

## **Debate and Acting, the Perfect Mixture in Expressing Freedom of Speech**

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***Abstract:** The aim of this article is to prove that debate could be a controversial way of expressing freedom of speech in which sometimes we cannot guide the arguments in the direction we choose. Acting skills can help the speaker have better results when trying to convince its audience.*

*The experiment was conducted in a private school on a group of 62 children with ages between 7 and 12 years old attending the debate workshop for a semester, which means approximately 6 months, 5 full months without vacations. The difference between the topics I proposed at the beginning of the school year and the topics I started to debate at the end of the semester is huge. Students started to argue on topics I would never have thought might preoccupy them. From topics easy to handle, they went on and directed the talk to areas almost impossible to manage for the mediator/facilitator, since they were somehow beyond or unsuitable for their age. Firstly, due to the importance of the controversial issues, secondly, because of the great difference in the cultural background of each participant and finally the educational needs of the curriculum, namely, a homogeny in the initial level of each student. Now, my perplexity comes when people ask if a debate is actually a free way of expressing ourselves or whether we have to comply with censorship when we reveal our point of view. Could theatre help people express themselves properly, according to their feelings?*

**Keywords:** *debate, experiment, freedom, opinion, acting skills.*

### **Introduction**

In 2019 I started the debate workshop experiment in an international private school where all the participants were having entirely different backgrounds. One participant was from Lebanon, two others were from the United States of America, one was from France, one from Greece, two of them were Romanian and 3 were British. Obviously, the language in which the extracurricular activity was performed was English because of the cultural

diversity of the learners. The topics were supposed to meet each student's needs, expectations or to deal with their concerns. Additionally, the subjects debated were supposed to also follow the curriculum devised by the school at the beginning of the school year. Most of the times, it was impossible to be in line with the educational program, because it seemed that the topics chosen to be debated were already considered easy and totally outdated. We should notice that the students were of different ages and still they all agreed that the topics were too childish for their level of targeted knowledge. Furthermore, they started to reject the subjects they should have argued about at their age, according to the curriculum, and showed preference for different areas.

Sometimes, even though they gave the teacher the impression that they accepted the topic, they still carried on with the speech in the direction they wanted. Why were they so eager to speak about things they weren't supposed to? Could it be because of the constant censorship they have to comply with within the educational system? Is it advisable to impede their willingness of expressing freely their point of view? Is it correct to guide their opinion in a direction the educational system wants them to be guided to? Consequently, could we still regard the debate as an art of free speech?

The aim of the debate workshop is to develop in all those enrolled in the experiment, abilities and competences in a manner that doesn't hurt or embarrass the participant public. It becomes a win-win project, in which the student expresses his/her opinions and beliefs in front of the entire audience self-confidently, while the listeners get the chance to approach new perspectives in relation to various notions that open different fields of reflection at things, which could open totally new perspectives.

### ***Method***

The implementation of controversial topics (related to religion, culture, civilization, rituals and habits) meant to expand the students' perspective by inserting them smoothly in the debate workshop. In order to deceive somehow the participant's eagerness of discussing only subjects that were of their own free choice, we tried to follow/manage its path in a collective direction of focus. The method I approached was the verbal one, in which the results could have been effective as long as the oral manipulation was done constantly with a well-known objective. The controversial topics written earlier were questions such as: "Should we spend Christmas with family or friends?" or "Easter versus Christmas".

"If we teach today as we taught yesterday, then we rob our children of tomorrow"

(Niess, 2008). The ability of the teacher to change, to be chameleonic, to adapt the lesson to the students' needs and to be creative throughout the course, are some of the qualities an educator should have. It doesn't matter that much what subject is being taught but the extent of his/her involvement. Children are constantly changing and their motivation for achievement, too. That is why a teacher has a variety of aims, irrespective of the field of coaching in case the s/he is incapable of adjusting to the children's expectations, the purpose of the class will never be accomplished. In this particular case, the teaching process becomes a failure for both parts involved: the teacher as well as the student. In order to have a successful lesson, the presentation techniques are more important than the lesson itself. The method is about the way you introduce knowledge to the students in order to catch their attention in class.

For example, one of the Romanians attending the debate workshop had the tendency of speaking only about weapons, wars, justice, killing and defending. His passion for guns and weapons was coming from his family. His parents were both working in the police department and his grandfather had been a fighter in the war and was somehow understandable. Due to such a preoccupation with firearms, he began to take over the entire school program. Obviously, his point of view counted, and the debate was in keeping with its very aim, i.e. freedom of speech, but his eagerness for the violence related topics started to scare the audience, including the teacher. Censorship must interfere in the evolution of the workshop because otherwise the effect will be damaging for the other participants. Violence, brutality and dangerous activities do not make the purpose of this workshop. Even though the debate topic was not related to the speeches he held, he did his best in going on with the arguments in the direction he was interested in.

Most of the children attending the course at this private school are not allowed to play video games and use smartphones. The majority of them are not yet accustomed to the cruelty peculiar to famous computer games. This information can be harmful to students at their age, the reason why a mentor must prevent and even prohibit such discussions. The student that was highlighting all the time the topic of weapons was only 7 years old, which is why his behavior was strongly affected. His body language indicated the fact that he wanted to draw everyone's attention to information he already knew was noxious for his classmates and for himself, too. Censorship is mandatory in these cases because if such a topic is not banned by the person in charge of the class, s/he will become the only target for the parents' complaints.

When we speak about education, we speak about values, beliefs, skills and knowledge. Education helps us grow personally, professionally and socially. Every age is

appropriate for the achievement of different things. The topic pointed out earlier was definitely not a proper topic to debate with children at their young age. In these particular cases the teacher's competence of handling the situation can make his/her role sparkle. The adequate pedagogy is the right way through which the teacher can stay calm when facing a problem. Unquestionably, the emotional investment of the teacher is necessary, alongside with a pedagogical ability of solving the troubles and building character in school.

A debate is a discussion or structured contest about an issue or a resolution. A formal debate involves two sides: one supporting a resolution and one opposing it. Such a debate is bound by rules previously agreed upon. In the context of a classroom, the topic for debate will be guided by the knowledge, skill, and value provided in the curriculum (Manitoba Government Education, 2016).

As pointed out earlier, the topic of a debate workshop should be guided in compliance with the students' concern and level of comprehension. The respect for the rules is required because otherwise the game cannot start. As every game, any debate is about respecting regulations, too. If some of the participants are disturbing and are disobeying the requirements, the teacher must find an academic/pedagogical way of dealing with the issue.

In conclusion, censorship is necessary in cases in which too much information becomes harmful and pointless.

The topic of religion is yet another controversial issue in debate classes. Students at this age, between 7 and 12 years old, don't seem to understand the discrepancies of expressing faith in different cultures. The rituals and the beliefs are totally different, reason why they need to accept other perspectives. For instance, some don't understand why Easter is celebrated twice a year and who decides which is right. On the one hand, some of them don't understand the reason why they should respect a false/fake Easter and on the other hand some celebrate both Catholic and Orthodox Easter. In both cases the religious significance of Easter seems to become confusing. Easter becomes more and more a farce, a parody in which all children expect the Easter bunny that brings them presents, in which the only meaning is the egg hunting. Furthermore, in my class there is also a Lebanese student that doesn't celebrate Easter at all, because he is Muslim and, in this religion, they don't have the same beliefs or celebrations as in the Christian one.

Debating apparently a common topic can reveal verbal fights almost impossible to handle for the teacher conducting the workshop. The controversy over the correct date for

Easter becomes a topic ideally to avoid for a teacher educating a group of 10 totally different children from all points of view: place of birth, age, religion, culture, civilization, skills and abilities, education, areas of interest. If the teacher doesn't act in the children's interest of preserving the beliefs they grew up with, the endeavor will interfere with the education his family provided and will cause a storm in their educational process. It depends on every schools' policy. It's up to them what the teacher is allowed to do and what not. The limits are set by them. The teacher's aim is to educate the child how to think, not to manipulate him/her in order to think what is being told him/her to. Children must learn to create their own opinions and convictions.

If we encourage children to accept something without thinking, this will not produce a major change in their brains. In spite of that, the information will be stored somewhere inside the memory where it will slowly disappear. On the contrary, when we are forced to think how to solve a problem, the brain produces a restructuring that results in growth. Children must find their own way of doing things and that causes them to gradually form their own values (Altaf, 2018).

The purpose of school is to guide students to think for themselves and to find creative solutions to their problems. The main concern of education is not to encourage an excessive acquisition of information but to help them develop critical thinking, skills to process it at a level that surprises them. Again, it also depends on the schools' beliefs, rules and regulations applied with the parents' approval.

School must prepare the learners for the future in order to make their integration easier in the society. The ability to reinvent themselves should be a tool available to all people, not only to the lucky or privileged ones. Sometimes because of the rigid system of education and teaching, students are taught that once you choose a path you have to follow it, no matter what. Somehow, you are obliged to stick to the same decisions you had made, even though those choices are no longer available for the actual you and because of the system, you actually remain stuck in the past. School has to teach children how to be kinder to themselves and to allow themselves to make mistakes. It is human not to be right all the time and they should be made aware of that. The pressure they get from school, teachers and parents becomes very often too difficult for them to handle. This is one of the reasons why the entire educational system should re-prioritize its goals when it comes to the achievements of students. The more they obstruct the children's decisions, the more stubborn they will be

to follow the path they choose. The opposite is sure to happen and it would be very difficult to discipline or tame them and impose their own preferences.

Censorship in schools is a complicated situation because there are many variables involved that can impact the way children learn and the way schools serve to educate. Censorship in schools usually exists in the form of the removal or manipulation of materials or learning processes (EveryDayHealth, 2017).

The ban of the materials and the administration of the learning process represent the methods used in the teaching strategy I applied in the debate workshop with my students. Sometimes, the need to forbid or restrict is vital for a normal development of the children.

The second case I would like to introduce is a Romanian student I had in class who howled at one of the Greek girls' after presenting her point of view. She felt so bullied that she asked for permission to go outside the classroom to recover. Even though I wish I could have stopped this kind of behavior, the unspeakable had already been done. The misbehaving child actually did that deliberately, without thinking of the consequences. Moreover, he didn't have any regrets, he refused to apologize, without justifying his actions in any way. Probably he couldn't manage his feelings when he heard the girl expressing another point of view, different from his own and very well argued. I didn't report the Romanian student's actions to the headmaster, because I thought it would pass never to be repeated. The next week, the Greek's girl mother wrote an e-mail of complaint to the principal in which she asked to suspend the Romanian's boy participation in the workshop because of his disruptive and rude behavior.

In conclusion, sometimes the free speeches and the freedom of expressing opinions that disturb the audience are judged by the public and their live feedback can be a damaging one for the person holding the speech. That is why, occasionally it is highly recommended to refrain from expressing your opinion because of the reactions it might trigger and the incapability to manage them and ending up being harmed.

## ***Results***

The results I have got after analyzing the behavior of 10 children coming from different cultures were somehow predictable. Even with the mixture of ages, the children could not be on the same wavelength, and they couldn't accept the others' opinions. Even

though debate should have been a workshop in which freedom of speech should have defined the class, unfortunately they approved of certain points of view till the moment they disagreed. Let's agree to disagree was not the solution within this group of students. In theory, they all understood the principles of debate, in which opposite arguments should have been put forward and ended with a vote. Sadly, the discrepancies among their cultural background were too big and too tough to knob.

Lastly, when it came to applying the theory and what they had learned, they simply refused to assimilate and resorted to an aggressive behavior. There weren't any students to prove an exception to the rule. All of them were having totally different traditions, education, values, habits and lifestyles. I believe that this rigidity in thinking and the inability of accepting the others who happen to be different, is rooted in the family. As a teacher it is very hard to change the perspective in a world in which one doesn't have the same authority it used to have and be granted the same respect and consideration by the parents and students as well. The educational system also has its gaps and drawbacks, a reason why sometimes the teacher becomes only a puppet in the big process.

Regarding the multitude of roles, a teacher might assume in his research on "Controversial Issues: The Teacher's Crucial Role" Lockwood says that

Maintains that teachers must act a clear role or roles when discussing controversial issues. Discusses the various roles a teacher may assume, including presiding judge, determined advocate, nurturant facilitator, and socratic cross-examiner. Suggests which scenarios may work best with different roles (Lockwood, 1995).

Of course, the role the teacher is playing is complex and in a permanent change. The teacher has to be chameleonic in order to understand the students and to be capable of helping them when they need it. Sometimes the role the teacher has to assume isn't a pleasant one but for the quality of the educational process s/he has to act as such: sometimes as judge, sometimes as advocate, sometimes in between. Even so, students don't seem to appreciate the crucial role that the teacher has in their future and the implication he proves every time an obstacle appears in their educational process.

## ***Conclusions***

Finally, topics must be carefully chosen, and diversity should be encouraged more and

more in order to make people get used to and accept it. Normality is a concept not properly defined and each human being considered as one's own way of acting normal. Society shouldn't put pressure on people to follow specific directions. People should be taught how to think for themselves, how to act in different situations, how to manage conflicts and unpredictable issues, how to be less judgmental with the others. Freedom of speech exists, and debate should give students the chance of voicing their opinions in front of a mixed audience without fearing criticism. Reviews are important, but the manner they get to the speaker is highly meaningful too. Opinions are relevant when it comes to hearing another perspective that can or cannot change the way you as a speaker see things. Maybe some can open new horizons that you have never thought of. Through this experiment we could observe the fragility of the human being, the harshness of the society and the grimness of the students when it came to different points of view. The ability to speak better in front of an audience is for sure a big plus for all the ones that have acquired acting skills. Their competence is even higher when they acquire such oratorical qualities. This fact is available not only for the teacher teaching a speaking workshop, but for its participant students too. Theatre definitely helps people expressing themselves according to their feelings. The study case mentioned earlier proved the question asked in the hypothesis and more specifically the certitude that drama classes could and should become a subject in all schools, primary and secondary, no matter the age of the children. Unfortunately, freedom has become a paradox in which students will begin to say what the others want to hear, learning how to manipulate the audience in order to be accepted based on the criteria of a fake world with hypocrites pretending to be something else.

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