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Practices of navigation: does debate teach skills?

Pratiche di navigazione: il *debate* insegna abilità?

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Abstract

Too often we read defenses of debate as the ultimate exercise in teaching skills for the future. Seeing the future as one of dissimilar problems to the skills we have today, I argue that debate could be seen as a practice that allows for relational articulation: The ability to look around one's immediate surroundings and find relationships that allow one to navigate the world. Opposed to skills, which assume an extant, knowable problem and the steps to solve it, debate encourages seeing oneself surrounded by indicators that could be read in different ways - arguments - that can be used to address movement through the world, political or otherwise. I use the metaphor of the Polynesian navigator Tuapia and the squiggle game, developed by D. W. Winnicott to ground the vision of debate that can help students address the coming Anthropocene, where contemporary skills may no longer be relevant.

Parole chiave: Debate; Winnicott; Skills; Rhetoric; Pedagogy.

Sintesi

Troppo spesso vediamo il *debate* presentato come il metodo supremo per l'insegnamento delle competenze per il futuro. Considerando il futuro come un insieme di problemi diversi e non riconducibili alle competenze che abbiamo oggi, sostengo che il *debate* potrebbe essere visto come una pratica che consente un'articolazione relazionale: la capacità di osservare ciò che ci circonda e trovare connessioni che permettano di orientarsi nel mondo. Al contrario delle competenze, che presuppongono un problema, la sua conoscibilità e la sua scomposizione in passaggi per risolverlo, il *debate* incoraggia a vedere se stessi circondati da indicatori che possono essere interpretati in modi diversi - argomentazioni - e che possono essere utilizzati per affrontare il movimento attraverso il mondo, politico o altro che sia. Utilizzando la metafora del navigatore polinesiano Tuapia e il gioco dello scarabocchio, sviluppato da D. W. Winnicott, per fondare la visione del dibattito come metodo capace di aiutare gli studenti ad affrontare l'imminente Antropocene, in cui le competenze contemporanee potrebbero non essere più rilevanti.

Keywords: *Debate*; Winnicott; Competenze; Retorica; Pedagogia.

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1. Introduction

Around 1769, Captain James Cook drew a copy of a map of Pacific islands that he claimed he faithfully reproduced from his Tahitian navigator Tupaia. Originally, Tupaia amazed Cook by recounting to him over 130 islands in the Pacific he knew how to get to, sketching 74 on the deck with charcoal and chalk. What was marvelous to Cook and to the British-trained navigators of the *Endeavour* was less the geographical information and more the ability of someone seen as so 'primitive' to be able to provide such detailed information from memory. Cook and his crew began to suspect this wasn't navigation, but myth, involving such things as examining the color of the sea, looking between stars, and tying twigs together to form journals, marking islands with bits of leaves (Gascoigne, 2015, p. 138). These practices were the subject of skepticism and surprise by navigators trained by the British Navy, who navigated with precise, scientific instruments.

The misunderstanding could not be resolved. The British navigators saw the world in terms of static information - a Euclidian geometric world. Navigation was a *skill* one used to move accurately through the static world. But mapping for Tupaia and the Polynesian navigators assumed a different world - one that's existence and value had to be understood as fluid, as relational. One didn't *articulate* where they wanted to go; they had a *conversation* with the wind, sea, stars, and water to work to get there. A map was a narrative of relationships, not a grid of static places (Roberts, 2012, p. 750). There were many barriers to understanding, the least of which was not that 'north' remained static for British cartographers but for Tupaia, navigators described a north wind as a direction that wind went when one wanted to go to one island from another one - always relational (Lewthwaite, 1966, p. 42). Cook and his crew never could imagine the world as constituted by the navigator from where they stood. Navigation was a skill to them of reading information the correct way. Tuapia presented a different approach, crafting this information relationally.

Tupaia and Cook did not lack skills. Both could navigate the Pacific. What they faced was a crisis of epistemology. Neither could properly prove their ability because they had no common connection with one another. Cook and Tupaia had a crisis of *relational articulation,* the inability to communicate meaning due to an immersion in an epistemic frame. This perspective is one that comes from a rhetorical perspective, where skills are seen as parts of a vocabulary that seeks to reflect and automatically deflects reality (Burke, 1969). When we think of a set of relationships as static, we see our task as one of finding the 'right way.' This is the practice of a skill. If we see relationships as fluid and fungible - modulating - we think of ourselves as crafting them, not moving through them - making them. This is a practice.

I start with this story to serve as a metaphor for us. In teaching debate, we might think we are teaching a type of navigation, one that helps our students avoid grounding their boat by charting their position based on the known understandings of controversies.

However this pedagogy does not reflect the reality students face, deflecting potential interpretations that come from alternative positions. Furthermore, this pedagogy does not help students navigate uncharted waters as it does not focus on relational articulation, the art of making connections to make knowledge. Skills alone will not prepare students to create connections over new an unexpected information that comes from vastly different perspectives than their own. Debate taught this way only helps students through charted waters.

The knowledge and practices of debate that come from relational content - that sea of the traditions of classical rhetoric - have been abandoned by contemporary teachers of rhetoric for a technical set of rules that seem like a 'verbal sextant,' mapping the world of debate using only one star, once a day, at the same time. The idea that teaching debate is valuable because debate is a skill, or produces sets of skills, is dominantly pervasive. Most American textbooks stem from a tradition citing debate as a skill that is unparalleled in helping to sort misinformation, make better decisions, or separate the truth from misrepresentations (Ehninger & Brockriede, 1971; Freeley & Steinberg, 2009).

Of course, nobody would be foolish to deny that skills are valuable and matter. My argument in this paper is that thinking of debate as teaching a skill is a relationship to a fixed and static world. Instead, debate should be conceived as a practice that creates a way of thinking and moving through the world that uses combinations of relationships to create meaning. Instead of finding the correct latitude, students instead look to the wind and water of life to generate ways of movement to their destination. The time is now for debate to pull debate away from skill focus because of the imminent threat of anthropogenic climate change. This threat to the entirety of the material and physical world that humans need to exist can only be countered with deep rearticulation of the nature and role of the human being. I believe debate conceptualized as a practice is a powerful move in that direction. I model this by offering that debate is the practice of relational connection that produces speech about ourselves, much like D. W. Winnicott's 'squiggle game,' used in child therapy. The squiggle game is a game about drawing lines and making them into something - which focuses on the creative development of a place rather than how debate is currently evaluated: Are you in line with what we know? Instead, we should think of debate around this question: Why are you making that line, and what line does it make me draw?

2. The Threat of the Anthropocene

Much ink has been spilled across all scholarly fields about Anthropocenic climate change. There are few issues of this magnitude - this might even be an issue of singular importance where hard physical sciences like chemistry and geology, mixed sciences of systems like climatology and oceanography, and the liberal arts such as sociology, literature, and anthropology, are all engaged in the study of this phenomenon,

concerned about its totalizing threat. An important shared consideration among humanities scholars working in this area is one of conceptual failure: There is a dearth of capability to connect, communicate, and conceptualize the shattering global changes to come.

This frustration of making relational articulation with populations has been felt by the scientific community, who are discussing turning to more direct, violent action to communicate the coming threat (Capstick *et al.,* 2022). Presentation of information does not seem to be changing the minds of those in power or those who place representatives in power in democratic regimes. In most of the world, the desire to participate in 'modern' life - consumer capitalist culture - «raise troubling questions - perhaps unanswerable, but in need of an answer - about the capacity of the planet, let alone politics, to realize such claims without a radical reorganization of the order of things» (Wenzel, 2020, p. 82). This threat is one that is equally of material concern and conceptual concern - the implications of it are so staggering that we have trouble even imagining what that future world will look like.

Scholars are united in their view that this is not a simple question of miscommunication, but a failure to relate on the deepest levels of meaning. Jedediah Purdy (2010) argues that there are many factors that contribute to this incapacity including «lack of a traceable vocabulary for discussing the interplay of values and interests in democratic self-interpretation» (Purdy, 2010, p. 1130). This is vital since the coming threat of the Anthropocene lacks «salience - centrality and power in the public mind» due to a lack of powerful and "terrifying" images, such as what terrorism can convey (Purdy, 2010, p. 1134). Add to this the fact that any policy to combat anthropogenic climate change will be seen as high individual cost with marginal global impact, and you have a dismal picture indeed. But to combat this threat, Purdy does not suggest further research or 'better facts' or even teaching people the skills of understanding science. Instead, he argues for a deeper dive into the practice of public discourse. «Democracy is one of the arenas in which people can change their own reasons for acting: in struggling to persuade one another of the meaning of central but over determined ideas [...] because the stakes of political argument are high, there is particular motive to make basic commitments and urgent innovations intelligible in this register» (Purdy, 2010, p. 1136). In trying to convince us of the power that debate might have to help us face the Anthropocene, Purdy writes, «History is full of reforms that were cogently argued to be as impossible as addressing climate change can seem today» (Purdy, 2010, p. 1136).

Jennifer Wenzel argues for the practice of the art of reading and representing the many narratives of specific places to combat the Anthropocene. By placing poetry, literature, film, political theory, and other narratives next to one another she shows that a failure of imagination - terming something 'unimaginable,' like environmental destruction is not «an end to thought» but «involve acts of unimagining» (Wenzel, 2020, p. 89). Her work tells the story of environmental exploitation of

the Niger Delta, arguing that oil captures the imagination by forcing the narratives around it, in terms of inequity, suffering, and the ethics of those who benefit from exploitation. This leaves little capacity to imagine any alternative relationships to the land or water or people of the Delta. The power of 'unimagining' stems from the way that oil runs the story, with its promise of modernization and wealth, and how that presence precipitates violence on many levels. It is not a question of not having the relevant facts, but interpretation itself, and the limited choices made in articulation that make possible imagination and the communication of environmental horrors:

> «Reimagining entails reading across those geographic and experiential divides, working against the foreclosures of unimagining: the impossible necessity of *reading for the planet.* But the slippages between metaphor and metonymy also demonstrate that the *acrossness*in reading across is not given but contingent, shaped by the position of the interpreter and working at multiple scales. Parts do not always neatly resolve into wholes». (Wenzel, 2020, p. 134)

Wenzel argues that reading for the planet requires a shift in understanding itself: «thinking in terms of legibility and intelligibility rather than visibility. The salient question is not whether environmental injustice can be seen, but under what conditions it can be *read,* understood, and appreciated» (Wenzel, 2020, pp. 14-15). This is not the matter of understanding facts, but of constituting narratives that engage, involve, and absorb human capacity to feel connection. Skills in interpretation are not what are being called for but a practice of contextual questioning that goes well beyond the skill to read or understand scientific data, but the motives behind the production of such narratives that are not invisible unless in context with one another.

It's useful to add to this conversation the idea that the Anthropocene can be made intelligible and imaginable through the literary device of the allegory, «a language of cosmologies that reflects nested structures or spatially dispersed lower and upper realms» (DeLoughrey, 2019, p. 64). To communicate between these realms one needs a figure that can move between worlds - «travelers, soldiers, scientists, and writers» who traditionally are seen as «a perceived emissary between the divine and the earthly or between knowledge and recipient» (DeLoughrey, 2019, p. 64). These figures are not sought out but are constituted as the messengers between worlds. Such a crafting is an art, not a skill, where one must imagine figures that can traverse a world of knowledge and explain it in everyday speech. A messenger between worlds conjures the need for some sort of translator, a person who can explain what is, articulate what can be, and argue how our understanding of the world hinges on that articulation.

Perhaps the capacity to combat the Anthropocene lies in reconceptualizing the human being. Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that climate change poses for us a question of a human collectivity, an us, pointing to a figure of a universal that escapes our capacity to experience the world. «It is more like a

universal that arises from a shared sense of catastrophe» (Chakrabarty, 2009, p. 222). Our contemporary skills in interpretation, based on our current understanding of 'human being' will not be adequate to address what's coming. We simply do not have the capacity to imagine this experience or what would help to thwart it because of how we imagine ourselves.

Although the scientific evidence is accurate, accessible, and verified, what's missing is the capacity to imagine what to do with it. We have a chart by which we can navigate but we have not practiced an orientation to this chart in order to benefit from it. Like Cook, we are missing a powerful way to understand how to get through this sea. The difficulty is acute because of comfort. What has worked well for us in the past is what we reach for as the forge for solutions for whatever is coming. But in this case it won't do the trick - we need deep reconceptualization of ourselves, our understanding, and our use of words to fight climate change.

In the next section, I argue that debate is best conceptualized as a game, but not in the manner that we do it today. Debate should be thought of as a game that is aimed at the production of relationality through discourse, one that allows us to recognize ourselves and others in terms that stem from the interaction, not from some set of distant, objective, ordinal principles. In D. W. Winnicott's child therapy practice, he invented such a game that can serve as a powerful metaphor for how we should conceive of debating.

3. The Squiggle Game of Debate

Imagining Tupaia on the deck of the British ship the *Endeavor* using charcoal to show British sailors how to get to different islands must have looked like a bunch of scribbles. Sailors trained in British Navy navigation didn't know what to make of his chart, asking him to make corrections as it was obviously wrong. The result was a map where some elements were in accord with European concepts of location, and others with the more subjective, fluid Tahitian conception of navigation (Lewthwaite, 1966, p. 44). The result is a map that from one point of view is correct, but from another it is skewed - the relationships of the Polynesian islands to one another is correct, yet the relationship of those islands to the major ones known by the British is incorrect.

Tupaia's drawing on the deck, shaping islands from his training as a navigator from memory punctuated with "put this here," or "where's north?" from the crew of the *Endeavor* takes on the feeling of a game where spectators shout ideas to the players. Without a relational sense, he tried his best to accommodate their external worldview into his subjective sense of knowledge, creating a nonsensical chart to him, but one that got some approval from his shipmates. What the British missed was that Tuapia wasn't going for an accurate chart but a useful one - his lines on the deck communicated relationships between wind, water, and islands. The lines on his chart made possibilities, whereas a

British navigational chart prescribed actions.

In this section I want to suggest that debate, already thought of as navigation for a dynamically changing world, is best thought of as sketching lines of relationships for the purpose of moving through something - a controversy, inquiry, or a set of problems. The debater, like Tupaia, must bring a subjective account of how to move through the world into terms understood by those who believe the world to be a static thing, where distances and orientations 'exist' no matter where one is standing. I would like debate to be thought of like D. W. Winnicott's squiggle game, a technique he pioneered working in psychoanalysis with children. Winnicott found that by offering a line to a child, they would draw on it, completing it into a picture and providing commentary to go along with it. He found this to be an excellent way to get children to open up about their feelings, perceptions and concerns, and allow him to find ways to help his young patients. Although a psychoanalytic method, Winnicott was clear about the relationship between analysis and games: «it is play that is the universal, and that belongs to health: playing facilitates growth and therefore health; playing leads into group relationships; playing can be a form of communication in psychotherapy; and, lastly, psychoanalysis has been developed as a highly specialized form of playing in the service of communication with oneself and others» (Winnicott, 2011, p. 237). Thinking of all things as forms of the basic, natural impulse to play gave rise to the squiggle game as therapy, not the other way around.

We should think of debate as a game that encourages articulation about the picture of things that we are mutually drawing through speech. In short, it is a game about accounting for our rhetoric as we add to, complete, and question the picture of things that our speech illuminates during debates. In orienting it this way, we open the opportunity for articulation to tell us about our positionality in relation to the "chart," where the justification of the lines of argument open up conversations about where we are standing, what we are seeing, and how we relate to what's going on around us. Instead of looking for the 'right' interpretation, debate looks for the creation of 'meaningful interpretation,' teaching us new ways to imagine, engage, and understand problems and how we see ourselves in relation to those problems.

The squiggle game as Winnicott defined it was simple: Draw a line, and ask the child to complete the picture. They could make the line into anything they want. Then they are to draw a line, and Winnicott (or the therapist) would complete the drawing into whatever they wanted. The result was conversation about the drawing, the lines, and what was being made together.

Winnicott was well known for the strong connections he could make with his patients. At his funeral, one eulogist from Denmark remarked on how his children saw Winnicott when they were kids, and expressed excitement to meet him once again when they were teens. The reason was they remembered how well he spoke to them in Danish, which was a language he «could not speak a word of» (Jacobs, 1995, p. 67). This image of a practitioner of play through

speech and conversation being remembered for perfectly speaking one's language is a great way to think about the capacity of debate imagined as a game with no rules.

Winnicott's squiggle game can be seen as «a propensity toward visuality as a mode of expression and communication where words might otherwise fall short» (Farley, 2011, p. 15). I believe that the need to account for what was drawn, whatever the interlocutors created from the squiggle, serves as a transitional object, something that mediates between one's subjective world and the outside world - a reality that one is entering with trepidation. This is a natural process of human development from childhood for Winnicott and is the root of creativity and all forms of meaning-making. As Günter explains:

> «Winnicott takes up in his definition of creativity with its close connection to the transitional object. He depicts the emergence of the intermediate area of art, religion and culture as a whole as the attempt to find a solution for the problem of relating what is objectively perceived to what is subjectively imagined, the outer world to the inner world». (Günter, 2007, p. 10)

The existence of the squiggles is a place to practice bringing in relationships that appear to be 'out there.' One must always be using some type of familiar metaphor - something close at hand - in order to help make what is out there tangible, real, and most importantly, meaningful. The squiggles are a comfortable way to test the limits of one's creation or perhaps one's ability to get away with meaning given the right arrangement of lines.

A discursive version of this kind of game might be found in the work of David Bohm, whose book *On Dialogue* suggests having verbal exchanges about 'nothing,' with the hopes that people will recognize one another in terms of what is said and what the responses are:

> «The object of a dialogue is not to analyze things, or to win an argument, or to exchange opinions. Rather, it is to suspend your opinions and to look at the opinions -- to listen to everybody's opinions, to suspend them, and to see what all that means. If we can see what all of our opinions mean, then we are sharing a common content, even if we don't agree entirely». (Bohm, 2004, p. 26)

The point of Bohm's dialogue is not to have one. Unlike traditional debate models, where the point is to try to win by following certain norms, rules, or established senses of 'reason' or 'good argument,' the dialogue is about talking about the talk - what is it that made someone make a 'line' of argument into a particular picture of the world?

Winnicott's scribble game and debate are both about making 'lines' and then seeing what the response is. Then one speaks about the relationship between the line and response, and the line, the speakers, the response, and further meaning. Debate with minimal rules - save turn-taking exchange - can serve to generate new discourse, new meaning, and new ways to relate. The game is based on relational articulation - 'Why did *you* make that line into that claim?' One more

response. As Bohm put it, «in this dialogue we share all the roads and we finally see that none of them matters. We see the meaning of all the roads, and therefore we come to the 'no road.' Underneath, all the roads are the same because of the very fact that they are 'roads' - they are rigid» (Bohm, 2004, p. 38).

Debate's function seen as a scribble game is one to get us talking in more ways than one. The game is productive if discourse; its scribbles are no doubt utterances. But the utterances demand an evergreen response. They are haunting in how they demand further accounting and articulation. Anyone who has debated can, at this very moment, call to mind utterances from debates that happened years ago that still have a freshness, an edge that feels like a demand to speak. The debate may not even be serious. A school debate and a political debate in a community produce adjacent discourses that are unaware (or simply do not care) about how vital they are in the world. This demand to speak is valuable as it is the attitude that is taught, not a set of skills. The squiggle debate game produces this kind of attitude.

Debate is a game that is *like* the squiggle game. I say 'like' because I do not want to carry to debate the notions of the squiggle game that are connected to child psychology and psychoanalysis. Rather, I want attention on the process and results of the squiggle game in terms of being able to articulate new relational knowledge. Debate should be thought of as teaching relationality, that is, crafting numerous relationships that open spaces from which things can be said that would not have been said in the same way, or even at all, given another set of relations.

One of debate's overlooked powers is that of the impromptu - due to the contingent nature of speech, the performance aspect of debating, and the desire of students to win and perform at their best, articulations arise in debate that were not pre-planned or scripted. This is the connection to the squiggle game. Winnicott's method was to draw some line on a page and have his patient complete the line into a picture. Responding to the squiggle - that articulation of thought on a page in a particular situation - created relations between the doctor and the child from which speech could emerge that Winnicott - and many others - could not get from typical planned doctor-patient conversation. This unplanned response to lines scribbled out or spoken in the moment are invaluable for helping us create the kinds of knowledge of relations that will help us in the Anthropocene.

Thinking of debate as a game about connecting one line to another and explaining what is being made opens debate to different pedagogical processes that are inaccessible if we think of debate as a game of research, facts, or (most popular in the United States) a game about solving big political problems. Instead, the game becomes one of turning a line of thought into something that includes yet is not determined by the line presented by the next speaker. It's a short leap to take the squiggle game's line and call it the debate game's 'line of argument.' It's an even shorter hop to include the conversation about how that image or creation was formed as a part of the game.

Rethinking debate as the practice of articulating relationships between lines of argument, rebuttal, and the relations between the speaker and the line of argument to themselves and others constitutes debate as a practice of investigating and creating stories that explain our relationships to one another. This makes debate a vital part of increasing the capacity to imagine, particularly in the face of the unimaginable catastrophe of the Anthropocene.

4. Conclusion

Thinking of debate as a classroom tool to teach and reinforce the mastery of skills is thought of as a way to teach young people how to navigate a world of misinformation, facts, overwhelming data, and political polarization. However, this set of skills limits debate's capability to what is assumed ontologically about the world. Just like James Cook, our students will not recognize valuable navigational information from others if it does not include fixed concepts like a "true north." It will be dismissed as 'fake news,' much like how the British navigators treated Tuapia's approach to the sea.

Instead, the squiggle game can serve as a model for how debate can teach us that discussion about the line and the response to the line - how did you make that meaningful? - is always the right way to move toward understanding. Instead of trying to test one's skills on how to interpret evidence, facts, or data, debate becomes a test of narrative - can you relate me, your line, and yourself in a way to provide insight not just on who should win the argument, but where our meanings originate?

The threat of anthropogenic climate change is simultaneously real and inconceivable. Perhaps our role as debate teachers is to give students the capability not to judge the value of data, but to create new ways to understand the value of data by practicing the art of rearticulation through relational states. Much like Tupaia's navigational tradition, he knew where he was and how to get to where he wanted to be because of what was around him. From wherever he was he could tell the story of where his destination lay on the horizon. Cook had no such ability, considering the ocean, wind, and islands "fixed" in space and time. Without specific scientific tools, the sea and sky and stars were just 'noise.' Both perspectives led to great navigational accomplishments, but with the crisis of lack of imaginative capacity across the board when thinking of the severity of climate change, the role of debate might be best not as a skill of inclusion and exclusion, but a practiced art of weaving meaning out of surf, sea, sand, and sky - as long as we still have them.

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