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The Controversy

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Résumé

L'éducation à la citoyenneté démocratique et le dialogue interculturel sont depuis 1954 des thématiques clés du Conseil de l'Europe qui considère la place de l'éducation comme centrale pour aider les peuples à mieux vivre ensemble. Les attentats et les tensions qu'ont connus les sociétés européennes ces dernières années ont renforcé l'importance de promouvoir un ensemble de valeurs communes dans les sociétés occidentales. C'est ainsi qu'en 2012-2013, lors de la présidence du Conseil de l'Europe par l'Andorre, est né le projet de définir les compétences nécessaires à une société démocratique. Parmi les compétences attendues des citoyens dans les sociétés démocratiques entrent différentes aptitudes, comme celle de communiquer efficacement avec les autres, et notamment avec les personnes de cultures différentes, et celle de résoudre pacifiquement les conflits. Le dialogue et l'argumentation ont une place centrale dans le développement de ces compétences. La controverse est apparue au Conseil de l'Europe comme une pratique essentielle, à mettre en place dès l'école, pour permettre aux citoyens de régler les polémiques de façon pacifique. Le Conseil de l'Europe a mis à disposition des Etats divers outils dont un portant sur la controverse, particulièrement intéressant pour construire ces compétences.

Mots-clés

Controverse; argumentation; Conseil de l'Europe; citoyenneté démocratique.

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Resumen

La educación para la ciudadanía democrática y el diálogo intercultural son desde 1954 temas claves del Consejo de Europa, que considera que la educación es fundamental para ayudar a los pueblos a vivir mejor juntos. Los atentados y las tensiones que han sufrido las sociedades europeas en los últimos años han reforzado la importancia de promover un conjunto de valores comunes en las sociedades occidentales. Así, en 2012-2013, durante la Presidencia Andorrana del Consejo de Europa, se inició el proyecto de definir las competencias necesarias para una sociedad democrática. El diálogo y la argumentación tienen un lugar central en el desarrollo de estas competencias. El Consejo de Europa ha puesto a disposición de los Estados diversos instrumentos, entre ellos uno relativo a la controversia, especialmente interesante para construir estas competencias.

Palabras clave

Controversia; argumentación; Consejo de Europa; ciudadanía democrática.

The Controversy

Abstract

Education for democratic citizenship and intercultural dialogue have been key themes of the Council of Europe since 1954, which considers the place of education as central for people to live better together. Attacks and tensions in European societies in recent years have reinforced the importance of promoting a set of common values in societies. Thus, in 2012-2013, during Andorra's presidency of the Council of Europe, the project to define the competences necessary for a democratic society was born. Among the skills expected of citizens in democratic societies are different skills, such as the ability to communicate effectively with others, especially people of different cultures, and the ability to resolve conflicts peacefully. Dialogue and argumentation are central to the development of these skills. Controversy has emerged in the Council of Europe as an essential practice, to be implemented in schools, to enable citizens to settle controversies peacefully. The Council of Europe has made various tools available to States, including one on controversy, which is particularly interesting for building these skills. This paper will focus on how to teach controversy in schools.

Key words

Controversy; reasoning; european council; democratic citizenry.

1. Skills for a culture of democracy

The place of argumentation in education in France has its roots in antiquity. In the ancient Athenian city that invented democracy, speech is essential for political life: by influencing the audience through speech, citizens can take power. The sophists, professors of rhetoric in the 5th century BC, understood this well, teaching their young disciples the art of speaking well on any subject, whatever it may be; their disciples pay dearly to master this word which allows them to play a political role in a democracy. This word

is performative (it causes action) rather than descriptive. "Talking well", therefore, is not "thinking well" or "saying what is right", but producing in the listener the desired effect using certain rhetorical procedures in order to gain his support¹.

Sophists teach their followers the art of influencing their audience through rhetoric. The rhetoric, theorized by Cicero, is also an instrument of power among the Romans. While the argumentation that is practiced in the French school system stems from this rhetoric, a difference appears between the two.

Argument is not convincing at all costs, which implies a break with rhetoric in the sense that it is not about how to persuade².

The argumentation was introduced in France in 1983 in the official instructions of the school. It emerged after the conflicts of the 20th century, it does not aim at a mastery of speech to manipulate but, as J. A. Huynh points out in *Le Français aujourd'hui*, a humanist formation of the students, posing in this way also as heiress of the Enlightenment (eighteenth century). The consideration of the other, the place and use of Reason appear to be central to these practices. Language becomes mediator and argumentation replaces the use of force.

The role and place of language in improving human relations and conflict can be found in the following official texts, such as the Common Base of Knowledge, Skills and Culture published in 2015. In domain 1, "languages for thinking and communicating", it is recalled that the student "speaks, communicates, argues orally in a clear and organized way; he adapts his language level and his speech to the situation, he listens and takes into account his interlocutors. "In domain 3, "the training of the person and the citizen", "the student learns to resolve conflicts without aggressiveness, to avoid the use of violence thanks to his mastery of means of expression, communication and argumentation. (...) He bases and defends his judgments on his reflection and his mastery of argumentation. »

¹ Navarro P. (2014). Les sophistes et l'art de la parole. https://www.editions-ellipses.fr/PDF/9782340010123_extrait.pdf

² BOEN Bulletin de l'éducation nationale 1996 : « *il importe que la dissertation fasse appel à une argumentation* ».

This expectation that language should allow dialogue in conflict situations responds to a social demand for the teaching of French as an "effective word", emphasizes J. A. Huynh. But how is it practiced in class, and particularly in French class? How do teachers train students to use speech to resolve conflicts?

In writing, the emergence of argumentation in official texts took place during the 1980s and 1990s: the ability to convince and/or persuade became crucial and a new exercise, discussion, appeared at the BEP- CAP and Brevet des collèges in 1987. The argumentative issue prevails over the form and the subjects go beyond strictly literary questions to open up to questions of society. But these standard practices rarely lead to real debates. In 1994, the "essay" became essential; even if it is argumentative³, it is a writing that is not action-oriented and that it does not influence a decision. It deals with literary subjects and works and not with social subjects.

Orally, it was with the practice of methodical reading in 1987 and even more so with analytical reading that argumentation found its place in the reading of literary texts. The teacher expects his students to go beyond the simple affirmation of their impressions when reading a text and to confront them with the text, in a rigorous way, by validating them with statements and by arguing. Analytical reading in the classroom allows the confrontation of the points of view of the students who argue by referring to the text studied, thus aiming at the training of a more rigorous reader.

Quite quickly, in French the notion of debate is associated with learning argumentative discourse. (...) The debate is a situation that invites the interlocutors to assume these various intentions. It is often studied and modelled as a learning situation for argumentation⁴.

But in their research carried out in 2004, two researchers, Annie Le Fustec and Pierre Sivan⁵, made one observation: they stressed the reluctance and resistance of the teaching staff to practice reading the texts and to solicit students for an argument on controversial subjects. If classes debate by reading a text, everything "painful, conflictual" is avoided in these exchanges.

The most burning social or political themes - inequality, unemployment, poverty, exclusion, money, power, injustice, freedom or the law - almost never appear. (...) This rejection or absence of ideology is accompanied by a fear of conflicting debate.

Teachers practice "a dodge of strong texts", of these subjects.

We also willingly avoid, in the study of texts, the violence of ideological clashes in order to preserve a misleading consensus. The battle of ideas - supposedly superior

³ BOEN Bulletin de l'éducation nationale 1996 : « *It is important that the essay use argumentation* ».

⁴ Dias-Charrutini A., 2010, *Le débat interprétatif dans l'enseignement de la lecture et de la littérature à l'école*, <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-01223578/document>

⁵ Le Fustec A. et Sivan P., 2004, « Lectures sans esquives », *Le français aujourd'hui*, n° 145, p. 49 à 59.

to the physical battle it should always replace - rarely takes place in our classes, or only on battlefields where the outcome is already known, victory is assured.

The Council of Europe draws the same conclusion in 2015.

(...) In Europe, young people often do not have the opportunity to discuss controversial topics in school, as they are considered too difficult to teach⁶.

Annie Le Fustec and Pierre Sivan explain that teachers practice various evasions: either they seek consensus in the exchanges between students, or, if a controversial subject is treated, it is treated in a moralizing way, in an opposition between good and evil that often erases its complexity. Finally, another evasion is the formal approach of the texts, which emphasizes formal statements by evading meaning.

However, Council of Europe and French official texts require teachers to build skills in their pupils that enable them to live in today's and tomorrow's society, and to do so by preparing them for the conflicts and polemics they may experience. These are the skills for a culture of democracy. As societies are multicultural, these skills are linked to intercultural competence, and the complexity of such competence is highlighted⁷:

Democratic and intercultural competence is defined as the ability to mobilise and deploy relevant values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and/or understanding in order to respond appropriately and effectively to the demands, challenges and opportunities that are presented by democratic and intercultural situations. Competence is treated as a dynamic process in which a competent individual mobilises and deploys clusters of psychological resources in an active and adaptive manner in order to respond to new circumstances as these arise.

It is exercised in situations specific to democratic regimes, which therefore raise specific questions, as Salvador Sala points out in the "Competences of a Culture of Democracy".

At school, it is essential to encourage children and young people to exercise democratic citizenship in order to develop a critical and creative spirit in order to seek new relationships and models for building a sustainable global world. To this end, it is important to commit to analysing and deliberating on sensitive and controversial issues, and to recognize the value of peaceful dialogue in resolving conflicts, tensions, divergences and conflicts. This is not only a task of the social sciences or civic education, but it is a responsibility of all teachers in all school subjects to create learning spaces that enable them to exercise the skills of a culture of democracy. (...)

⁶ Conseil de l'Europe, « Face à la controverse : enjeux et stratégies », p. 3

⁷ Conseil de l'Europe, « Competences for a democratic culture », p. 11.

This competence is accompanied by the competence to conduct intercultural dialogue. In our multicultural and sustainable societies, skills for a culture of democracy must include intercultural dialogue.

Language proficiency is essential in the development of skills for a culture of democracy. Dialogue and argumentation replace force, avoid violence and make it possible to live in peace in society. But the use of dialogue to promote peace can be learned. A culture of democracy includes the willingness to express one's own opinions, to listen to those of others and the conviction that conflicts can and must be resolved peacefully.

Students must acquire a command of language that allows them to communicate in a variety of situations and to meet the communicative requirements of diverse intercultural situations by using a shared language or more than one language. They must be able to express themselves without aggressiveness, even in situations of profound disagreement with others, adjust their communication and build consensus and compromise within a group⁸.

The Council of Europe calls for the development of skills in young people to manage and resolve conflicts peacefully, to reduce aggressiveness, to encourage and improve mutual understanding and trust. Language acquisition is an important part of these skills:

Acquisition [...] also depends on language skills [...]. Learners are also becoming increasingly aware of the language and the importance of their language skills in the performance of their duties - their democratic and intercultural skills⁹.

Knowledge and understanding of language and communication is central: students must have a good knowledge of socially appropriate verbal and non-verbal communications, conventions, multiple ways of expressing themselves in a given language and the social impact of communication.

But that is not enough. Students need knowledge that enables them to grasp the complexity of the world and the issues facing them: they must have knowledge of cultures, religions, history, economics. Citizen skills require taking into account the complexity of situations and students must have solid knowledge, acquired in class and used in an interdisciplinary way. The argument is only made therefore does not deploy "empty" but is based on a good knowledge of the subject, prepared in advance with the students.

Finally, these skills for a democratic culture are based on values, such as respect for human dignity. These values are central and allow these skills not to be used in the service of regimes that would deny Human Rights.

⁸ *Ibidem.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

1. The controversy

How can these skills be developed for a culture of democracy? What practices does the Council of Europe recommend? The latter proposes several tools, including a particular practice of the argument of controversy¹⁰.

As J.L. Fabiani points out¹¹, the controversy is characterized by an interaction based on the very argumentative nature of the exchanges. There are also modes of regulating the exchange, such as organizing speaking tours, for example. Moreover, controversy always presupposes an audience, supposed or actually present. Finally, it "presupposes the mobilization of external resources such as reference to observations or indicators taken outside the commonly accepted space of the discussion".

The Council of Europe recalls that controversial subjects are "subjects that arouse intense feelings that divide opinion in communities and societies". These are real subjects, current or past. What is controversial in one country is not necessarily controversial in another. This is also true for periods, a controversial subject at one time not necessarily at another.

For example, the idea of a state-funded health system is a hotly debated issue in the United States, which is not the case in most European countries. Similarly, issues relating to sexual orientation and religious difference are addressed in more detail in the programmes of some European countries than in others. Similarly, a subject may be controversial within a school, or even within a class, and may not pose any problems in another school¹².

The difficulty in teaching controversial subjects comes from the fact that they cause disagreements and conflicts. As it can be difficult for a teacher to manage these disagreements within a classroom, these topics are rarely addressed. But there are many advantages to addressing them. They can be used to address social, political, economic or ethical issues that are part of students' lives; teachers can encourage students to research these topics in order to inform the arguments that will take place in the classroom, by mobilizing interdisciplinary knowledge; and they can help to nuance and balance the partial and biased presentation that is often made of them by the media and to raise students' awareness of the complexity of these issues.

The Council of Europe recalls the importance of creating optimal conditions for their teaching, "protected pedagogical spaces allowing pupils to discuss, to debate openly controversial issues with the support and accompaniment of teachers. These spaces help students to accept differences, help to ease tensions and promote peaceful conflict resolution. »

¹⁰ Conseil de l'Europe, « Relever les défis d'aujourd'hui ensemble : l'enseignement des sujets controversés », <https://rm.coe.int/1680490bod>

¹¹ Fabiani J.L. (2007). *Disputes, polémiques et controverses dans les mondes intellectuels, Vers une sociologie historique des formes de débat agonistique*, p.45 à 60.

¹² *Op. Cit.*

Before engaging in the teaching of these subjects, teachers are asked to reflect personally on their functioning, on their values: they must reflect on the influence on the treatment of these subjects of their convictions and values and the influence they have on their teaching. It is important that they also reflect on the specific difficulties of teaching the various controversial topics and the sensitivities of their students.

This teaching also presupposes that the teacher does not pose as the holder of the knowledge but as the facilitator of the group. In sessions on controversial topics, it will stimulate debate, exchange and, where appropriate, provide ideas, arguments, either to the whole class or to a group less involved or more powerless to answer questions.

The teacher can create a controversy, by choosing a topic for his students, or start from a controversy that actually existed between students. The analysis of the experience is valuable: it allows him to lead his students to an analysis of the situation. The meta positioning will allow students to build tools with the teacher, on the typology of a dispute, for example, which will become a reusable tool for them in other similar situations. They will be able to identify "what has happened, the causes of the current situation, the desirable objectives towards which to aim, the appropriate action to be taken, the expected repercussions of this action." "The objective is to provide students with both tools and procedures for future situations in their lives.

In class, the analysis of a filmed controversy will allow students to observe the progress of the session. Role plays can also be organized, followed by classroom analysis. Students will be able to build a list of questions "that will allow them to approach the subject from different angles and provide a solid basis for a decision: what is the subject about? What are the arguments put forward? What is the hypothesis used? How are the arguments used? ». In this way, students learn to observe and decipher these situations they often experience, to take a step back; the objectives of these exercises are to lead them to critically analyse situations and arguments, to be cautious in their conclusions, to detect prejudices and stereotypes, and also to "make the difference between an opinion and a fact, to detect in the media the language that is emotional, to identify in the media the statements reported, hearsay", thus developing their critical thinking and providing them with tools for better living together, in a peaceful way, in life in society.

However, the teaching of controversy can only take place at the end of a learning process. This requires "devoting a certain number of hours to identifying the subject and documenting the context of the subject, using the debate not as a means of deepening an issue but as the outcome of a series of idea-generating activities such as role-playing, drama, simulations,..., training students for discussion from the outset and not asking students to debate controversial topics without first introducing them to basic techniques on more trivial topics. ». This helps them to "have a nuanced approach to these topics"; teachers can thus "prepare young people to face the controversies of tomorrow, develop their critical and analytical skills to weigh information, detect prejudices, take a position based on facts. "Peaceful behaviours, citizens of students, are thus constructed in today's classrooms.

Both students and teachers benefit from this teaching: for the latter, the Council of Europe aims at an increase in competences, with the development of personal competences including the "ability to reflect on one's own convictions and values and on the influence they exert on the classroom and to judge whether or not it is appropriate to share them with pupils"; theoretical competences allowing to "understand the nature of a controversy in a democracy and the role of dialogue and peaceful conflict resolution and the corresponding importance of controversial issues in education for democratic citizenship and human rights"; and practical skills such as "the ability to take on a range of different pedagogical roles in the classroom, to use a variety of strategies to address controversial issues intelligently, to present issues objectively in the absence of all the facts, to deal with inappropriate and controversial student comments and to collaborate with other stakeholders"

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