

THE SKILLS AND DISPOSITIONS OF DEMOCRATIC DEBATE AND CRITICAL THINKING

In its most narrow meaning, ‘democracy’ may refer to a form of government or political system, where citizens have been guaranteed – by constitution for example – an opportunity to elect their own representatives to make decisions on the governance of a state or a community. However, most of the theorists of democracy set many other requirements for democracy as well, and even the narrowest theories of democracy acknowledge that *a well-functioning* democracy needs a much wider and robust foundations than the minimum requirement above.

In western countries, democratic institutions seem firmly established, but trust in institutions is deceptive if the democratic attitudes and skills are not rooted in the civic society. A few decades ago, we might have believed that the triumph of liberal democracies is inevitable and that representative systems will function of their own accord. Today, the world looks very different.

The rapid change of the media has made the social debate fragmented. On online forums, unjustified opinions and fanaticism are seemingly on the same line with argumentative debate respectful of others. Both scientific knowledge and unfounded prejudices as well as intentional deceptions are readily available to anyone. At the same time, the appreciation of scientific research and trust in its social effectiveness are faltering. The social media has been observed to feed echo chambers and confirmation bias. By using the data collected from the users, the algorithms of digital applications tend to limit the world view instead of expanding it or exposing people to something new.

The social environment may strengthen both the good and the bad human characteristics, and this most clearly applies to our present-day world of media. For example, at first, the internet and the digital communications technology raised immense optimism as “information superhighway” and “connectors of people”. On the other hand, they have also brought the humankind into an era we now call “the post-truth times” and where heated debates accompanied by hate speech have become an everyday occurrence.

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The introduction of increasingly efficient communications instruments did not automatically produce more intelligent public debate.

This has been a graphic reminder of how the competences maintaining a democratic culture and way of life do not develop by themselves. Good thinking and good debating skills must be supported and learned – and taught – deliberately. When this is done, we, once again, get to see that individual thinking and common dialogue are reciprocally connected.

Democratic deliberation requires critical thinking

Dialogic and ‘deliberative’ democracy – or the model of democracy emphasising wide multilateral public deliberation – is fundamentally dependent on the citizens’ competence to participate in argumentative communication. (Alhanen 2016; Gutmann & Thompson 1996.) The striving for common deliberation and decision-making is a demanding project in the implementation of which emphasising “everyone’s right to personal opinion” will not suffice. The opinions may be unjustified, incomprehensible to others, based on incorrect information and destructive of the dialogic connection.

A democratic debate requires more than that. For example, one needs to have answers to key information-based questions or at least criteria for how to seek information-based solutions and answers. For the comparison and weighing of controversial conceptions of value, one needs tolerant and peaceful practices and the ability to engage in respectful debate beyond value conflicts. Some generally acknowledged standards of good argumentation are needed for a debate to go forward. And, generally speaking, to provide starting points for a democratic debate, it requires good will to understand others and the readiness to admit one’s own mistakes, if necessary.

When growing up as part of their own community, people adopt different practices, attitudes and expectations. This is called socialisation and some of it happens automatically. The features that characterise each era and society are imprinted on our minds without us even noticing. For example, in our own era, nationalism and capitalism are the basic settings of our world view into which we are socialised semiautomatically. At the same time, they bring with them many other elements we have not consciously weighed and included as part of our thinking: division between us and the others, the fear of anything foreign and unfamiliar, the myths of

unity, competition between individuals, idealization of success and fear of failure, measuring of the human value using economic criteria or benefits they produce – and so on.

Even our biopsychological properties prepare the ground for many moral and political intuitions that we adopt in the socialisation process. Spontaneous emotional responses and our intuition often guide the way we operate more than rational thinking and knowledge. As individuals, people are quite deficient in processing of data. They are easy to mislead, since the intuitions and heuristics that are an organic part of their own thinking are enough to make their minds stray easily. (Tomperi 2017b.) Many of these innate biopsychological properties and features of socialisation work against democratic attitudes. In addition to making individual rational decision-making difficult, they also impede common deliberation based on reasoning.

Therefore, the competences for democracy are not learned spontaneously. In the process, critical-reflective thinking must function as a central instrument, a kind of intervention, with the help of which we acknowledge our own ways of thinking and acting and are ready to change them. The challenge of democracy education has always been finding ways by which obstacles to the establishment of competences for democracy could be overcome or dismantled. It does not happen by disseminating information alone (even though that is needed as well). The essential thing is to gain practical experience of how intelligent, listening and argumentative dialogue and debate works. Common consideration, democratic ‘deliberation’, is the same as public reasoning which needs to be learned through practice.

Critical thinking requires democratic deliberation

In Plato's *Theaitetos* dialogue, Socrates already defines thinking as “soul's silent dialogue with itself”. (Plato, *Theaitetos* 189e.) Language and dialogue are learned from other people, and with language we gradually learn conceptual, or abstract, thinking. The modern educational and learning psychology confirms the conception that reasoning is specifically by practicing the use of reason in social interaction with others.

The educational psychologist Lev Vygotski, who has greatly influenced the current conception of learning, underscored that all the higher cognitive functions originate as a result of concrete interactions between individ-

uals. When growing up as part of a human community, a child internalises forms of social interaction and communication and applies them to her or his personal psychological use. The higher thinking skills of an individual originate within a human community from mutual communication representing skilful thinking. (Vygotski 1982.) Applying this conception, we can also propose that higher-level rational thinking develops when we receive models, encouragement and support for it from our social environment. The key to this are the *shared practices* of good thinking. (Cam 2019; Lipman 2003; Tomperi & Juuso 2008; Tomperi 2017b.)

Skilful thinking has been divided into different dimensions in the form of, for example, critical, creative, constructive and caring thinking (Lipman 2003). All the dimensions are important, but in this package critical thinking provides kind of foundations on which the potential for independent thinking and intellectual self-defence can be built upon.

As a feature of skilful thinking, ‘critical’ does not refer to negativity or rejection (as it often does in everyday language). Here, critical refers to careful evaluation, rational consideration – in accordance with the etymology of the word (Greek *krinō*, ‘I investigate’, ‘I decide’; *kritikos*, ‘capable of judgement’). If necessary, critical thinkers understand to call to question the claims, distractions and world views presented to them. On the other hand, they do not make haste to pass judgement but refrain from jumping into conclusions or judgements. The time to take a stand comes only after the matter has been analysed and examined from different perspectives. Even in this case, every achieved view is fundamentally open and temporary. New information or better understanding may cause one to change one’s thinking. Criticality is defined by ‘fallibilism’, awareness of the possibility that all claims to knowledge could be mistaken, and the readiness to test and correct adopted conceptions. Critical thinking is also always and primarily self-criticism. (Tomperi 2017b.)

Critical thinkers aim to make considered judgements, deliberately support them with criteria and justifications, take the contexts and semantic connections of the topic into account and are ready to correct their views (Lipman 2003). Skilful expression of critical thinking is public argumentation that does not outright reject counterarguments but understands them as a resource for developing one’s own thinking. This kind of open and argumentative communication sounds natural but is far from easy.

Since the cognitive, emotional and social dimensions are closely intertwined in people's thinking and actions, as described above, one cannot practise the art of critical thinking simply by developing one's intelligence. In fact, many prerequisites of skilful thinking and debate are specifically socio-emotional abilities and dispositions: one listens to others and replies to them in an orderly and friendly manner even when in disagreement with them; one recognises and acknowledges aloud the merits in another person's thinking; one knows how to receive criticism against one's own ideas; one admits one's mistakes in front of others; one tolerates uncertainty and avoids making abrupt black-and-white statements; one can flexibly adjust one's own world view and outlook on the world in collaboration with others. These and many other abilities of a good thinker and debater require growth in self-understanding and in the management of one's own emotional reactions.

The socio-emotional abilities and dispositions of intelligence and emotions cannot be practised alone but they develop in the company of other people, when exposed to concrete situations where one opens one's own thinking to mutual sparring. It requires courage and collective trust. Online discussion forums seldom advance the growth of such trust. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that, during their school years, all children and young people get plenty of chances to practise argumentative debate and dialogue built on trust, and that they gain positive experiences of such discussions in a safe atmosphere. In the growth process, the practice of dialogic and democratic deliberation can offer a most necessary positive model for how to pursue critical thinking.

At its best, the practice of co-operative thinking is dialogue and debate that has personal meaning

In other words, critical thinking and democratic debating culture are closely linked and reciprocally strengthened. At the same time, they are linked to the topical key questions of a multicultural and pluralistic society, such as media literacy, intellectual self-defence, understanding of diversity, conciliation of interests, dialogue transcending cultural differences and the search for common ethical principles. One may notice that the fundamental elements of teaching thinking skills are at the very heart of democratic education:

- Getting accustomed to inquisitive, questioning and deliberative debating practices that respect the criteria of argumentation and practising them;
- Guidance to listening and respecting others and learning from them;
- Encouraging people to practise self-criticism;
- Supporting inclinations towards critical, creative, constructive and caring thinking;
- Encouraging people to openness towards new experiences, different people and diverse views;
- Gathering positive experiences of collective dialogue and debate situations.

The connection between democratic-deliberative debate and the skills of independent thinking are today well acknowledged in research. The psychological development of thinking skills is nowadays typically approached from the angle of linguistic interaction and social co-operation instead of an individualistic perspective. Several areas of research are interested in the dialogic debate and communication exercises that develop thinking and argumentation skills. (E.g. Preiss & Sternberg 2010; Resnick et al. 2015; Wegerif et al. 2015.)

The democratic debating culture is emphasised by, for example, the ‘pedagogical philosophy’ for children and young people, which has long traditions and widely spread applications as a pedagogic operation model. In this model, the learning and inquiring community – a class, teaching group, interest group – practises quality thinking by focusing on examining philosophical questions that interest the people involved. The community also always jointly reflects on how it operates itself: are we listening to one another, are we justifying our arguments, are we learning from each other, are we making progress in argumentative thinking. By modelling the prerequisites of democratic activity and the process of public consideration in the forms of deliberation and argumentation, the practice of philosophy strengthens the democratic skills and dispositions of the participants. (Lipman 2003; Tomperi & Juuso 2008; Tomperi 2017b.) “Love of wisdom” – as well as aspiring for such philosophical values and ideals as truth and justice – is also actually an excellent signpost for deliberative democracy.

Practising the skills of dialogue and debate in philosophical subjects brings content to such activity, preventing thinking from diminishing into a mere technical skill. The issues being addressed are sought from the spheres of life that are meaningful for the participants, and the debate advances to deep further questions concerning the content. When discussing the matters, one cannot avoid analysing fundamental epistemic, normative and existential concepts and phenomena – such as knowledge, truth, beauty, the good, power, existence and identity – in a reflective manner. As opposed to instrumental practice of thinking skills, philosophy can be called personally relevant thinking. (Tomperi & Juuso 2014; Tomperi 2017a.)

In philosophical questions, the personal relevance and meaningfulness (e.g. “how should I lead my life?”) is shared, since the private causes of wonderment are at the same time shared and fundamental problems of human life in general. Personal interrogation proceeds to general themes (“what is good life?”) and expands to concern the framework for living together with others (“what kind of a good society creates opportunities for striving for a good life?”). A philosophical inquiry does not need to lead to consensus, but it can still eliminate misunderstandings, sharpen argumentation and strengthen our ability to understand others and respect the diversity of our thinking. In this respect as well, philosophy is well suited for modelling a well-functioning democratic society, where disagreements and conflicts cannot be avoided, but where they can be debated in a peaceful manner respective of others.

Examining the questions of personally meaningful matters in the process of shared thinking is simultaneously a practice of both personal growth and collective progress, a form of personal and social cultivation. As John Dewey, known as the philosopher of democracy, so often reiterated, in the best possible democratic community this is not merely the business of school and education, but the ultimate goal of all institutions in society:

“Democracy has many meanings, but if it has a moral meaning, it is found in resolving that the supreme test of all political institutions and industrial arrangements shall be the contribution they make to the all-around growth of every member of society.” (Dewey 1920, 186.)

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