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A SUON DI PAROLE IL GIOCO DEL CONTRADDITTORIO

Il format trentino del dibattito per
l'innovazione della didattica

A cura di
Paolo Sommaggio e Chiara Tamanini

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PAOLO SOMMAGGIO, ALVISE SCHIAVON, MARCO MAZZOCCA *

“A SUON DI PAROLE” A (BRIEF) ENGLISH GUIDE

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1. Introduction

In everyday life, as well as in scientific discourses, disagreements (interpreted as a lack of consensus around an assertion) are not only common but, often, unavoidable. Everyone in their lives must deal with disagreements at some point, so that the ability to engage critically in efforts that seek to reach a consensus is valuable. One of the ways to deal with disagreements is through debate.

Anecdotal evidence tends to suggest that disagreements result from logical fallacies or faulty logic rather than as the consequences of different representations of facts. In essence, disagreements may be rooted in different and complex reasoning, be it ideological, moral, or ethical. Our experience suggests that one of the most important challenges today is not merely to recognise and understand the nature of disagreements, but to deal with them and, in some cases, to compose divergences, which is what pluralistic and democratic societies require from their citizens. Therefore, in 2010, the University of Trento and IPRASE (Provincial Institute for Research and Educational Experimentation of the Autonomous Province of Trento) founded an educational path aimed at increasing the democratic consciousness

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and the aptitude for public discourse through an innovative debating tournament called “A suon di parole” (ASP)¹.

The aim of this paper is to introduce the ASP project, to explain the reasons that led to its creation, and to highlight its unique design features. To do this, in the following section, we provide some background information about the project to illustrate the rationale that led to its birth and the goals it intends to achieve, focusing on its innovative elements compared with other debating tournaments.

In the third section, we discuss the format of the tournament. In this regard, we explain the structure of the tournament, the role of each team member, the features regarding the way teachers and students are trained and involved, the criteria of judgement, and, finally, the goals we aim to achieve through the choice of topics. Then, in the fourth section, we provide and comment on some tournament data to illustrate empirically the effects of this particular form of tournament on the formation of students.

In the final section, we draw some conclusions and, at the same time, predict some possible developments for the project.

2. General information about the project

In recent years, the wide *spread* of mass media and social networks has consistently increased the opportunities for people to communicate. This phenomenon is an unprecedented historical opportunity, since such platforms do not just create connections among people, but also allow for the spread of news, ideas, and opinions. In other words, these platforms help to create a virtual public square where anyone is free to express themselves².

However, it must be noted that if the increased opportunities to communicate open a number of unforeseeable possibilities, they may also represent a hazard to our societies, our democracies, and our informa-

1 “A suon di parole” (literally “to the sound of words”) is an Italian wordplay based on the meaning of “A suon di” which can be translate both as “to the sound of” and as “by dint of”. Therefore, in this latter sense, the title of the project represents the wish that the debate may be won “by dint of” words (i.e. through the quality of oral speech).

2 Cfr. F. D’Agostini, *Verità avvelenata. Buoni e cattivi nel dibattito pubblico*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2010; Id., *Logica in pratica. Esercizi per la filosofia ed il ragionamento comune*, Carrocci editore, Roma 2013; F. Cavalla, item *Topica giuridica*, in *Enciclopedia del diritto*, Giuffrè, Milano 1992, pp. 720-739.

tion systems. No matter how many ideas, opinions, or news are disseminated, the issue emerging in our societies, we argue, concerns the method of developing critical thinking around this information abundance. If people can only accept or reject an idea without being able to rationally justify its merit, they expose themselves as sycophants or bigots rather than critical individuals.

Therefore, we believe that a tool to develop social, civic, and logical argumentative skills is needed to question the assumptions that people make about their world and how it works, and healthy debate can play a meaningful role in that regard³. In the ASP project, debating is considered a method for testing an assertion by posing critical questions that illuminate the assumptions being made in that assertion. The project attempts to prepare students to face challenges based on the ability to argue and counter-argue civic and social issues.

It is assumed that, even in everyday life, making a decision with other people often involves divergent opinions that can cause disagreement, which can often escalate into a dispute, especially when no one is willing to question the decisions assumptions and merit. It is on the basis of developing students' critical thinking through debates that the ASP project was mooted. It is hoped the project generates and stimulates in younger generations a trustful attitude in rational research, in the free comparison of ideas, in the non-violent conduct of discussion, as well as a critical attitude toward their theses and those of others through the concrete practice of building and confronting arguments and counter-arguments⁴.

Furthermore, this project aims to help students to acquire, through gaming, a deeper awareness of themselves, of their abilities, and of their own interests in the merits of rationality. These aims are made possible

3 Cfr. P. Sommaggio, *Contraddittorio, giudizio, mediazione*, Franco Angeli, Milano 2012; A. Iacona, *L'argomentazione*, Einaudi, Torino 2010; A. Gilardoni, *Logica e argomentazione: un prontuario*, Mimesis, Milano-Udine 2008.

4 Cfr. A. Fisher, *Critical Thinking: An Introduction*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2011; T. Moore, *Critical Thinking and Language: The Challenge of Generic Skills and Disciplinary Discourse*, Continuum, London-New York 2011; A.J. Freeley, *Argumentation and Debate: Critical Thinking for Reasoned Decision Making*, Belmont, Wadsworth 1996. K. Colbert, *Enhancing Critical Thinking Ability Through Academic Debate*, "Contemporary Argumentation and Debate", vol. 16, 1995, pp. 52-72; S. Norris (ed.), *The Generalizability of Critical Thinking: Multiple Perspectives on an Educational Ideal*, Teachers College Press, New York 1992; J. McPeak, *Teaching Critical Thinking: Dialogue and Dialectic*, Routledge, New York 1990. J. Parella, *The Debate Method of Critical Thinking*, Dubuque, Kendall Hunt 1986.

because the proposed topics are designed to stimulate students to input into the game not only their own ideas, but also their concrete experiences and personal opinions. In this way, the game itself turns from simply playing into an activity of research and rediscovery of the self⁵.

Finally, the project aims to promote the spirit of collaboration, the teamwork attitude, and the ability to listen. In this sense, one of the purposes of debate that arose during the ASP tournament is to develop the ability to listen and to re-elaborate the opinions of others, not only to develop thoughts through oppositions, but also to improve the ability to listen and to understand deeply the opinion of others, to understand their point, and to find its criticality.

3. *Special features of the project*

Today, there are many possible debate formats⁶. However, none of the formats currently used in international debating tournaments fit the goals we intended to achieve through the ASP project. In particular, what we prefigured in the construction of the ASP debate format was the creation of a debate model that can avoid the “critical points” of other forms of debate. Therefore, we imagined a model that, primarily, can involve as many students as possible. In the ASP debate format, there are six speakers actively involved per team in each match (three for the arguments phase and three for the counter-arguments phase).

However, for a more in-depth analysis, the number of participants for each team should be higher. To facilitate the effective use of this approach, the topic of each challenge is communicated to the teams ten days before the match, so every member of the team can contribute to elaborate the team’s thesis. Furthermore, in the construction of the counter-argument, all members of the team are involved in the goal of understanding and finding the weaknesses of the other team’s thesis – both

5 Cfr. G. Rybold, *Speaking, Listening and Understanding. Debate for NonNative English Speakers*, International Debate Education Association, New York 2006; G. Wiggins, *Assessing Student Performance: Exploring the Purpose and Limits of Testing*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco 1993.

6 Cfr. Z. Brown, *The Use of in-Class Debates as a Teaching Strategy in Increasing Students’ Critical Thinking and Collaborative Learning Skills in Higher Education*, in “Educationalfutures”, 2017, DOI = [educationstudies.org.uk/?p=3685](https://doi.org/10.1080/17513758.2017.13685); S. Quinn, *Debating in the World Schools Style: A Guide*, International Debate Education Association, New York 2009.

speakers and non-speakers. These features of the ASP debate format not only involve in the project as many people as possible, but they push the teams (which coincides with the class group) to be more co-operative. By offering a role to all the participants, our observations indicate that this allows all students to improve their listening speaking skills and encourages integration in the group and the personal growth of a student.

Second, another important feature of the ASP debate format is its probable suitability for addressing disagreement⁷. The entire tournament, from the choice of topics to the concrete structure of matches, is designed to allow the participants to focus on oppositional argument⁸, its merits and weaknesses, as analysed through the basic tenets of critical thinking, such as perspective, goal, and assumptions, as well as the consequences and implications of argument for improving an intended situation. This format allows the teams to develop an improved version of a good argument or to pose a counter-argument that neutralises a mere dualistic approach to an argument.

On the one hand, the topics are designed to make claims maximally oppositional and, at the same time, equivalent. The topics do not consist of a mere dualistic opposition (pro/counter something), but they should illustrate the common principle behind both claims⁹.

On the other hand, the argumentation phase is clearly distinguished from the counter-argument phase, unlike in most of the other formats of debate tournaments, in which the two activities are conducted concurrently¹⁰. In the first stage of the match, each speaker must support his/her team's claim through the construction of a speech that should be persuasive, logically grounded, and sufficiently argued; in the latter stage of the match, the focus of each discourse is not on the thesis of their own team but, conversely, the claim of the opposite team. In particular, each counter-argument (or rebuttal) must refute the arguments expressly proposed by the opponents, without introducing new arguments. Therefore, a generic counter-argumentation against the topic of

7 Cfr. R. Feldman and T.A. Warfield, *Disagreement*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2010.

8 Cfr. H. Prakken, *Logical Tools for Modelling Legal Arguments: A Study of Defeasible Reasoning in Law*, Kluwer, Dordrecht 1997.

9 An example of this kind of topic might be the following: "the defense of common goods is a responsibility of citizens / the defense of common goods is a responsibility of institutions".

10 This is, for example, the case of the British parliamentary style in which each speaker is simultaneously in charge of arguing his/her thesis and counter-argue the opponent's thesis.

the opposing team is insufficient since it is necessary to produce a precise counter to the specific arguments put forward by the opponents in the argumentation stage. Therefore, listening to the opponent is crucial.

Team spirit, listening skills, and the ability to face opposing arguments are just some features of the ASP debate tournament. Since 2010, the project has had increasing participation and interest from promoters and students, and it intends, in the future, to improve and advance its research towards the education of new generations.

4. Project promoters

The ASP project was created as an experimental pathway, beginning in the academic year 2010-2011, by IPRASE in the Department of Legal Sciences of the Faculty of Law of the University of Trento and the high schools “Leonardo da Vinci” and “Galileo Galilei” in Trento. Coordination was handled by IPRASE, and the scientific supervision is a prerogative of the Faculty of Law at the University of Trento. However, it should be noted that, from its second edition (academic year 2011-2012), the tournament has benefitted from a partnership with the City of Trento – specifically the Department of Culture, Tourism and Youth Council. The project also enjoys the patronage of the Italian Philosophical Society and, from the academic year 2016-2017, a partnership with the City of Rovereto.

The project promoters share the ownership and responsibility of the project-related initiatives and agree on the general organisational guidelines and the methods of economic support and funding. To do this, the organisation of the tournament is headed by a Coordination Group consisting of representatives of the project promoters, the persons designated by them, and the teachers of the high schools of Trento. The Coordination Group developed the guidelines of the tournament and fixed them into a formal set of rules that regulate the enactment of the tournament. These regulations particularly address organisational issues, but no rules on argumentative techniques or fallacies are provided, which is consistent with the general inspiration for the project.

Moreover, as we specify below, it should be noted how the number of higher schools participating has steadily increased over the years.

Finally, it should be specified that the group of project promoters is an open group. Indeed, other organisations, institutions, associations and societies can participate in the organisation of the tournament.

5. “A suon di parole” *debate format*

The ASP format of debate, as previously mentioned, is promoted primarily as an educational tool to encourage critical thinking and, at the same time, tolerance of different views. The format is consistent with the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning, the Italian national regulations for the reform of the second cycle of education, and the provincial studies plans of Trentino¹¹.

The ASP format particularly accentuates both the role of the team and the role of every speaker within the debate. Team members perform individually and are responsible for the success of their speech, but the format requires them to work together also, especially in the phase of counter-argument, to succeed. Therefore, reflecting the format’s emphasis on both individual work and teamwork, the team score is the sum of the performance of its members. In addition, individual awards are presented to the best speakers.

Variants of the format are currently being explored. The length of speeches, the number of speakers, the length of preparation time during the debate, the system of evaluation, and the language in which to debate may vary¹². However, in the continuation of this work, only the original format is referred to.

Structure

In the ASP format, twelve individuals speak during each debate: six (three per team) in the argumentative phase, and six (three per team) in the counter-argument phase. The debate is composed of thirteen parts: twelve are speeches, and the remaining part is a period of about 20 minutes in which each team, after listening to the arguments of the

11 In this regard cf. Recommendation 2006/962/EC on key competences for lifelong learning; Italian National Regulation on “Revision of the Ordinary, Organizational and Teaching of Licei” of 15 March 2010; Italian National Regulations laying down rules for the reorganization of professional institutes of 15 March 2010; Italian National Regulations laying down rules for the reorganization of technical institutes of 15 March 2010; Decree of the President of the Province of Trento of 5 August 2011, nos. 11-69.

12 In this regard, two slightly different ASP formats are currently being studied. One in English called *WordGames* and one in German called *Wortbewerb*. These latter differ from ASP format not only for the language in which it is debated, but also for slightly different rules.

opposing team, prepares their own counter-arguments. In this period, each team can make use of any online or bibliographical resources it wishes. The only help not allowed is that from tutors or any other person outside the team.

The first six speeches are constructive, in which debaters present their reasons for supporting their thesis. The remaining speeches, in the counter-argument phase, specifically contest the arguments presented by the opposing team in the first phase. In this latter phase, debaters are not allowed to introduce new arguments to support their position.

Each speaker has three minutes in which to present his/her argument or counter-argument (depending on the stage of the match). Thus, each match takes about fifty-five minutes, to which are added a further fifteen minutes to allow judges to decide the winning team and the best speakers of the match. Overall, the entire match should last about seventy minutes.

Topics are generally focused on politics, economics, philosophy, and social affairs, although they can relate to any subject as long they contain two reasonable and maximally opposite positions. Topics are delivered to teams ten days prior to the match to allow them time to study the topics, to outline their strategies, and to prepare the argumentative phase.

Roles

From the beginning, one of the ASP format goals has been to involve as many people as possible in each match to increase teamwork. Since each team consists of class members, we wanted to increase the integration of members through a playful and educational activity. Indeed, this activity has been able to achieve this goal thanks to the following division of roles:

- *Speaker of the arguing phase.* The roles of the first six speakers are similar to those in many other formats; they build cases, propose their reasons, and justify their arguments. However, in the ASP format, speakers of the first phase do not deal with a rebuttal to the opposing theses. This explicit exclusion of reply speeches in the first phase creates an interesting dynamic situation. If speakers of the first stage are generally free to create and build their argumentative discourses as best they believe, they have to be careful to make their speeches as unassailable as possible, since having no feedback in this first phase means they do not have the opportunity to “correct” their words.

- *Speaker of the counter-argument phase.* As previously mentioned, the role of the counter-argument speakers is crucial because, since their

speeches are less “prepared” and, in a way, more spontaneous, they can bring out a students’ unexplored qualities. Since every form of new argument is forbidden at this stage, students can only address those arguments opposed to their claims, consider them, and, above all, focus on “overcoming” them. In other words, it is at this stage that a student learns how to deal with disagreements.

- *Critical listeners.* This is an unofficial role that has arisen in the practice of the matches. Since the first matches, it was apparent how each team involved not only the speakers, but also other classmates in the formulation of counter-arguments. These other classmates, while not having an active role, helped the speakers take notes during the first phase, in addition to aiding the speakers of the second stage to prepare their speeches. Therefore, it is fair to recognise the fundamental role of these students.

Training

One of the key aspects of the ASP debate tournament is the formation of the teachers and students involved in the project.

Formation is carried out under the responsibility of the Coordination Group: training does not consist of frontal lessons, but an informal approach of a few hours is preferred, in which teacher and students are invited to participate.

In these training hours, the tournament rules are explained, and brief information is provided about the most important argumentation techniques. However, trainers tend to highlight the spontaneous ability of students to argue and debate, rather than provide a set of abstract rules and prohibitions. This is the reason students and teachers are invited to participate in a simulation of a match; we think that the best way to learn skills related to the ASP debate format is to play the debate.

Player’s autonomy

“A suon di parole” encourages students to be independent of teachers. Although each team must nominate one or more teachers who act as *tutor(s)* in the tournament, they cannot be helped by their tutors during matches.

Therefore, the tutors simply follow the training of students, guarantee internal workouts (which must be self-mastered by students), and accompany the team to matches.

Organisation of the team, workouts, and the role of each student are decided by the class themselves. It is also up to the class to decide whether to confirm or change the various speakers during the tournament.

Adjudication

Adjudicators in ASP base their decisions on the argumentation and counter-argumentation introduced in the course of the debate.

The adjudicators judge each speaker individually. It is the sum of the votes for each speaker that determines the team result. There are six criteria on which each speaker is evaluated, and, for each criterion, each adjudicator can award a score of 1 to 5, with 5 representing the highest score and, thus, superior argumentation.

Moreover, because the focus of the ASP format is on education, structure is generally as important as communication style. The ASP debates are always judged by at least three independent adjudicators who are strangers to the teams involved in the match. The adjudicators make their judgements according to the following assessment criteria.

Content of speech

- *Argumentative quality*. This criterion assesses the ability of the speaker to make useful arguments during the discussion. Each speech should be coherent, sufficient, convergent, and resistant. Furthermore, the speakers should be able to overcome each other's theses.

a) *Coherent*. This indicates non-contradiction between premises and the conclusion that the speaker wants to make in support of his/her position.

b) *Sufficient*. This represents the necessary reasons to reach the conclusion.

c) *Convergent*. This is a logic connection that manifests itself when the different reasons are directed towards the same conclusion.

d) *Resistant*. This is the strength of the exposed arguments to remain unassailable.

- *Argumentative quantity*. The number of arguments, data, and sources that each speaker uses to support his/her thesis.

- *Relevance*. This is the relationship of a speech to the specific subject of the discussion.

Mode and forms

- *Exposure Lucidity*. Clarity in the exposition; ordered concatenation of arguments.

- *Dictionary*. Language skills: the ability to master the language in which the debate is held (including, when appropriate, technical languages).

- *Acting*. This is the effectiveness of performance in a scenic, persuasive, and rhetorical manner. In other words, acting is the ability to engage the audience (through, for instance, tone of voice or posture).

Data

Since ASP is still being developed, in the past few years, progress monitoring has begun. It was decided to collect some data that, in our opinion, can provide useful information to measure the effectiveness of the project.

Therefore, from the academic year 2012-2013, we began collecting the following data:

- the number of schools participating in the ASP debate tournament;
- the number of classes participating in the ASP debate tournament (including classes that, while not participating in the “final stage of the tournament”, participated in the internal matches¹³);
- the number of students participating in the ASP debate tournament;
- the number of teachers participating in the ASP debate tournament;
- the number of topics presented during the tournament.

The obtained results of the data collection are illustrated in the following table:

Table 1. A Selective List of Data regarding the ASP Project

Academic Year	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015	2015-2016	2016-2017
Schools	6	7	10	11	12
Classes	36	33	35	45	50
Students	700	620	700	980	1000
Teachers	100	100	160	200	200
Topics	37	27	45	61	53

13 Indeed, given the large number of classes which wanted to participate in the project, many schools organized internal match in order to decide which classes could participate in the ASP debate tournament.

Regarding participation in the tournament, the trend is very positive. Despite some slight drop in the number of classes and students that participated in the tournament in the academic year 2013-2014, the trend is generally increasing steadily. Ever more high schools, classes, and teachers, year after year, are joining the ASP project.

Therefore, in the coming years, our research will be developed along three different paths:

Questionnaires will be distributed to the teachers of the classes involved in the debate tournament (at the beginning and at the end of the tournament), with the aim of analysing changes in the students' social behaviour.

Questionnaires will be distributed to the students of the classes involved in the debate tournament (at the beginning and at the end of the tournament) to verify not only the presence of a generic interest in the project, but also the influence of the tournament on future student choices.

We will collect student report cards before and after the tournament to determine whether there are significant changes in student performance in the oral exams.

6. Conclusion

Currently, there are many forms of debate tournaments. None of these forms, however, seem able to develop in the younger generations the skills and abilities that the ASP debating format can.

As we have seen, the ASP is mainly characterised by the presence of an exclusively counter-argumentative phase. This characteristic allows us to evaluate students not only in terms of what they prepare prior to the match (which is what happens in the argumentative phase), but also, and especially, regarding what they do during the match.

In all honesty, what students face in the match is nothing more than a disagreement. Nevertheless, what happens during the match is fascinating. Through the dialectical confrontation, it is possible to note how students learn the art of listening to their competitors. Subsequently, students try to understand the views of their opponents because the goal of the challenge is to overcome each other's arguments.

Fair play, listening skills, and the ability to think critically are capabilities that, in concrete terms, allow future generations to become critical, thinking, and socially active citizens who prefer dialectic confrontation to violence, and reasoning to insult. In other words, citizens

who do not want to overwhelm others but who simply overcome disagreements by dint of words or, in Italian, “A suon di parole”.

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