ago. Since its beginning, the project has obtained great success, a sign that it met (and still meets) a series of needs intensely felt by the students (Tamanini, 2014). When the project started, Paolo Sommaggio (for the Faculty of Law in the University of Trento) and Chiara Tamanini (for IPRASE, an instrumental body of the Province of Trento dedicated to educational experimentation and training) organised the first debate (between L. Da Vinci high school and G. Galilei high school) inspired by legal opposition and elaborated the main guidelines. The following is, in a nutshell, some of the reasons for the success of the project (Sommaggio *et al.*, 2018).

First of all, the model presents a competitive framework where the rules of debate are not taught, but a discussion is ‘made’. It is one thing to know the parts of a speech or how reasoning is structured, and another to organise and

present a real speech by subjecting it to the discussion. This explains why we have not taken the usual path of developing preventive rules. On the contrary, we have tried to build a real tournament with real teams that confront each other – not with blows or to the sound of slaps or other violent gestures – but through a sort of new sport based on reasoning, arguments and counter-arguments. We thought that each team could prepare three short, three-minute interventions to affirm a specific thesis and three brief interventions to demolish the opponent's arguments.

The few rules that we have elaborated over the years have only served to maintain some fixed points during the meetings such as, for example, the duration of the interventions, the setting and the context, but we were careful not to influence the content or the strategies of the game with precise regulation. Content and strategies are left to the experience and sensitivity of the girls and boys.

The competitive engine of the game lends itself to developing two skills primarily. The first is to elaborate on reasoning in the form of speech, which can be done by looking for materials and data and strategically processing their position within reasoning and the organisation of the argument. This work, however, is already done in class and constitutes baggage that the average student already possesses and administers (where more is perhaps less). The second skill – and, we think, an original one – consists in the ability to criticise and try to demolish the opponent's discourse – that is, the reasoning of those who are in front of us in a discussion. This recognises the great importance of the opponent, because his or her arguments must be listened to and understood to try to overcome them, thus demonstrating the need for a context of strong respect. It is precisely the context of strong respect that most students do not, in general, experience in school and that can attract him or her to this programme: the possibility that the organisation of a speech and the criticism of an adverse speech can be measured in competitive terms. The opponent is not struck directly, but rather his or her argumentative products or reasoning are the focus of attack.

For this reason, we decided that, unlike other proposals for debate formats, both national and international, our proposal should recognise the equal time and equal value of the counter-argument phase – that is, the phase in which the opponent's reasoning is analysed, broken down and criticised. We have therefore chosen to remember the Platonic dialogues when developing this model.

## Conclusions

Let's try to summarise the pivotal points of the path we have followed. We have seen how the opposition of arguments allows us to elaborate a harmonious relationship between experience and personal rational principles. It is a sort of exercise in Socratic masking that is necessary to 'unmask' one's truth to oneself and others. The dialectical structure of the contradictory opposition in the 'A suon di parole' debates allows us to cross the two Socratic instances that come from the parties and thus obtain powerful effects. Moreover, this result seems to be rationally controllable because it connects the lived experiences of the speakers and their speeches.

We believe that all of the formulas or methods that claim to guarantee autonomy independent of the responsibility of those who play an active role in them are doomed to failure. The project 'A suon di parole' is part of the Anglo-Saxon tradition of school debates, but we believe that the specific peculiarity of this project may be more effective than debate experiences that are specified as being able to train learners in public speaking or teamwork. Our project may, however, constitute a much more pervasive model of training for the use of critical reason and human promotion. All the considerations we made, as a sign and not as a point of arrival, show that the opponent always calls into question self-responsibility as active citizenship. This explains the human and deontological significance of this project. We have shown that concept training, problem training and choice training are the three training models in the project 'A suon di parole – Il gioco del contraddittorio'. This combination is why the 'A suon di parole' project could be considered an educational game in line with Objective 4 of the UN 2030 Agenda to provide quality, fair and inclusive education<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> In order to see the final competition of the 2019 'A suon di parole' tournament, <https://webmagazine.unitn.it/evento/giurisprudenza/62473/a-suon-di-parole>.

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