

Debate as a practices in Higher Education curricula

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Mode 2 of Knowledge production is context-driven, problem-focused and interdisciplinary. Higher education curricula must organize themselves to warrant this mandate and provide teaching and learning approaches more cooperative and contextualized.

This new culture establishes mechanisms that allow individuals to improve and enlarge their knowledge in relation to its cultural capital. Debate is a technique that helps to expand the knowledge, not only of the individual but also of society, as it allows putting into question or discussion the ideas of a group of people to find "coincidences" or differences on a particular topic.

This research aims to characterize the debate as a strategy to promote the participation of students in higher education and their learning.

Currently, some courses of the 14 faculties of the University of Porto used the "debate" as a pedagogical strategy for teaching. For this study we took into account: syllabus of subjects which are using the debate as a method of teaching - learning, the observations made by "De par em Par" program of the University of Porto as action of multidisciplinary training and the interviews to teachers that use debate in their courses, to achieve the research objectives.

There are pedagogical strategies that may be related to the debate, such as: forum, meeting in open space, collaborative work, interaction, dialogue, dialectic or deliberate. Each of these strategies, using different levels of criticism, shall be related with fields of science of each course and debates' uses.

Research is still on-going.

Nevertheless, study will characterize the uses of debate for learning purposes in Academia and shall discuss what would be the possible mechanisms of improvement to enter.

Keywords: Higher education pedagogies, curriculum practices, debate, classroom strategies

Introduction

More and more, open HE access policies bring into Universities students that were usually out of this education level. This is a very important target to accomplish among Portuguese system (and not only) as it ensures a larger "critical mass" into societies, but it must be followed by a reflection on the conditions that HE Institutions raise to integrate and promote effectively all students achievement and commitment.

This is in line with trends that shape European higher education policies in recent years, such: (1) the importance of attracting more students; (2) the idea that HE must be accountable to society; (3) the clear awareness that there is no university without science and (4) that HE curricula must organize to provide teaching and learning approaches more cooperative and contextualized (Nowothy et al.,2001). Never before, it was so required that HE

institutions train "students who think that others are not able to think, to say what others cannot say, to do what others have failed, before" (Nóvoa, 2011).

This picture claims for a new workforce to 21st century able to deal with rapid changes, open to novelty, skilled in information analysis, problem solving, effective communication and critical reflection on professional practice (Brennan, Enders, Musselin, Teichler, & Välimaa, 2008), and able to learn along their lives. This is also a challenge to HE curricula.

On the other hand, from a pedagogical point of view, it challenges the conventional roles of teachers and students in the Academia and in the 'knowledge society'. The expression "knowledge society" carries within itself new knowledge contents and processes, emphasizing on one hand innovation and creativity and on the other the political, social and ethic aspects of knowledge, aiming to relate economic development and human development, and then taking into account differences of power and levels of development (Cobo Romani, 2013).

If 'knowledge society' concept and need is largely consensual, as a goal to HE systems, Institutions must be more students' learning oriented. The growing importance of networked collaborative learning is associated with this change in the pedagogical paradigm and its key issues: "the focus on learning, the strengthening of the teacher-student and student-student interactions, the inclusion of collaborative work strategies and learning based on autonomy and reflection" (Nóvoa, 2011). Which is the role of the debate as a methodology of teaching and learning in such equation?

Specifically, However, to what extent is debate used in academia for learning purposes, by which pedagogical strategies and with which effects?

There are multiple purposes to use the debate as a pedagogical strategy in higher education and each teacher has a different way to use it.

This paper intends to research this question. To do so, it starts by presenting a review of literature concerning how the debate works in the dimension of citizenship and collaborative - active learning.

Debate and the dimension of citizenship

The debate as strategy of learning in higher education could stimulate to the public participation of students but it can be combining with other strategies to achieve the main objective: share, clarify and create new knowledge about a topic in a context of mutual respect between participants.

As Hafford said "combining role play with debate provides a potential means of facilitating attitude change, combating ignorance, prejudice and discrimination." (2010, 249) This combination allows the student on the one hand to use empathy to understand the situation from another point of view different from his/her; on the other hand to research more about the topic because to talk about something it is necessary to have reliable information and not just opinions unsubstantiated.

When a student realize about new changes in his/her mind and the multiple information to understand a topic he/she modifies the speech. According to Pontecorvo:

“the speech in the classroom and the language that characterize can be considered the meeting point between communicative and social process, on the one hand, and cognitive aspects, of another.” (Pontecorvo, 2005, 55)

In this case, the debate allows connecting the learning process of the students in the university and the responsibilities that come with being a participant of the community know as citizenship (Microsoft Encarta 2009. 1993-2008). That could mean an approach between higher education institutions and the society trying to develop critical thinking in the students to talk about aspects that are considering important in the current context.

When debates are used to develop the student capacity to “weigh risks and benefits to draw a conclusion” (Moore, Clements, Sease, & Anderson, 2015, 240) in similar processes as the social debates related with a controversial subject, it is possible to claim that such debates serve citizenship aims. Some argumentative skills are supposed to be involved in these debates, also contribute to improve to citizenship. This is an issue that is relevant both to soft skills development (Mouraz, et al, 2014) as to deep knowledge construction process understood as a controversial one.

Debate and collaborative learning

The creation of new knowledge in higher education can happen through various media (oral, written, face to face, digital) for instance: e-mail, video conferences, forums of discussion among others, promote the involvement of the students. All these aspects allow mixing the efficacy of the learning process to the motivation to acquire new knowledge.

According to Johnson & Johnson “several currents recognizes the pedagogical importance of the collaboration between the actors of the educational process”. (in Pereira, 2011, 34) This collaboration could stimulate students to resolve some doubts or problems talking or debating to their classmates & teacher and their different perspectives to fix the problem.

Sometimes there is no a right answer or solution to a problem, doubt or topic but the most important to motivate a collaborative learning is the accession of students to the debate “within an educational context” and “hoping that learning happens as a side effect” (ibidem, 35)

This strategy can be related to the cooperative learning because the students can work together to resolve problems (Fontes; 2004). According to Johnson & Johnson there are three types of cooperative learning groups: formal cooperative learning (students are active in the work of intellectual group), informal cooperative learning (capture the attention of students) and cooperative base groups (groups of long duration of mutual cooperation). (ibidem 2004, 43)

Both the cooperative and collaborative learning allow a “classroom debate as a powerful learning tool for promoting classroom interaction and the development of skills such as communication, argument – construction, discussion and critical analysis” (Jagger, 2013,39)

Debate can be seen as “a way to engage students in their own learning” (Moore, Clements, Sease, & Anderson, 2015, 240).

Kegley sees a debate as an effective active learning strategy and thinks that “debates enable students to develop team skills” (Kegley, 2014,1) and that’s the principal idea to develop in higher education and focus to improve at the same time the learning process and the student's individual and group abilities.

This research aims to characterize the debate as a strategy to promote the participation of students in higher education and their learning, according with two main dimensions previously referred: to promote citizenship and to improve learning in a collaborative way.

Methodological framework

The debates are an example of pedagogical strategy that implies a greater participation of students because it assumes that they are active and critical elements in the acquisition of knowledge that the University proposes them. The principal purpose of this paper is to produce knowledge about ways to better implement and ensure the scientific quality of the debates, designed as a pedagogical strategy.

According to this purpose were chosen the following secondary aims:

- Identify courses into the University of Porto which use the methodology of the debates as a strategy for increase students’ participation ;
- Characterize the teaching work associated with the implementation of the debates’ methodology in the classroom;
- Study the students ’ adherence to methodology;

To identify courses that use the debate as a methodological strategy of teaching, 34 bachelor's degree were took into account. Within the Sigarra webpage that belongs to the University of Porto a search was done using the word “debate” in the search box to detect the courses that could constitute the research material. “Debate” word was search within Courses plans: objectives, results, learning outcomes and competencies, program, teaching methods, learning activities and evaluation.

According to this procedure 183 courses were identified as could be seen at table 18.

	SCHOOLS	Objective	Resultado	Program	Metodology	Evaluation	Debate per School	Total Subjects
1	Architecture School	3	0	0	7	0	10	10
2	Fine Arts School	2	1	2	10	0	15	14
3	Science School	0	0	0	3	0	3	3
4	Nutrition Sciences and Food School	0	0	0	2	0	2	2
5	Sports School	0	0	0	4	0	4	4
6	Law School	1	0	0	4	0	5	5
7	Economy School	1	1	0	6	0	8	8
8	Engineering School	2	2	1	5	0	10	9
9	Pharmacy School	1	0	1	2	1	5	3
10	Letters Schools	12	1	0	84	3	100	94
11	Medicine School	0	0	0	3	0	3	3
12	Dental Medicine School	0	0	0	2	0	2	2
13	Psychology and Educational Science School	4	1	0	23	0	28	24
14	Abel Salazar Biomedical Sciences Institute	0	0	0	2	0	2	2
	TOTAL general	26	6	4	157	4	197	183

Table 18: Course that include debate distributed by schools

It was necessary to identify carefully how many times the debate was located in each syllabus, because we need to know what is the idea to use it as a strategy. The final results were: objectives – 26 times, results – 6 times, program – 4 times, methodology – 157 times and evaluation – 4 times. After these results, we decided to choose four courses from different faculties to interview the teachers of these four courses. The selection was in relation to the following criteria:

- All these courses had the “debate” in the methodology.
- One of them had the “debate” in three aspects: objective, program and evaluation.
- There were used some verbs to practice the “debate” in these courses, for instance: stimulate, foster, combine, develop, consolidate, reflect, analyse and clarify.

Interviews used an interview guideline to characterize the course and the inclusion of the debate as methodology.

Interview guideline focus on the same objectives of research, such previously presented.

Interviews were made after a contact mail with teachers and occurred in their work places from May 2015 until July 2015. Interviews were recorded and after, fully transcribed to aloud validation and analyses.

Analysis was performed following study objectives and framework. To do so, data were analysed using the NVivo program. Each objective was transformed in a main node and material analysis allowed a new structure composed

by main nodes and secondary nodes emerging from analysis. Sentence or a set of sentences expressing the same idea were, usually, consider the reference unit

For the purpose of the present study four interviews were analysed. They are from different schools and courses and they include three women and one male which is correspondent with the main sample of our large study.

The study purpose was achieve by analysing three main dimensions that could answer to research question: which are the uses of debate in higher education classrooms? And which are the teachers' work features that are related with debate enhancement? Analysis follows three main categories: course characterization, teaching work features and students' participations.

Results

Four interviews were analyse according to the general data analysed and presented at table 19.

TEACHER GENDER \ COURSES TYPE	Compulsory	Optional	Total
Male	0	1	1
Female	1	2	3
Total	1	3	4

Table 19: Course type

Course characterization

It is important to characterize the use of debate in the mandatory and optional courses because this information allows understanding this kind of learning strategy.

For one hand, in mandatory course we found that inside this course teacher allow students have the conceptual and theoretical instruments sufficient to a critical reflection. It could be abstract or complex for students but they are responsible for each section of the subject with the help of teacher, for instance: the basis of the material learned is in the lectures then the debates are made in practice class where all students have access to the same texts those colleagues who are going to present a topic. In this course they have the debate and an exam too.

The debates have a structure; we divide the class into groups, and each group will be evaluated only once during the semester. Each group will be responsible for a section of the subject.

For the other hand, in optional courses students must understand that a view on a specific topic could be multiple and how to write about it, it is multiple too. To use the debate in the classroom teachers explain a little the context of the debate and if there is not enough time to continue with it, students have homework to recognize the main ideas of the text to debate next class. Some text can be chosen by them.

The choice of texts is important and the fact that we let them take ownership of bringing text. Teachers allow students to create something of them.

At the end of the debate the teacher make an oral summary by asking critical questions of what was said during the debate.

There are usually two phases. After the match and the explanation comes the discussion that happens when the positions are attacked by others and myself.

Teaching work features

The teaching work features in mandatory course is difficult because teacher in addition to having to evaluate she has to take notes. Teacher becomes a mediator to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to participate in the debate

I have a collective framework where I'm noting who participates and the relevance of the participations on the audience.

Sometimes I do also of agent provocateur, give eventually an issue especially when the debate is falling or not start.

In fact, her work consist in be a "judge", mediator and have to make provocative. At the end of the debate she tries to do a synthesis in particular for the group who present the topic

In the optional courses, the teaching work features it is similar because they work normally as pivot.

Teacher is typically the moderator and sometimes are almost the fisherman

They show that there are other ways, forms and perspectives of complementary work of the subject. Every contribution is important and what teacher never done is to say that students are wrong because they bring ideas that sometimes teachers hadn't thought of, and that is enriching for both. The only difference is that one teacher decide to connect the subject with the reality using the daily information to be analyzed and discuss.

I start reading the newspapers of the day and then send them to go look for the street. I think this link to reality is fundamental

Students' participation

In the case of mandatory courses students' participation need to be assured to everyone, since it also depends on their note. However the more or less informal character of their participation and the diversity of ways in which they can do, it reflects in its discrimination in participating. One of the teacher said:

"Everyone wants to participate and so I have to give a chance to everyone to participate, I don't want it to come at the end of the class to say "teacher I was standing my arm up high and you didn't see and today I couldn't be evaluated and I wanted"

In the case of optional courses students' participation is related to present a topic in an individual or group way where they have to answer questions but they have to also stimulate the debate and participation of the whole class because it's a continuous evaluation. They enjoy participating in each debate.

The students' participation depends on two main conditions: students must prepare their participation previously to avoid very common sense statements and students' interest must be insured. This interest is better warranted when subject or themes are contextualized, meaning themes are related with daily based questions or future professional aspects. Also students are invited to present their statements in an innovative way, to foster colleagues participation.

In the debates, they can use other pedagogical techniques, make quizzes, submitted films, sometimes they also play, can pull off humor, can use some kind of humor to teach colleagues.

Teachers, in their discourses, related students' participation and interest with evaluation practices it means that teachers ensure students' work by making debate an assessment element. Also students' work collaboratively to prepare their participation in debates.

Discussion and conclusions

The main differences between mandatory and optional courses using debate are \Teacher work exigencies seem to be not different from those required for other methodologies implementation as teachers has to act as pivot, promoters and evaluators of students' participation. This is in line with literature review presented that stressed the importance of making learning a discussable matter, related with knowledge society features, as stressed by Nowotny (2001)The same idea could be understood by reference to the construction character of knowledge instead of its transmissivity. Therefore it is possible to conclude regarding this issue that teachers' work is very much evolving with class and with subject as it is within other pedagogical approaches that are student based learning.

Students' participation is important to achieve debate purposes but it also depends on assessment practices that are used. Therefore it is not possible to conclude the close relation between debate and students' participation without assessment practices.

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