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**The Importance of the Socratic Debate in the  
Academic Education. The Case of the University of  
Trento**

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**A Socratic Approach to the Academic Education.  
The Case of the University of Trento**

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**Abstract**

*Debate has always been considered as a training strategy that “de-structures” and reassembles the traditional setting of a learners community in an innovative and participatory way, it builds a sort of “upside-down class” in which students are called to cooperate in order to manage access to different sources of information and to deal with them in a way that helps them to construct persuasive arguments and hypothesize counter-argumentations. The main purpose of this work is, therefore, to show how the introduction of this form of educational approach on university students can lead them to some indisputable academic and social benefits. In this regard, this paper presents the various steps undertaken in the last two years by the University of Trento's strategic project called “NSF - Nuove Strategie per la Formazione” (“NTS - New Training Strategies”) are presented.*

**Keywords:** *academic training, critical thinking, education, educational research, rhetoric*

## **Introduction**

Nowadays, in Western societies, the public debate seems to have in many ways deteriorated: logical and the argumentative strategies are often designed or performed to enable a delegitimization of others. In this context of post-democracy, the practice of the debate seems to be a valuable tool for the formation of future and current citizens: people willing to participate in a critical way, open to dialogue and confrontation, and then to non-violent interaction.

Starting from these considerations, from 2017 the strategic project of the University of Trento called "*NSF – Nuove Strategie per la Formazione*" ("NTS - New Training Strategies") began to operate with the clear aim of developing training tools suitable not only for passing on specific knowledge but also for training future citizens in constructive dialogue, listening and active participation in society.

The main purpose of this work, therefore, is to present the first 18 months of the project, its goals, and its activities, in order to disseminate its practices as well as the first academic results in the field of innovative teaching and student education.

To do this, in the following paragraphs, after a brief presentation of the project and of its background information - in order to provide the rationale that led to its birth and the goals that it wants to achieve – we focus on some of the theoretical aspects that have guided our actions with students.

Subsequently, we provide a list of research-action activities promoted by NSF with the dual purpose of mapping existing good training practices (creating a network) and propose and test some innovative training strategies.

Finally, in the last section, we try to draw some conclusions and, at the same time, to predict some possible developments of the project.

### *The Project in Brief*

The idea behind the "*NSF - Nuove strategie per la Formazione*" ("NTS - New Training Strategies") project has developed on the basis of some of the challenges launched both by the Italian Ministry of University and Research (MIUR) and by the European Union to the so-called humanities and social faculties: to innovate training and conceiving it not only as a means of acquiring knowledge and skills but also as a tool for personal growth and ethical maturity.

For this reason, one of the goals of NSF is to create a network within the University of Trento, able to connect different and distant disciplines in a common constructive perspective, focused on the modeling and application of innovative and effective training processes. Fortunately, so far, our experience has led us beyond our wildest expectations.

Since, in fact, we immediately realized that working with models, schematizing and computerizing training processes – ensuring their widespread dissemination – achieving an effective interdisciplinary approach it wouldn't have been enough, we decided to do more: we decided to put the students at the center of the project.

In the first phase of the project, in fact, after having obtained the first funding from the University of Trento and having created a first group of professors and young researchers, we've been working in order to register the state of the art of the training in the Autonomous Province of Trento area, with specific reference to:

- University;
- School;
- Companies.

The mapping of the existing good practices and the identification of the innovative implementation strategies, also through the formulation of new models or schemes for teaching and learning, would have helped us to have a general picture of what is happening in the field of training and education in Trentino, not only at the academic level. The idea, in fact, is to gather all the realities in the field of training in order to create a training network to share good practices. Obviously, particular attention has been directed to the ethical value of each good teaching or training model, in its main aspects. However, as already mentioned, this activity would have been sterile without any experimentation.

For this reason, starting from the academic year 2018/2019 we thought, organized and promoted the first training activities of NSF. In particular, this is a series of activities aimed mainly at the students of the University of Trento. The objective of each activity and the training methods have been very different and have changed according to the activity. What has remained the same, at least until now, has been our approach: a Socratic approach. The latter is a form of a cooperative and argumentative dialogue between individuals, based on asking and answering questions in order to stimulate critical thinking not only in the students but also in the trainers.

In the next paragraphs, therefore, starting from a brief analysis of what we mean by the "Socratic method", we show our first attempts to implement it in the various training activities

### *Our Socratic Approach*

On 25 September 2015, the General Assembly of the United Nations drew up a document that sets out the seventeen objectives that the Organization intends to pursue with a view to sustainable development: the so-called 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Particularly interesting, for our purposes, is the fourth objective which requires a commitment from all to provide quality, fair and inclusive education. Nothing that cannot be achieved, we believe, by the NSF project.

Nothing that cannot be achieved, we believe, by the NSF project. To clarify, however, the reasons for our conviction, it is necessary to start from a very well-known quotation.

The motto (from time to time attributed to Confucius and Mao Tze Dong) is as follows:

Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day.  
Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime.

This sort of short story is often presented in many contexts dedicated to the training. This is because the food-knowledge analogy seems to be very useful to explain the transition from a traditional and passive education (providing a fish) to an active practical-problematic approach (teaching to fish).

Problem-solving, indeed, is a model of learning that, just like fishing, allows people to activate themselves and to act to find new concepts or alternative proposals to the concrete situation. The moral of the story is therefore very simple: the problem-based model is certainly better than the *ex-cathedra* model. We believe, however, that there is much more than that.

First of all, to learn how to fish one needs to know what a fish is. Therefore, a problem-based approach cannot ignore the basic knowledge of notions. This is why the transition from fish to fishing can only take place if both are known. The two models, therefore, are not excluded but are integrated.

Further, it is also necessary that, during fishing, the learner understands what to keep and what to throw. This is because fishing is not a simple "pull up from the water" but consists of several strategic choices aimed at obtaining knowledge and skill (fishing a fish) that differs from other possibilities (fishing a shoe, a branch, etc.). To fish a fish, for example, is useful if we need it to satisfy our appetite but, if we had to set out, perhaps it would be better to fish a shoe - even old or broken. But how can we communicate this ability to consider alternatives in opposition so that the best choice can emerge?

It is necessary to train the ability to make a motivated choice, i.e. the ability to consider alternatives. Hence, neither a concept-based training, nor problem-based training, but, instead, choice-based training. The activities of the NSF project are based on this last training model.

Being trained, indeed, does not only mean to possess knowledge and abilities to deal with problems: one needs also to be able to choose freely and consciously. In this regard, the choice-based learning, in its dialogical exercise, does not only teach learners how to talk to the other party and how to support debate with others (or with themselves), but it is also a real *species* of the "Socratic method" *genus*. (Sommaggio 2012; ID. 2014)

The Socratic method, in fact, provides learners with the ability to formulate and support their own thesis in a debate. It also trains learners to challenge, refute or defend their positions with reasonable arguments, and it enables them to enhance their critical/evaluation skills and language skills. It is the rebuttal – also known as *élenchos* or *elenchus* - which allows, through a process of refining discourse, to make the speaker's thesis stronger and, thus, less prone to denial.<sup>1</sup> In fact, as rightly point out by Martha Nussbaum a "problem with people who fail to examine themselves is that they often prove all too easily influenced." (Nussbaum 2010, 50)

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<sup>1</sup>Indeed, it consists of a continuous process of "attack" that does not want to be sterile or destructive, quite the contrary: in fact, its destructive part is preparatory to the construction phase; the objective is to 'build' theses based on valid arguments and able to resist opposition.

Every activity inherent to our project, in summary, is based, therefore, on a Socratic approach. The latter is not only considered a rather shared reference in the horizon of contemporary practices in the field of education but is also beginning to be present in areas such as ethics, morals, and law. (Dordoni, 2006; ID. 2002a; ID. 2002b; Birnbacher 1999)

In other words, the student is not only involved and invited to take an active part in every activity but placed in front of his Socrates, that is to say, a series of oppositions, he will be able to autonomously examine any contradictions that haste, or lack of reflection could have transformed into convictions or axioms.

## **Our Activities**

During these first months of the project, many activities have been promoted by the NSF project. Below is a brief analysis of the main ones.

### *Trainers Network*

One of the main objectives of the project has always been to expand its network of partners, in order to encourage the creation and sharing of good multi-sector training practices in a context that is not only local but also national and international. For this reason, from the beginning of 2018, the NSF Project has begun to establish several collaborations. As provided in the Executive Project, indeed, some of the activities developed in the first months of the project were focused in particular on the Design and understanding of the training needs of the Trentino's territory.<sup>2</sup>

In the first part of the year, thus, we designed a European project (Horizon 2020) titled "NETHICAL. A European Network for Teaching Research Ethics and Research Integrity". with Kingston University of London (UK), Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zürich (CH) and Jönköping University (S).<sup>3</sup> The project, born to share different experiences in the field of university education with the aim to improve the future of academic research, has obtained a good evaluation but has not been funded. However, we think that the NETHICAL project was a first step towards the creation of a European network of universities based on the desire to improve the study of student education.

Following this attempt, then, we decided to enlarge the NSF project group through a research grant (titled: "Ethical Learning. New Models") co-financed by the Faculty of Law of the University of Trento and NSF itself, the enlistment of some students, and the recruitment of young researchers.

Through this enlargement, indeed, we have been able to develop more regularly some strategic contacts in the field of local training, in order to understand and elaborate the training needs that characterize the Trentino area with

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<sup>2</sup>In addition, during those first months of activity, a logo and a communication concept were identified in cooperation with the Communication Office of the University of Trento. This need was necessary to increase our identifiability.

<sup>3</sup>Proposal ID 824570; Internal reference number: SEP-210498314; CALL: H2020- SwafS - 2018-1

regard to school, business, and research. We refer in particular to: IPRASE (Trentino's Provincial Institute for Educational Research and Experimentation), FBK (Bruno Kessler Foundation), TSM (Trentino School of Management), Confindustria Trento, IUSVE (Salesian University Institute of Venice), SIO (Italian Society for Orientation) and ELSA Trento (European Law Student Association).<sup>4</sup> Some of these were also our guests at our first congress titled: "Stati generali della formazione Trentina" (General States of Formation in Trentino).

The latter was a Congress focused on one of the main challenges that the UN, the European Union and the Italian Ministry of University and Research have launched to our society: innovate training, conceive it not only as a means to acquire knowledge and skills but also as a tool for personal growth and ethical maturity. The main objectives were, therefore, to meet together on an official occasion, to encourage debate and cooperation between different experiences in the field of training, to present the first results achieved by this cooperation, and enhance the potential of existing practices in the world of education, research, and business. Obviously, the meeting was mainly addressed to the operators of the sector (trainers, managers, teachers, students), however, the citizens of Trentino have also participated.

Needless to say, even with respect to an event eminently aimed at implementing a network, the opportunity to discuss with experts, students, and citizens has allowed us to have a more direct approach to the concrete training needs of our community.

*GREAT! (Get Ready for Exams-Advanced Training)*

Nowadays, university students are very different in several respects such as culture, religion or family background. Due to such diversities, students' learning needs are also becoming increasingly diverse. Personal skills, propensity to study and desire to emerge, in fact, often are no longer enough to serenely face the university career. This is because small misunderstandings, communicative inabilities or nervous crises can undermine students self-confidence and their academic results.

For this reason, one of the most important activities promoted and designed by NSF aims to provide each student with the tools to increase their self-awareness of the challenge of the exam, in order to better address the required performance from an argumentative, rhetorical and psychological point of view. All this, of course, starting from the specificity of each student considered as a unique person (the differences in this sense are incorporated, not smoothed out). This is GREAT! (Get Ready for Exams Advanced Training): a coaching and training program aimed at students of any year and any type of degree course, in order to train them to give their best during university exams.

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<sup>4</sup>In truth, these first approaches have allowed us, as we said, to begin the creation of a small local network of training able to act on several levels. Among the various partners, we would like to mention, in particular, IPRASE, the Trentino's provincial institute for research and educational experimentation, with which most of the member of NSF cooperate (Sommaggio, Schiavon and Mazzocca 2018)



GREAT! consists of a cycle of three workshops aimed to offer students the opportunity to reflect on their personal resources in order to improve their performance during the exam. The activity program, in fact, provides for the implementation of two cycles of workshops during the academic year. Each cycle is divided into three phases focused on:

- how to manage the exam from an argumentative point of view;
- how to manage exam stress and correlative performance anxiety;
- how to manage one's own body and surrounding space during public speaking (especially important for oral exams).

Our educational approach, during GREAT!, is twofold: on the one hand it is student-oriented and, on the other hand, it is choice-oriented. This means that the student is not only the real protagonist of the training but also has the opportunity to make and experience their own choices. In this sense, therefore, during the GREAT! workshops, the student is not a passive subject of formation but becomes a real active subject thanks to the cooperation with the trainers. Students, indeed, have not only the opportunity to discuss, on an equal footing, with teachers and experts (such as professors of rhetoric, actors, and psychologists) but they also have the possibility to act directly on themselves. During the course of GREAT!, in fact, students have the opportunity to train:

- their mind, developing and improving their own argumentative capacity;
- their body, promoting greater awareness of their body, especially during oral exams;
- their soul, developing and increasing their ability to manage and respond positively to exam stress and related performance anxiety.

GREAT!, thus, is a training innovation that does not look at the object of a specific field of knowledge but rather at the exposure of knowledge. The design of each workshop, in fact, is based on the model of the so-called Choice-based learning adapted, from time to time, to the specific topic dealt with by the students.

We have also chosen to improve student autonomy through unguided self-evaluation. Each student, in other words, is free to provide feedback and is invited to participate in subsequent cycles of workshops bringing his experience to all other students, thus becoming both student and coach. In fact, starting from the cycles of workshops after the first, students who have already participated in GREAT!, if they want, are not only involved in the design of future courses but they can become real trainers.

The advantage, in this sense, is certainly their equal position with other students - and, consequently, the opportunity for them to be closer to the needs of new students, sharing their experience and increasing the effectiveness itself of the activity. In this way, indeed, students are not only able to work on themselves from a dual point of view (that of the trainer and that of the learner), but they can further develop their listening skills and their ability to think critically through fair confrontation with their peers.

*Debating Society*

As a strategic project dedicated to academic training, we believe that debate is a particularly effective and innovative model of training. In truth, in most English-speaking countries it has now firmly entered the canon of higher education, and also in continental Europe, it is increasingly widespread. For this reason, we are organizing and sponsoring within the University of Trento the first Italian University Debating Society.

The model for this initiative is the experience of the Student Unions in the Anglo-Saxon countries: the Debating society should be a non-curricular, spontaneous initiative whose goal and function within the academical career should lie on the acknowledgment by students of its relevance rather than on official recognition by academic organs.

However, since our first objective is to stimulate the students, we have decided to spread this method of training through a series of meetings dedicated to providing the first theoretical and practical bases for dealing with a debate. Members of the NSF project organized two series of meetings (called *Seminario permanente sul dibattito*, that is Permanent workshop on debate), one for each semester of academic activity.

In the first cycle – conducted during the Winter semester 2018/2019 – we coordinated six meetings, where general issues and problems linked with debating were discussed.

The meetings had the following objectives:

- to learn the techniques needed to participate in a debate;
- to have fun exploring all the playful potential of the debate: in this meeting, the possible intersection between debate and the role-playing game was explored;
- to rediscover the classic roots of rhetoric, argumentation and contradictory;
- to work on themselves, and face their own insecurities: this meeting focused on bias and expectations influencing our approach to debate and our reaction to the result of a debate
- explore new ways to debate, through the discovery of the debate of Tibetan Buddhist monks: in this traditional form of debate, indeed, opponents are engaged in a highly dialectical activity similar to the Socratic method.

Several meetings were conducted by invited experts coming from different backgrounds and experience, with which students were asked to confront. Furthermore, we also organized a special meeting where Pietro del Soldà presented his book on the Socratic method as a crucial tool for dealing with problems of modernity (del Soldà 2018).

The objectives and modalities, even in these activities, were closely related to our student-oriented approach. In this sense, therefore, each individual meeting was always held in an informal way, giving each student the opportunity to be part of a group of young people interested in the practice of debate.

Anyway, the first series of meetings was primarily devoted to creating a sense of belonging among students and to offering some basic concepts to students facing for the first-time debates.

In particular, we aimed at making students aware of the difference among three apparently similar concepts: Speech, Discussion, and Debate. They are all linguistic acts aimed at communication, what distinguishes them is the different relationships between the interlocutors. In this sense, in fact:

- the Speech is a potentially monological act since, in itself, it doesn't require the presence - or even the existence - of any interlocutor: it would remain a speech even if pronounced in the absence of an interlocutor;
- the Discussion, on the other hand, presupposes the coexistence of different speeches side by side: what is lacking is a system of rules to ensure the coherence and effective relevance of the different speeches in relation to a specific theme;
- the Debate, finally, is a discussion that takes place within a framework of rules aimed at ensuring that the different discourses are not simply juxtaposed but can effectively interrelate with each other: a discussion that takes place within a (metaphorical) playing field made up of rules shared by the speakers.

In the second cycle of the *Seminario permanente sul dibattito*, which took place in the Summer semester 2018/2019, we pushed forward our goals and tried to gather student willing to participate to a team which should take part to a competitive debate in English as Second Language. Consequently, this series of meetings was therefore named "Debating team training".

Therefore, the features of the meetings changed according to our different mission. Firstly, meetings were mainly conducted in English, to encourage people to use the language of all international competition of debate: in this regard, also a teacher of English at University took part to the meetings and gave us important feed-backs on the importance of such initiative also for training English. Secondly, the meetings aimed at presenting the specific format of debate used in international competition, namely the so called British parliamentary style. Thirdly, meetings were much more specific and focused on practical issues or skills directly related to the use of British parliamentary format of debate.

In particular scheduled meeting of the second cycle dealt with:

- Introduction: the first meeting focused on the peculiar features of British Parliamentary (BP) style of debating, the format used in the EUDC – European University Debating Championship. In particular the meeting will focus on: types of motions normally used in BP challenges; roles of each speaker in the Debate and team work; points of information;
- Rhetorical skills (style and delivery): The meeting addressed some basics issues related with performance of speeches, that is formal aspects concerning the effectiveness of verbal communication such as: gesture; eye contact; movement;
- Notes and minutes: BP debates require high rapidity of thoughts, since each speaker need to quickly take a position on the opponent's arguments. This meeting aimed at improving the ability to quickly take notes on the opponent's assertions in order to identify strongest and weakest points in his argumentation.
- Speech structure: One of the key features of speeches in BP debates is indeed the balance between argumentation (put forward arguments supporting one's thesis) and counter-argumentation (to take a stand against the opponent's arguments). In

this meeting some advises on the ideal structure of speeches and will be performed exercises on conscious use of the time of the speech were given.

- Impromptu debates: In international debating championships such as EUDC, teams normally face impromptu debates, that is debates on the topic which are disclosed few times before the match. These debates are obviously problematic for several reasons: they require the ability to improvise and to develop arguments on topics which are not fondly known by participants. On the other hand, practicing impromptu debates strengthen the basic skills required in competitive debates. In this meeting, we explored the possibilities and difficulties of improvisation.
- Points of information: One distinctive characteristic of BP debates is the possibility to require points of information during the opponent's speech, that is to pose specific questions on the opponent's statements. In this meeting, we focused on how speakers in competitive debates pose and deal with points of information.

Also in this part of the training the staff of the project was supported by experts: in this case, we relied on the experience and knowledge of Austeja Kazemekaityte (PhD candidate in Economics and former trainer in High Schools and University debating societies).

As for the method of training used in these meeting, we insisted in an approach as bottom-up as possible, although several topics were extremely technical and not fitting with a purely Socratic approach.

Besides the official meeting, though, in the second cycle of meetings of *Seminario permanente* we were requested by students for extra-meetings in order to practice British parliamentary style debates: the best proof that the project is actually working.

## Conclusion

Some final considerations regarding the "NSF - Nuove Strategie per la Formazione" (NTS – New Training Strategies) project.

First of all, we repeat, this is a project in progress. In truth, many of the activities presented here are only at the beginning of their cycle of experimentation among the students. Further, it is worth remembering that, although there is a clear theoretical framework within which to make our educational choices, we must keep in mind that the concrete practice of training is an ever-changing challenge. However, our fortune is to be part of a local and an international network that allows us to share the best ideas in order to find, from time to time, the best educational strategy.

Moreover, we believe that we can further contribute to the modeling of new training strategies based on the Socratic debate as soon as we have a sufficiently large amount of data available. In this regard, it should be remembered that, since these are the first months of experimentation, the data collected are not yet sufficient to develop effective training strategies.

Yet we can already say something. In recent months, in fact, we have realized that, despite the relative novelty of the NSF project, the lack of adequate publicity

among the students of the University of Trento, and the lack of any form of remuneration for students (there are no educational credits, votes or certificates), the project has seen the enthusiastic participation of a good number of students. This struck us particularly hard, especially because some students who actively participated in the activities promoted by NSF started a side project: The First Italian Debating Society. A project in a project, we could not ask for better.

We believe, thus, that this is proof of what was said at the beginning of the essay by means of the metaphor of fishing. Indeed, it is not useful to provide fish, nor is it sufficient to teach how to fish: it is also necessary to know whether to fish and what to fish. Similarly, our students have made their choices: we can only be proud of them.

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