



## Soft Skills and Leadership. Debate as Pedagogical Tool

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## SOFT SKILLS AND LEADERSHIP. DEBATE AS PEDAGOGICAL TOOL

### HABILIDADES INTERPERSONALES Y LIDERAZGO. EL DEBATE COMO HERRAMIENTA PEDAGÓGICA

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**Abstract: Introduction:** Soft skills are characterised by social-emotional skills, relevant for individual growth, community engagement, academic and work achievements, and are theoretically in contrast to job-specific technical skills. Higher Institutions are now called to adapt to the requirements of a changing and highly complex labour market, in which it is important to promote the employability of university graduates and to educate future workers who possess soft skills and technical skills. **Method:** The University of Roma TRE has originated a theoretical and methodological reflection on the evaluation and development of soft skills in its students by including a Laboratory for Leadership in the Master's module Leadership and Humanistic Management. The Laboratory consists of a critical analysis of famous lectures given by notable speakers working in various fields; students are then guided to construct their debate by choosing from the proposed topics. The 40 Master's degree students from different courses enthusiastically submitted their debates. **Results:** The assessment result of the soft skills detected in the post-test phase after the lab, along with the linguistic analysis of the forms used to express intentions and skills also in a foreign language, significantly improved the students' perception of their leadership skills in the communication area. **Conclusion and Discussions:** The conclusions bring to light a critical re-examination of how to train soft skills, the debating tool being functional not only for communication and language skills but also for choosing a leadership style.

**Keywords:** Soft skills, Pedagogical tool, leadership skills, FL/L2 communication skills, debate

**Resumen (idioma original): Introducción:** Las "soft skills" se caracterizan por ser habilidades socioemocionales, relevantes para el crecimiento individual, el compromiso con la comunidad y los logros académicos y laborales, y se contraponen teóricamente a las habilidades técnicas específicas del puesto de trabajo. Las instituciones superiores están llamadas a adaptarse a los requisitos de un mercado laboral cambiante y altamente complejo, en el que es importante promover la empleabilidad de los titulados universitarios y formar a futuros trabajadores que posean habilidades blandas además de habilidades técnicas. **Metodología:** La Universidad de Roma TRE ha originado una reflexión teórico-metodológica sobre la evaluación y el desarrollo de habilidades blandas en sus estudiantes, mediante la inclusión de un Laboratorio de Liderazgo en el módulo del Máster Liderazgo y Gestión Humanística. El Laboratorio consiste en un análisis crítico de algunas conferencias famosas impartidas por ponentes

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notables que trabajan en diversas áreas; a continuación, se guía a los estudiantes para que construyan su propio debate eligiendo entre los diferentes temas propuestos. Los 40 estudiantes de máster de distintas titulaciones presentaron con entusiasmo sus debates. **Resultados:** El resultado de la evaluación de las soft skills detectadas en la fase post-test tras el laboratorio, junto con el análisis lingüístico de las formas utilizadas para expresar intenciones y habilidades también en una lengua extranjera, mejoró significativamente la percepción de los estudiantes sobre sus propias habilidades de liderazgo en el área de la comunicación. **Conclusiones:** Las conclusiones ponen de manifiesto una reexaminación crítica sobre cómo entrenar habilidades blandas, siendo la herramienta del debate funcional para las habilidades de comunicación y lenguaje, y también para la elección de un estilo de liderazgo.

**Palabras claves:** habilidades blandas, herramienta pedagógica, habilidades de liderazgo, habilidades de comunicación en lengua extranjera/segunda lengua (LE/L2), debate

## 1. Introduction<sup>i</sup>

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century highly competitive culture in which the job industry spreads its doors towards a global perspective, Human Resources units overseeing the human capital of corporations have evolved in their approach to employee selection, moving beyond prioritizing technical skills alone and now emphasizing the importance of candidates possessing a combination of essential soft skills and a degree of hard skills tailored to the specific job requirements. In contemporary global business practices, a growing number of enterprises accord heightened significance to soft skills in comparison to technical competencies. Concurrently, there exists a perspective wherein these skills are deemed to be of equal importance or are viewed as mutually reinforcing within organizational contexts (Cranmer, 2006; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2019). Owing to changing work settings brought by globalisation and innovations in technology, graduates need to be equipped with soft skills as in addition to technical skills in order to be able to compete in a more-and-more-demanding work place. Despite the recognition of the the prime value of soft skills in the workplace, though literature on building soft skills is lacking.

This Report presents a study on human competencies, carried out in the framework of the research project for the academic year 2022/2023 of the 'Dipartimento di Scienze della Formazione', Università degli Studi Roma Tre, in collaboration with the Rome Business School and the Chair of Pedagogy. The forum highlighted a set of the 10 competencies considered most valuable for skilled professionals in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Non-cognitive skills are considered to be

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relational and involve both personal and interpersonal skills; they are associated with "behaviours, attitudes and strategies" that often demonstrate core competencies rooted in emotional intelligence (National Soft Skills Association, 2022). Soft skills are recognised as being as crucial as hard skills or even more so in the contemporary economy of knowledge. However, a mismatch exists between the soft skills learned by graduates and the soft skills demanded by companies. The relevant literature shows the limited number of pedagogical tools to develop soft skills.

The curriculum has become a criterion for classification and identification in international rankings and, in virtuous cases, seems to respond to needs negotiated with stakeholders. It seems urgent to define and bring back into the debate the educational dimension that is part of the university culture, for the development of the whole person. This is the main objective of our methodological proposal to teach soft skills with the help of music, whose tools are functional to represent forms and concepts in an accessible way. This paper therefore aims to explore how soft skills can be developed through debate as a pedagogical strategy in its very own right in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts.

## **2. Debate as a leadership tool**

According to Snider and Schnurer (2006), debate is a structured communication event in which opposing proponents argue their viewpoints before a decision-making body. Being "a questioning and arguing process, a process of arriving at a well-reasoned opinion on a proposal" (Freeley & Steinberg, 2013, p. 6), it is well known in the relevant literature for its positive effects, particularly in developing students' soft skills, like Critical Thinking and Communication Skills, also in Second (L2) /Foreign Language (FL) learning (Cinganotto, 2019). Pedagogical assignments are structured in such a way as to provide educational learning opportunities for the improvement of knowledge and ought to be based on the learning principles of students using an authentic vocabulary (Mozgalova et al, 2021) and engaging in interactive, collaborative and effective tasks boosting confidence and motivation. Accordingly, the present research study conceptualizes the utilization of debate as a pedagogical tool across different stages of tasks. The primary objective is to cultivate a spectrum of multifaceted soft skills essential for students in real-life scenarios.

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If debate as a pedagogical tool is used in class, more students, especially those who do not have the possibility to practice their communicative skills in English in non-English speaking countries such as Italy, will be provided a potent tool to engage in meaningful English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts.<sup>ii</sup> Debate activity consists of a confrontation between two teams of students who support and counter a given motion, placing themselves in one camp (for) or the other (against) through a formal discussion, dictated by precise rules and timing. The effectiveness of this methodology is evident from the illustration of the schools' practices, which focus on the connections between the potential of debate and the development of the eight European Key Competences. In particular, borrowing the logic of classical oratory, debate offers itself as a powerful tool to train students in the exercise of critical thinking. In fact, they are asked to select the most suitable sources for constructing their team's arguments, developing, among other things, public speaking skills and education in active listening. This also encourages the assumption of alternative perspectives to one's own while fully respecting the point of view of others, finally promoting intercultural dialogue and the acquisition of global citizenship skills (Cinganotto, Mosa, Panzavolta, 2021).

The pedagogical utility of debate spans approximately 2,400 years, originating with the intellectual traditions of ancient Greek philosophers who posited the validation of truth through the rigorous examination of arguments (Darby, 2007). The first recorded inter-scholastic debate took place in 1400 between the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge. While debate served as a prominent teaching strategy, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century its popularity waned. However, a revival occurred in the 1980s, driven by its recognized efficacy in fostering critical thinking, logic, and communication skills. Despite this resurgence, though, the utilization of debate in higher education has remained relatively underexplored, and even though the skills of argumentation are frequently presented as archetypal tools of a democratic empowerment, specialised theorisation of how to use such tools in academic projects is rare: debate is more known as a restricted competing activity for a limited group of students than as a pedagogic tool used in the class (Okolie et al, 2022).

Previous research, exemplified by Aclan (2015), has substantiated the positive impact of debate on communication skills; consequently, scholars recommend the integration of debate across the curriculum as a means of enhancing educational outcomes. In the project we carried

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out, students perceived it as a new, innovative, eye-opening and informing method of learning and teaching (Rao, 2019).

### **3. Debate on Leadership**

The proposal is based on an interdisciplinary format aimed at promoting the discovery and knowledge of the main constituent elements of music, with a creative and imaginative approach. In this itinerary, music is viewed from an interdisciplinary perspective, tracing and gathering the links it weaves with the fields of knowledge and the dimensions of knowledge, using all the poetic languages to promote the development of its rich expressive potential.

Debate on Leadership was embedded in the Master's modules on Leadership and Humanistic Management in September 2023. Five laboratories were carried out and informed consent was received from all the master's degree students who took part in the LAB. Critical analysis of various famous lectures was proposed; students were then guided to construct their own debate by choosing from the different themes proposed. 40 Master's degree students from all degree courses enthusiastically submitted their debates.

Participants attended the programme at a transversal level, and an assessment test of interpersonal and language competencies was carried out at the beginning and at the end, as well as a review of the impact and application of the module. As most of the participants came from Italy, a Country where English is rarely used or not used at all except in the English classrooms, their average entrance proficiency in English as shown in their CV, was relatively low. This profiling of the language skills of the participating students has two pedagogical dimensions. First, it shows that these students from different classes really needed an intervention like the LAB to improve their skills so that they could study at a university where English is the medium of instruction. For this reason, debate is one of the subjects taught in the Listening and Speaking class that trains students with mixed skills, with the exception of true beginners who are taught basic listening and speaking skills. Secondly, the linguistic profile of the participating students shows that participants belonging to the basic English proficiency level are able to debate. This was also demonstrated by the fact that the pass rate of the three debate classes in three sockets was 92%. The debate format used by the participants in this study is the simplest one, which is easier for novice debaters.

In conjunction with the language proficiency assessment test, participants actively engaged in a focus group, aimed to examine the incorporation of debate in the curriculum, as

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well as to identify the strengths of debate and the implied soft skills. In the participants' responses, "leadership" was highlighted; though the term was not consistently employed, various behaviors associated with this specific skill were quoted as primary. All participants agreed in acknowledging the pleasantness of the debating tool, while recognizing in it a pedagogical opportunity to practice Leadership and to learn how to inspire others.

Assessment result of the soft skills detected in the post-test phase after the lab, along with the linguistic analysis of the forms used to express intentions and skills in a foreign language, significantly improved the students' perception of their own leadership skills, in the communication area

#### **4. Conclusions**

While the recognition of diverse learning styles underscores the importance of employing various teaching strategies to accommodate the unique preferences and strengths of individual student, learners exhibit better understanding and retention when they can directly apply the knowledge they are acquiring. This pedagogical diversity aligns with the understanding that students absorb information in different ways (Smith, 2018; Gardner, 1999). Debate, as a teaching strategy, stands out as a powerful tool in this context, as it serves as a catalyst for active student engagement (Leproni, 2020). By placing the responsibility for comprehension directly on the shoulders of students, debate prompts a transformative shift in their approach to learning.

The transition from a passive stance to an active one is not merely anecdotal; studies such as those conducted by Caggiano and D'Amante (2020) provide empirical evidence of this pedagogical shift. Contemporary educational paradigms increasingly emphasize learner-centered instruction. Scholars such as James (2006) and Ware (2006) advocate for a departure from traditional teacher-centric methods. The emphasis is now on educators fostering an environment where students actively participate in their own learning processes. This shift aligns with the broader recognition that educators should move beyond the mere transmission of facts.

In addition, by providing a critical re-examination of how to train soft skills, the debating tool proves functional not only for improving communication and language skills, but also for triggering the choice of one's leadership style. In this perspective, to equip students with the necessary skills required by today's dynamic and information-driven society, educators

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need to incorporate instructional methods like debate to promote engagement and active participation in the learning process, so to foster the critical thinking, problem-solving, and analytical abilities that contemporary job market and social interaction demand.

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<sup>i</sup> Raffaella Leproni wrote paragraphs 1-2, Valeria Caggiano wrote paragraphs 3-4.

<sup>ii</sup> The results of a survey conducted in Italy in 2019, even if limited, indicate that debate can be an effective strategy to foster both language skills and soft skills (Cinganotto, 2019).