

EDITORIAL

Debating and similar approaches: when different perspectives are in agreement

Debating is situated at a crossroads in relation to different study and research perspectives, having some characteristics in common with other educational methods, while maintaining certain peculiarities that distinguish it from these in Italy and other countries, particularly the USA. More specifically, *debating*, *accountable talk* and *discussions as collective reasoning* are the three main strategies based on the positive role that social interaction can have in the classroom, revolving around verbal interaction.

There are also several points of contact from the theoretical point of view; indeed, arguments and studies that presuppose such strategies, albeit more or less explicitly, (Toulmin, 1958; 1975, first of all¹) represent common ground; reference to different psychological perspectives, such as cognitive-oriented studies (Resnick, 1987; 1995; Resnick, 1999²) or Vygotskian or neo-Vygotskian oriented studies (Vygotsky, 1960; 1974³; Pontecorvo, 1985⁴) instead represent itineraries that clearly distinguish the configurations of the different strategies.

To deal with the focus on debating as fully as possible in the few pages that follow, it seems appropriate to compare its peculiarities and methods of implementing the practice in comparison to the two other strategies mentioned. To better understand debating, after having summarised certain characteristics, we will therefore go on to discuss the educational aspects of these different strategies and their implications. Lastly, we will conclude by referring to the increasing interest in this type of study in western society.

Experience of debating in Trentino

The first trials of debating in Italy include the programme started up in 2010-2011 in the Autonomous Province of Trento (for detailed presentation of educational aspects and different theoretical points of view see Sommaggio and Tamanini, 2020⁵) and its widespread

1. Toulmin S. (1958). *The uses of Argument*. Cambridge University Press, London; Italian transl.: *Gli usi dell'argomentazione*. Torino: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1975.

2. Resnick L. B. (1987). Learning in School and Out. "Educational Researcher", 16/9 pp. 13-20 (Italian transl.: Imparare dentro e fuori la scuola, pp. 61-83, in Pontecorvo C., Ajello A. M., & Zucchermaglio C., 1995. *I contesti sociali dell'apprendimento*. Milano: LED).

Resnick L. B. (1999). Make America Smarter, *Opinion Education Week* (June 16).

3. Vygotskij L. S. (1960/1974). *Storia dello sviluppo delle funzioni psichiche superiori*. Firenze: Giunti Barbera.

4. Pontecorvo C. (1985). Discutere per ragionare: la costruzione della conoscenza come argomentazione, in *Rassegna di psicologia*, 1-2, pp. 23-45.

5. Sommaggio P., & Tamanini C. (2020). *A suon di parole. Il gioco del contraddittorio*. Milano: Mimesis Edizioni.

and rapid diffusion shows that debating responds to several needs not satisfied with standard teaching methods⁶.

To summarise, as a format, debating requires two interlocutors - usually small groups or whole classes competing with each other - defending opposing arguments and presenting subject matter to support their ideas, in such a way as to win the competition. Evaluation is entrusted to a number of judges, usually three, who issue a verdict on the basis of specific known criteria and recognise the winners. Acceptance of the result represents an important aspect, at times the most difficult, and is also highly educational for pupils.

Preparation of the competition requires pupils to research and choose information in order to best support their ideas, to identify weak points and to recognise the fallacy of arguments presented by the opposing party; all this requires collaboration, not only in relation to the cognitive aspect - what information to use, how to process and present it bearing in mind the characteristics of the interlocutors etc. - but also the language to adopt, presentation skills, public speaking training, and recognition of pupils within the group who can best cover the different roles. As can be seen, it is a question of implementing specific abilities, which we will call soft skills, that can be pursued in the activities requested. In this sense, we are not dealing with generic appeals to promote these abilities, but rather of soft skills that can be recognised, increased and assessed precisely by being directly and clearly linked to the performance required.

The themes proposed for the various debates, in Trentino relating mainly to the “A suon di parole” project (TN: “By force of words”), have mainly concerned questions of general interest and current affairs, and for this reason debating tournaments have been linked to the teaching of Civics, given different titles over time (e.g. Citizenship and Constitution) and usually directed at pupils in upper secondary schools. In the provincial tournament, then also extended at regional level, themes related to specific disciplines have never been adopted for tournaments in Italian and especially in foreign languages. Such themes can instead be used by teachers in their own classes, on the basis of their educational choices, given that the “A suon di parole” format also lends itself to use in the context of a specific discipline. Furthermore, debates in foreign languages were adopted much earlier in Trentino than at national level - with an original aspect being the holding of debates also in German in addition to English - and have taken place with reference to interdisciplinary motions.

The range of contributions presented in this special issue of the magazine shows the great versatility of this strategy in relation to different themes and contexts, going from political concern regarding the problems raised by citizens’ disinterest in democratic institutions, to interaction with computers, the learning of oral language and foreign languages and so on. It is precisely the possibility of making reference to this strategy for different educational purposes

6. I thank Chiara Tamanini for the information and suggestions provided regarding experience of debating in the Autonomous Province of Trento. As regards this, see Tamanini C. (2020). Il dibattito in classe e tra classi: un’attività multimodale per sviluppare competenze linguistiche e comunicative, in M. Voghera, P. Maturi & F. Rosi, *Orale e scritto, verbale e non verbale: la multi modalità nell’ora di lezione*, <https://post.italy.it/repertorio-bibliografico/orale-e-scritto-verbale-e-non-verbale-la-multimodalita%C3%A0-nellora-di-lezione>.

that illustrates the role it may have in renewing teaching methods. The key role of pupils in debating is indeed implicit, an aspect often underlined, only to return to transmissive teaching methods in the classroom routine, despite this awareness. It is surprising that overcoming this form of teaching is entrusted to different strategies that nevertheless pursue the same objective: to ensure pupils are active and involved in what they are learning; the diffusion of debating could be the Trojan horse, so to speak, that makes its way into the fortified stronghold still represented by the classroom, to reawaken pupils' interest.

Accountable talk

Overcoming transmissive teaching techniques is another element that debating has in common with a further two strategies to which it is intended to make reference: accountable talk (Resnick, 1999; Resnick, Asterhan e Clarke, 2018⁷) and discussion as collective reasoning (Pontecorvo, 1985; 1987⁸; Pontecorvo, Ajello e Zucchermaglio, 1992⁹); indeed, this comparison will make it possible to underline and discuss certain aspects highlighting the social origin of how the mind works (see also Garofalo *et al.*, *infra*).

There is a different motivation behind the two proposals, although there are points of contact between them. Accountable talk has a clearly political and educational inspiration.

In a famous speech opening the annual Congress of American Psychologists in 1987, Lauren Resnick already underlined the need to change school curricula and teaching methods; in the article reporting it (Educational Researcher, 16/9, 1987, pp. 13-20) Resnick states: «*School is not just a place to prepare people for the world of work and practical everyday problems. It is also a place in which a particular type of work is done, intellectual work that engages reflection and reasoning*» ... «*If we value reason and reflection in social, political, or personal life, we must maintain a place devoted to learning how to engage in this extremely important process. School, at its best, is such a place*» (Resnick, 1987; 1995, p. 80). She continues: «*When we speak of the civic functions of education, we then envision a culture of reason, analysis, and reflection, based on certain shared knowledge. Realising this vision will require a civic consciousness that goes beyond the individualist one of current classroom learning models*» (ibidem, p.81).

At the beginning of the new century, after around fifteen years of research carried out with schools, in a joint article Resnick (2007)¹⁰ suggested that accountable talk represented the strategy that should orient teaching activities to promote skills allowing schools to pursue the civic roles stated in the 1987 article. This goal need not be pursued merely with discussions on

7. Resnick L. B., Asterhan C. S. C., & Clarke N. S. (2018) (Eds.). *Socializing intelligence through academic talk and dialogue*. Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.

8. Pontecorvo C. (1987). Discussing for Reasoning: The Role of Argument in Knowledge Construction, in E. De Corte, J. G. L. C. Lodewijks, R. Parmentier, & P. Span (eds). *Learning and Instruction. A publication of the European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction*. University Press, Oxford/Leuven, pp. 71-82.

9. Pontecorvo C., Ajello A. M., & Zucchermaglio C. (1992). *Discutendo si impara*. Roma: NIS.

10. Michaels S., O'Connor C., & Resnick L. B. (2007). Deliberative Discourse Idealized and Realized: Accountable Talk in the Classroom and in Civic Life, in *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 27 (4): pp. 283-297.

civic or current affairs (which would make accountable talk more similar to the Trentino version of debating) and in an interview in 1999, Resnick already affirmed its utility for teaching all other disciplines: «*in accountable talk the types of evidence that are appropriate in a given discipline take different forms; for example, proof in a mathematics class, experimental data in a science class, details of the text in literature, or documents in history*». In this context, accountable talk has indeed been tried out at different levels of schooling in the USA education system, not just at the highest level.

In the same interview, Resnick (1999) insisted as regards the need to adjust curricula to make America more intelligent (“Make America smarter”), thus underlining once again the urgency of pursuing educational objectives in line with the current times and the need for a democratic society: accountable talk is presented as the most appropriate strategy. Over twenty years later Zompetti underlined this same question (*infra*), given that difficulties have unfortunately remained in western democracies in terms of promoting citizens’ engagement in this form of government and encouraging their participation in an active and aware manner.

As can be seen, in Resnick’s opinion accountable talk represents a powerful tool for making an overall change to the education system and for pursuing more general policy goals in order to reinforce human capital, let us say in economic terms, which the American democracy badly needed according to the cognitivist psychologist, at the time operating at the University of Pittsburgh. Compared to debating, accountable talk is thus attributed a more extensive and powerful role, but in the current situation we do not know whether things have effectively proceeded in this direction in the USA, debating nevertheless being present and widespread in schools starting from middle school level.

Discussion as collective reasoning

Yet another approach is based on discussion as collective reasoning in the classroom.

The theoretical psychological perspective on which this is based comes from Vygotsky, with reference to the Soviet psychologist’s formulation of the «*general genetic law of development: every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first, at social level, and later at psychological level, namely firstly as a category of interpsychological functioning that then becomes intrapsychological*» (Pontecorvo, 1992, pp. 30-31).

A further reference regards the link between discussion and reasoning: «*Children’s evidence emerges from discussion with their peers and is then interiorised as reasoning that can be considered as internal discussion*» (Vygotsky, 1974, p. 196).

In other words, Vygotsky’s studies represented the scenario based on which systematic research has been undertaken, making it possible to bring to light many different aspects allowing discussion in the classroom to become collective reasoning, both in whole classes and in small groups, as well as the conditions necessary to implement a similar educational

strategy. The premises necessary to start up a discussion of this kind have thus been identified, with the role of the initial intervention by the teacher or the working instructions for discussion in a small group, the type of intervention by pupils, the role of the teacher during the discussion and the role of the closing comments. Furthermore, methods of cognitive processing specific to different disciplines have been identified, also focusing on the peculiarities of reasoning in a scientific-naturalistic field and in a historical-social context.

The general premise is that discussion, in certain conditions, makes it possible to “solve a problem” that the participants would be unable to resolve individually; while at the same time each of them makes a contribution to the processing necessary to solve the problem.

In order for discussion as a form of collective reasoning to take place, it is necessary to have a common experience that is sufficiently ambiguous to lend itself to different interpretations; at the same time, the introductory comments (or working instructions in the case of an activity carried out in a small group) are fundamental in order to direct the participants’ attention to the aspects on which it is intended to focus. Clearly this is something that the teacher can consider in advance, evaluating the different lines of reflection that their intercession may lead to. The situation is very different as regards their participation while the discussion is underway, “in the heat of the moment”, requiring strong self-control by the teacher, because they must abide by the methodological plan, without offering solutions or giving information, but playing different roles: *recovery* of an important element mentioned by one of the pupils (for example, Piera said...), *encouraging the expression of dissent* if it is clear that not everyone agrees (Does anyone see this differently? Do we all agree?), summing up, *acting as a recall* of the discussion (up to now, you have said...) or clearing the cognitive field from elements not relevant to continuation of the discussion (*summing up and discarding elements* that may distract from proceeding effectively), and also *reproducing* comments from pupils who participate little or not particularly effectively (*selective reproduction*, namely only partial).

When there are situations of stagnation or tiredness, it is important that the discussion comes to a close, summarising what has been said so that the final “dragging on” does not give rise to the feeling that the whole of the previous discussion was useless. If solutions have not been reached, for varying reasons, it is a good idea to clarify that the question will be resumed at another time, recovering information that is not available at the moment.

As we can see, these are “professional” intercessions by the teacher that require reflection and practice in conducting discussions, if it is hoped that these will take on the role of a sort of cognitive training ground, where processing is achieved that could not be developed fully by individual pupils.

As far as the participants in the discussions are concerned, there are clearly recognisable roles: the sceptics, those who call into question what has been said by someone else, those who make reference to personal experience that confirms or contradicts what is being said, those who exaggerate a case or situation, and those who take certain elements from what has

already been said and combine them in a different way to propose “the solution”.

Then there are rules to be provided as established and agreed: not to repeat anything that has already been said, giving precedence to those who have not yet spoken; these are simple procedures, easy to follow but that must become a habit with pupils.

Further clarification regards the different characterisation of discussions involving scientific-naturalistic content compared to historic-social content. While the former can be considered as fully-fledged discussions to find the solution to a problem, given that the solutions are recognised as such in scientific terms, discussions of a social nature are in effect reasoning processes, because as demonstrated by James Voss’ studies (Voss e Post, 1988¹¹; Voss, Perkins e Segal, 1991¹²), one goes from a “poorly structured” problem to redefine it, proposing a new representation of the problem whose correctness gives rise to a reasoning process.

We will not give further consideration to the characteristics of classroom discussions as collective reasoning, making reference to publications dealing with the matter for further information. Here we wish instead to highlight the specific features of these three different methods, which starting from the recognised social origin of the human mind, use the social relations of the class as a useful and suitable basis for progressively promoting more complex cognitive skills.

Debating, accountable talk and discussion as collective reasoning: final considerations

Through dialogue, conversation, debate and discussion, social interaction continues to have an important role for psychological studies with different theoretical orientations. Recently the magazine of the American Psychological Association, *Monitor of Psychology* (2023) dedicated a monothematic section to conversation and its different roles in people’s wellbeing¹³.

The three educational strategies referred to here have common points of reference linked to this different way of working in the classroom in relation to the use of pupils’ social skills, reasoning and the promotion of specific soft skills. Debating and accountable talk also share the promotion of attitudes paying attention to data among pupils, and this is a fundamental aspect, if it is hoped to avoid the pervasive sloppiness currently widespread in conversation. There are other aspects that are instead different. Indeed, the competitive nature of debating is a characteristic that is unique to this method, while accountable talk pursues a goal in terms of educational policy, at least in the intentions of those proposing it, and aims to radically change teaching methods in the current era. Lastly, discussion as collective reasoning is proposed as a more circumscribed teaching method, examined in depth in the trials on which it is based.

11. Voss J. F., & Post T. A. (1988). On the Solving of ill-structured Problems, in M. T. H. Chi, R. Glaser, & M. Farr(eds), *The Nature of expertise*, LEA Hillsdale (Nj).

12. Voss J. F., Perkins D. N., & Segal J. W. (eds) (1991). *Informal Reasoning and Education* LEA, Hillsdale (Nj).

13. Abrams Z., The Power of Conversation, in *Monitor on Psychology* (2023) (Nov/Dec) pp. 42-49.

It is thus clear why it was decided to deal with debating by relating it to methods involving accountable talk and discussion as collective reasoning. Indeed, from comparison with the other two educational strategies, it emerges that compared to these, debating involves an additional motivation and commitment to searching for information suitable for responding to the competition, given the need to compete and propose arguments that stand up when faced with the objections of the other party. This is translated into a stimulus to use the information found online with dexterity, assess its reliability, compare sources, and delve more deeply into different subjects in order adequately deal with the mass of information found on the internet. All this is of undoubted educational value because it demands skills that will also be fundamental in the future for pupils once they have finished school. If in addition to this we add greater knowledge of current affairs, as well as involving pupils in understanding the reality of the contemporary world, it is possible to finally promote motivating teaching methods for civic education, which has instead always been the Cinderella of subjects taught at school.

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