

Organized Dialogues and Debates in the Czech Republic



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Introduction and the local context

The following pages are a brief summary of the several methods of dialogues or debates which are well grounded and organized in the Czech Republic. They are all used as a pedagogical tool and as such are aimed at supporting those who take part in it in developing certain skills. For the purpose of this summary I am omitting the dialogues or debates which are either not method-based (meaning they have no specific structure and guidelines for their form) or are not accessible due to small number of people and lack of organization (an example of that might be Bohm's Dialogue).

For understanding how various methods of dialogue and debate work in the Czech Republic I need to briefly mention some contributing factors that either have or had an influence on the current situation. Those would be the period of communism and following shift to democracy which led to a time of transformation in many areas and perhaps the more important for us are education, citizenship and civic participation. The key notion for all of them are freedom, the need for critical and independent thinking, and later development of so-called soft skills and not least rhetoric and the ability to persuade which in the times of liberal opportunities are often the key to success. In the autumn of 1989 there were some people who were able to evaluate information and think independently and who could communicate their ideas to others. However, many people, those with higher education included, were not supported in developing these skills earlier in their lives. Not only for civic participation but also for private businesses were these skills sought after and encouraged in the younger generation. Thus, methods of developing these skills became the center of interest for some people in education and in civil sector. Unfortunately, the mere fact that some people became aware of the problem of teaching students how to think critically and how to express their opinions did not change the overall landscape and approach to classroom work. In recent years we can see that there are more teachers implementing more interactive and discussion based activities, doing so on their own accord or with the support of various NGOs and trainings. Most of these activities are either based on a subject, not on the form,



or are not done as part of some network or organization. For this publication I have chosen 4 organized and form-based methods. Form-based means that they have a structure and guidelines one can follow, not e.g. general topic where form is up to the facilitator. The four mentioned methods of organized group-talks are Student Agora (formerly Way to Parliament), Debate League, Debating club and Socratic dialogues. They are all organized activities supported by a certain organization or network. Some of the principles and procedures from the methods can be used outside of the specific activity which is run by the organization – e.g. short debates in the form of Student Agora, or principles of team exploration from Socratic Dialogues can be used separately in classroom work or similar.

For implementing these methods the target group is important to consider because different age groups have their own specific needs. That does not mean that they can't be aimed at younger or older audiences, it just means that for doing so appropriate changes should be considered and one should bear in mind that it has not been tested in the form presented.

Key concepts and theoretical framework

In the Czech Republic there are various types of dialogues and debates being practiced. Before I introduce them and explain where and how are these methods used, I shall explain various possible aims a debate or a dialogue can have because that is crucial to the ways it is practiced.

First let us look at the etymology of three words – debate, discussion and dialogue, it will clarify some key differences between various forms of group-talks and help us avoiding some common misconceptions.

Debate comes from French *débattre* (which in turn comes from Latin *de-* + *battere*) with the meaning of “beating with words”. Discussion comes from Latin *dis* + *cutere*, meaning to break and to shake, later also break to pieces, investigate. Dialogue comes from Greek: *dia* + *logos* where *dia-* means through or beyond and *logos* stands for reason, word and mind. From that we can see the difference between a debate which is literally fight with words with the aim to beat the opponent; and a discussion which is closer to breaking the topic into pieces and analyzing it; and a dialogue where the focus is on a common inquiry with the aim of finding the best answers together.

This might seem as an unnecessarily complicated analysis for our purpose but I believe it is not. With these distinctions in mind it is easier to distinguish between the various benefits of each method. E.g. debate has the disadvantage of it not being concerned with the best possible answer but with winning over the opponent. That means that whatever argument the other side presents the debater will hold his or her views and try to persuade them, therefore it does not leave space for re-evaluating one's own views. Dialogue may be seen as an opposite to debate with the space for making an inquiry, trying to get the best out of everyone present and encouraging listening and understanding rather than getting through with one's own views. Knowing that one can opt for a debate in a classroom because it can use the students' competitiveness, the battle character of it adds excitement so it can be a very lively and engaging way of learning. On the other hand when one wants to show the group the power of cooperation and to let them think in depth about complicated concepts, dialogue is perhaps more suitable.



Methods and their Organizations

Student Agora

The aim of Student Agora is to encourage secondary school pupils to pay attention to current affairs, to use and evaluate information sources, to argue in a fair way with respect to the opponent, to work on their rhetorical and presentation skills and to work in a team. This is achieved through a debating competition where school teams consisting of ten competitors can participate.

Each year the participating schools receive an introductory seminar for students where the structure of the competition is explained and the rules, what is judged and most importantly guidelines for how to debate and what to pay attention to. Among those there is the work with information sources, information on rhetoric, presentation, the importance of non-verbal signals and how to phrase arguments in a way that they are comprehensible and can be reacted to, also teamwork and cooperation are stressed.



Usually after this initial training the school team is formed (sometimes there are more interested students, in that case they all practice and only right before the competition they chose the 10 who are the best). A period of time for them follows when they have the space to practice and prepare. The competition itself is a series of 5-7 minutes long debates on topics chosen by the organizing team. These topics fall into two categories – known and unknown. The known topics are sent to the schools after the last initial training is concluded which means that the competing pupils have time to prepare – to look up information, decide on strategy, find strong arguments and prepare for counterarguments. They practice their rhetorical skills; learn how to express themselves in a convincing way and how to persuade others.

The unknown topics are usually formed in such a way so that the competitors can come up with various perspectives and arguments at the spot because they learn what the topic is only right before it is being debated.



Before each debate the two teams which are opposing each other randomly choose which position they will argue for. Then they have 3 minutes to prepare before the start of the debate (to recall the best arguments, choose strategy etc.).

The competition debate has only few simple formal rules – the one who is speaking in favour of the competition statement starts, speaker from one team is followed by a speaker from the opposing team, one speech can take up to 60 seconds, the word is granted by the moderator and the competitor who wishes to speak expresses that by standing up.

Three judges are present, they observe and comment the debates and grade the teams. The separate debates do not have a direct winner and loser, only comment from the judges (those are typically recruited from previous competitors). They fill forms and award points in the different areas of the debating skills, e.g. the quality of arguments and teamwork. After the teams fought every other team, the judges count the points and discuss the ranking. The two better ones compete in final three discussions.

There are usually two rounds of the competition – regional where everybody competes and national where the best team from each region participates.

An aspect of the competition that makes it distinctively different from other methods is that there is at least as much time for the audience to discuss as for the competitors. After each debate some time is given to the audience and the guests if there are some. The aim of the organizers is to invite

guests, who are politicians or professionals in related fields e.g. journalists, academics etc. It is perceived as beneficial for the students to have a chance to talk about current public issues with them.

The specific situation in the Czech Republic is that within the field of humanities, there are not many chances for students to take part in interschool competitions. Unlike in other subjects, there are only few competitions and they mainly comprise of writing essays. This probably contributes to Student Agora becoming popular among schools - it offers a unique opportunity for students to experience competition in the field of current public issues and doing so on a team.



Student Agora, or formerly Way to parliament (which was very similar), happens every year since 2004. It is possible for teachers to adopt the principles and use them in their classroom as some of them successfully do. There are also cases of schools where they have their own school-level competition or where the older students/former competitors are coaching the school team.

Debate League

The form of debate which the Debate League is promoting has origins in the mid 90th when it was encouraged and supported by the Open Society Institute. The idea of debating as a way of educating the post-communist citizens in the field of expressing and exchanging opinions in a constructive way became popular. Also teaching critical thinking is one of the objectives of the debate and has been since its beginning. The form of the debate itself can be credited to the K. R. Popper – also it is usually called after him “The Karl Popper debate” - and its dissemination in the Czech Republic (and other countries) to the support of Georg Soros.

Similar form of debate is practiced also among university students, it will be mentioned later. The organization in charge of the competition Debate League is *Czech Debate Association (Česká asociace debatních klubů)*, and it aims mainly at secondary school students.

Despite the fact that the debate has the form of a competition the main objectives, similarly to the aforementioned Student Agora, are to provide space for developing skills like argumentation, critical thinking, persuasion, public speaking, also English in some cases. Therefore succeeding in the competition is seen as secondary to practicing and learning.



The center of a debate is a statement. The statement suggests some change in the form of “something should be done” or a more general claim where the part of what should be done is implicit and can be specified by the participants. An example of the former is “the death penalty should be introduced” (it suggests a change of the present situation), an example of the latter is "The International Monetary Fund brings more harm than good." which implicitly involves call for change but the change itself is not specified.

In each debating “battle” there are two teams consisting of three persons, therefore six persons take part in one debate. During the debate each person gives one speech of 5-6 minutes, and most of them are followed with 3 minutes of cross-questioning. This is schedule:

Order of speeches	Speakers	Timeframe
The 1 st speaker for the affirmative side	A1	6 minutes
Cross-questions for the 1 st affirmation speaker	N3 – A1	3 minutes
The 1 st speaker for the negation side	N1	6 minutes
Cross-questions for the 1 st negation speaker	A3-N1	3 minutes
The 2 nd speaker for the affirmative side	A2	6 minutes
Cross-questions for the 2 nd affirmation speaker	N1-A2	3 minutes
The 2 nd speaker for the negation side	N2	6 minutes
Cross-questions for the 2 nd negation speaker	A1-N2	3 minutes
The 3 rd speaker for the affirmative side	A3	5 minutes
The 3 rd speaker for the negation side	N3	5 minutes

The teams are randomly ascribed either the task of proving the discussed statement (affirmative side) or disproving the arguments of the affirmative side (the negation side). It is important to emphasize that the task of the negation side is not disproving the statement as such but disproving the arguments the affirmative side introduces. It is allowed for the negation side to bring a new argument once in a while but they are expected to focus on reacting to the arguments already presented.

It is not necessary for the speakers to exhaust their time or be precise – they can for example finish their point after their time limit has passed (which is not possible in the above described Student Agora). During a speech none of the present people (e.g. the judges and the spectators) are allowed to interrupt the speaker.



The participants have the possibility to use their “preparation time” for formulating questions, preparing argumentation and so on, the time designated to that is 5 minutes for the affirmative side and 7 minutes for the negation side. That is the total amount of preparation time for the whole debate, the sides can use them before their speeches or before their turn of cross-questioning.

The role of each speaker depends the ascribed objectives derived from their place in the schedule (A1, A2, A3, N1, N2, N3). E.g. A1 has the task of defining the statement and explaining the argumentation of his or her team while the task of A2 is to show again the validity of arguments which were impugned by N1 and bring more evidence in support of arguments presented by A1. A3 and N3 have the task of summarizing the debate and convincing the judge that their team is better.

There is a judge who follows the arguments and at the end presents his/her findings regarding the arguments used and decides who wins. The judge also awards points to each debating participant in the range from 50 to 100, where content, strategy and style are the contributing factors. Strategy and style range between 15 and 30 points and content 20 to 40 points. The cross-questioning award points range from 1-10. These points then determine the best speaker of each round and of the whole competition.

There are two rounds of the competition – the first one qualifies teams to compete in the final round. During the qualification round a team goes through 4-5 debates where 4 are with prepared statements (the teams receive them about a month before the tournament) and 1 is with previously unknown statement (the teams receive it an hour before the debate and are not allowed to use electronic devices or outside help apart from one book and a dictionary). There are 4 qualification tournaments and they all happen within one school year. The results are counted and the best ones can compete in finals.

The languages of the competition are Czech and English, also it is possible to include any other language the participants and the judge speak. There are also international events where Czech teams take part, e.g. EurOpen or Bratislava Schools Debate Championship. The teams are not



necessarily school based, although they often are. It is possible for an individual to contact the association and get support in finding near-by team and for the teams to get help with finding either a coach or some other sort of support. For those who leave secondary school it is possible to take part in debating in a different form.

Debating clubs



At Charles University in Prague there is a club for university students (possibly open to other interested people) where a form of British parliamentary debate is used. The organization is associated mainly with the Faculty of Law but is frequented by students from other faculties as well as students from different colleges. It is e.g. supported by University of Economics.

Activities this club conducts are debating sessions throughout the academic year and either preparing or participating various tournaments. The currently largest one is Mikulášský turnaj s r.

o. in Prague at the start of December, then there is Brno Open and the Academic Championship in Debating in Czech and Slovak republic. The last mentioned tournament changes its location each year. The Debating club in Prague is not the only one, there are clubs in other cities too, typically associated with a Faculty of Social Sciences or similar. The various clubs have their own activities and they cooperate in preparing the events which are aimed at all the debating clubs in the Czech Republic and Slovakia (there are strong ties between the clubs in these two countries).

Despite the fact that we can find various guidelines for the British Parliamentary Debate, the core stays the same and the differences are mainly in the number of people participating in one debate and sometimes the etiquette and the expected moves of each team can vary. The way British parliamentary debate is practiced in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia is equal to the one we can see at world championship in debating.

The aim of each debate is to convince the panel of judges and the audience that the position one holds is the right one. The sides are called government and opposition. There are 4 teams in one debate, each team has 2 members (therefore there are altogether 8 speakers in one debate). It follows that both government and opposition are represented by two teams. These are the titles: *Opening Government* (Prime minister, Deputy Prime Minister); *Opening Opposition* (Leader of the Opposition, Deputy Leader of the Opposition); *Closing Government* (Member of Government, Government Whip); *Closing Opposition* (Member of Opposition, Opposition Whip).

With their speeches the Government and the Opposition take turns in this order:

1. Prime Minister
2. Leader of the Opposition
3. Deputy Prime Minister
4. Deputy Leader of the Opposition
5. Member of Government
6. Member of Opposition
7. Government Whip
8. Opposition Whip



Each member of the parliament presents 6 minutes long speech and while seemingly the teams that share either Government side or the Opposition side collaborate, in fact their aim is to win over each other. Similarly to the above

mentioned Debate League, each team has its own task, e.g. the Opening Governments task is to introduce definitions of the problem (and therefore narrow it down) and present all the main arguments that support their position. The Opening Opposition is disproving what the Opening Government has said and develops its own line of argumentation. Both of the Closing teams are expected to support the arguments previously said, develop them further and present some sort of conclusion.

The speeches are not only separate performances but rather answers to the previous speech, arguments and comments (except for the first speaker of course). This should assure fluency of the debate.

The topics in the British Parliamentary Debate the topics are most usually unknown before the competition. In the case that there are some known topics, they are sent to the competing teams in time. The topics are meant to offer a conflict so that the sides can hold different and conflicting positions.

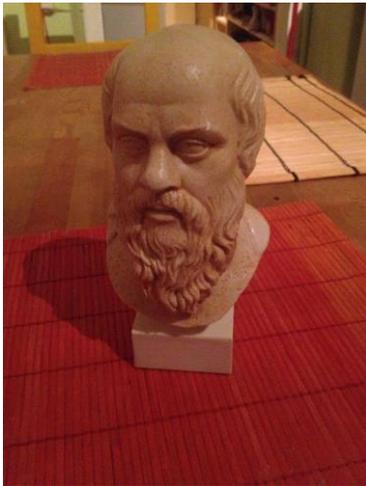
The tradition is that the number of judges is not less than three and there are existing guidelines for them to follow, which are very similar to the ones used in Debate League. The aim is to provide as objective judgments as possible. One of the judges has the position of *The Head of the Judges* and in case of disagreement or unclear results is the one to decide. The criteria which are being judged are Content and Style, where each of them has the same value. With content we understand argumentation and the logic with which arguments are connected, also the relevance and validity of the used arguments. The category Style involves the rhetorical skills, appearance, gestures, how persuasive the performance is, strategy and structure of the speeches and other similar factors. After each debate the judges confer and agree on the ranking of the teams. Then they appoint points, fill in any required protocol (depending on the tournament) and offer verbal feedback or commentary to the teams. Each judge can also award points to individuals and that serves for the competition category „*The Best Debater*“. That can vary depending on the tournament.

Those who like to compete in international tournaments travel typically to the UK, Ireland or Netherlands where this type of debating is widespread. It is practised world-wide and therefore the best debaters can compete in The World Championship.

The Debating clubs that use the style of British Parliamentary debate are often frequented by former Debate League participants. This is due to the fact that the form is similar and there is

also some connection between the organizations. The usual development therefore is that those who are active in Debate League in Secondary school are continuing with debates at university in the Debating club.

Socratic Dialogues



enhance the team's ability to effectively cooperate).

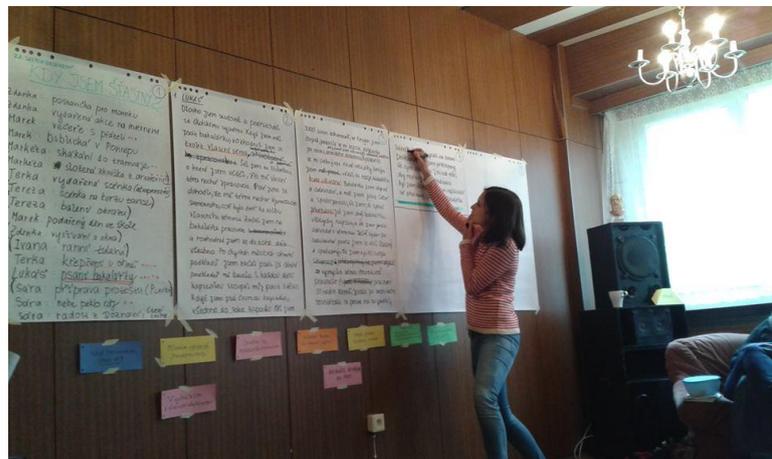
Compared to the above ways of debating, the method of Socratic Dialogues is different in the sense that it is not a competitive debate where the aim is to win over the opponent but the pressure is on understanding the others and finding consensus. Because of that it does not (and essentially cannot) adopt the form of a competition but is rather approached as a way of developing critical thinking skills, argumentation and soft communication skills like listening, verifying that one has understood what one had heard and as a team-building activity (it is sometimes used in teams to

Socratic Dialogues can be traced approximately to the second decade of the 20th century when a German philosopher Leonard Nelson developed this method as a way of learning and applied it in his school for students of 12 to 20 years old. Due to the political situation of those times the school was closed down in 1933 and it can be noted that none of the people who were either teaching or learning there believed the Nazi propaganda. The method was further developed by Gustav Heckmann who was first teaching at the above mentioned school and later moved with some of the teachers and students to Denmark and UK. Nowadays the method is used in both these countries as well as in others, e.g. Netherlands, Bulgaria, Italy... Due to its long history we can find differences in the method in various regions. The one practiced in the Czech Republic is the Socratic Dialogue in Nelson-Heckmann tradition.

The dialogue is a facilitated group dialogue where the number of people usually range from 6-12. The role of the facilitator is to make sure that the group follows the method and offers guidelines for cooperating, he or she is not expected to take part in the content work. The typical advice the facilitator says are e.g. "Can anyone repeat what this person is saying?" or "Can you give a concrete example of what you are trying to say?" The group's task is to analyze given problem and try to find an answer the whole group can agree on. The process is based on analyzing concrete

examples and through slow abstraction the group can reach a conclusion that is well understood and verified against one's own experiences.

Divided into steps, the dialogue can be described as a way from general question to concrete experience to analysis to general judgements to backing rules and to identifying principles and rules behind all this. In the process as such the focus is on the way things are done rather than on the results



because the way the group works is crucial to any interim answers. The guidelines for that exist in many forms, in some way many Socratic facilitators make them explicit for the group so that the participants can also be in charge of following them (on the picture they are placed on the colorful cards for the participants to see them throughout the dialogue). They can be phrased e.g. as:

1. To talk clearly, briefly and comprehensibly for others.
2. To talk to the current topic (not to say everything that is on one's mind but only what is relevant to the discussed matter right now)
3. To assume that the others mean what they say and do that too (no arguments for arguments sake)
4. To speak up in case I have a doubt or don't understand something.
5. To strive for understanding and agreement (for what we think is true), not for a victory.
6. To approach the theme with an open mind and „freshly“, not with an already formed opinion
7. Anyone can change their opinion during the dialogue if they find out that what they have thought is not so.

The topic or a question for Socratic dialogue has certain properties, e.g. that no special knowledge is required and that the participants can relate to it. Typically the questions aim at moral problems (When is it alright to lie?), at clarifying concepts (What is a stereotype?), at self-reflection

(Where are the limits of my tolerance?) and it is successfully used for mathematical problems, where the students are getting deeper understanding of mathematical principles.

The Czech organization Sokratovske rozhovory z.s. was founded in 2009 but the dialogues had been done each year since 1998. The three days dialogues are part of a university curriculum and therefore are offered to students of Charles University. The dialogues are however open both to younger (secondary school) students and professionals. It is seen as beneficial for the group to be diverse as it brings wider spectrum of experiences and the participants can learn from each other.

Currently there are 2-4 events a year in the Czech Republic, usually with several working groups. It is not unusual for people to take part in events abroad, mainly in Germany where the events are organized by Die Philosophisch-Politische Akademie. Because the working language is Czech, English and German, it can be perceived as a language training and is sometimes appreciated as such by the students. Apart from events aimed at public, it also prepares events for facilitators, to train them and improve their facilitation skills.



Conclusion:

These four methods are the most widely spread ways of debating or of a dialogue in the Czech Republic. They all are methods used and developed in other countries and implemented in the Czech Republic. Apart from these above mentioned ways, there are a large number of groups where some sort of discussion is going on, but unlike the above mentioned they are content concerned. E.g. a group would organize meetings on political situation/ environmental issues/ international relations... These are often more informative and less interactive and therefore aimed at adult audiences (a panel discussion with questions and answers can be very useful for an interested person but it does not provide space for learning how to express one's own opinion on the matter or how to ask questions to clarify points).

For an easy implementation in group-work of younger students, there is the field of Philosophy for Children which mostly provides activities and topics for group discussions for younger students. It is not a very wide-spread field in the Czech Republic yet, but rather a small group of teachers and students at the University of South Bohemia and some individuals in other regions. It is, however, growing and slowly finding its way to primary and secondary school classrooms. The advantage of it are existing materials (in English) and its specific aim at working in a school classroom (or a similar group). The whole field is aimed at supporting children in developing the ability to think, to recognize valid arguments and to argue in a coherent way. I have not included that in this article because it is only at its beginnings in the Czech Republic and also because it is, technically speaking, not a coherent method of group-talk but rather broad field of activities. Yet, for anyone who is interested in employing discussion, debate or a dialogue in education of younger students, Philosophy for Children can offer interesting ready-made materials.

Talking with people who are taking part in the above mentioned activities, either participating or contributing, one could get the notion of them competing. However, despite the fact that most people favor one of the methods, it is a mistake to see them as concurring or as something to rank as better or worse. Each of the methods have slightly different objectives and therefore it is up to the teacher or the participant to decide what skills they prefer to train. It is as well important to note in the Czech context that this type of activities are becoming more popular but are still not very common at secondary schools and quite rare at universities.

In the above pages I have briefly described complex methods which for implementation require understanding and preparations. There are large amounts of materials on all of them, offering specific guidelines, forms used etc., I have listed some of them in the following section.

Literature and references

This section includes literature and websites used in this article, all the information stated above can be found in more detail in the following sources.

Student Agora:

<http://www.studentskaagora.cz/>

Student Agora guide (in Czech): http://www.studentskaagora.cz/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Debatni_soutez_Studentska_Agora.pdf

Debate League:

Czech Debate Association (Czech): <http://debatovani.cz/web/asociace-debatnich-klubu>

Guidelines for Debate League (Czech):
http://debatovani.cz/files/dokumenty/150907_metodika.pdf

Judging in a Nutshell (English): http://debatovani.cz/files/metodika/110630_wsdc-judging-in-a-nutshell.pdf

Debating Clubs – British Parliamentary Debate:

Debating Club at Charles University (Czech): <http://www.dkuk.cz/>

Debating club at Masaryk University (Czech): <http://dkmu.sda.sk/>

General information (English): https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Parliamentary_Style

Trapp, R. and Yang Ge (English): The British Parliamentary Debate Format by Trapp, R. and Yang Ge:
<http://willamette.edu/cla/additional-academic-opportunities/debate/doc/Chapter-British%20Parliamentary%20Debate%20Format.doc>

Socratic Dialogues:

Sokratovske rozhovory z.s. (Czech): <http://www.sokratici.estranky.cz/>

Society for the Furtherance of Critical Philosophy (English): <http://sfcf.org.uk/about-us/>

Philosophisch-Politische Akademie (German): <http://www.philosophisch-politische-akademie.de/>

(English) Saran, R. and Neisser, B.: **Enquiring Minds: Socratic Dialogue in Education;**
Trentham Books Ltd., London, 2004