

## Teaching Philosophy with the Help of Games

**Floriana Battaglia<sup>1</sup>, Lucio Bontempelli<sup>2</sup>, Orazio Trincherà<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1,2</sup>University of Pisa, <sup>3</sup>Liceo Classico Giosuè Carduccim (Italy)

[floriana.battaglia@for.unipi.it](mailto:floriana.battaglia@for.unipi.it) , [luciobontempelli@gmail.com](mailto:luciobontempelli@gmail.com) , [oraziotrinchera@gmail.com](mailto:oraziotrinchera@gmail.com)

### Abstract

*There is often a reductive conception of creativity at school, which sees itself limited to areas such as artistic production. Creativity appears to be opposed to a regulated and logical type of thought, and seems to be explicated in situations where rules are weak or absent, or even overthrown.*

*The fact that philosophy, in the Italian system of education, is seen only as history of philosophy, means that we risk missing an important opportunity.*

*In 2004 an interdisciplinary team of teachers of philosophy and psychologists was formed with the aim of realizing a didactic project that could adapt the Socratic Method to the class setting, in order to improve creative thinking.*

*Philosophical topics of the curriculum have been introduced through games. The games consist of a short group activities, which can be interpreted metaphorically and linked back to the topic under discussion.*

*From the relational point of view, the initial game created a playful and non-judgmental atmosphere, facilitating the participation and the expression of all members. The philosophical games provide also a metaphor that is useful for creating more general and abstract thoughts.*

*The students involved in the project were 14-18 years old. More recently the same project was also proposed to younger students (12-13 years old), through a peer education methodology.*

*This paper discusses the methodology of philosophical games. The purpose of this study is also to show that philosophy learning at the school can be seen not merely as a set of contents, but as a way to improve competences, such as thinking critically, reasoning, and communicating one's own experience.*

### 1. Introduction

There is often a reductive conception of creativity at school, which sees itself limited to areas, such as artistic production, in which predefined rules are not followed. Creativity appears to be as opposed to a regulated and logical type of thought, and seems to be explicated in situations where rules are weak or absent, or even overthrown.

This way of looking at creativity often leads teachers to consider it in opposition to ordinary school activity [10], which in fact, provides for the acquisition of knowledge and skills that have already been well codified and regulated. For instance, it happens that the teachers care little of divergent thinking, and assign tasks that require repetition of content knowledge, rather than creative effort. For example, in the writing of essays, students are trained to think in an essentially convergent way, as if, when facing problems, there were always only one correct solution. Thus, considering creative thinking as opposed to regulated and logical thinking, does not allow us to appreciate the fact that creativity is not activated in the absence of constraints, but rather consists in the ability to restructure the framework in order to exploit these constraints in a new way [6],[7]. Furthermore, creative thinking is also active in simple tasks, such as reconstructing already made discoveries that may be new from the point of view of the student himself/herself.

Philosophy is a discipline of study that lends itself to be used to enhance the divergent thinking and the student's ability to restructure creatively a problematic situation. In short, philosophy, while enhancing the very logical, rational and systematic thinking, is a set of open questions, rather than the place of closed answers. Moreover, philosophy accustoms students to question the premise of the reasoning, and find new ways of argumentation.

In 2004 an interdisciplinary team of teachers of Philosophy and psychologists was formed with the aim of realizing a didactic project that could adapt the Socratic Method to the class setting in order to improve creative thinking. To introduce the discussion, philosophical games, which were thought ad hoc, were used. The methodology of the games proved to be very effective, both for the relational climate, and for reflection. The students involved in the project were 14-18 years. The same project was also proposed to younger students (12-13 years), through a peer education methodology [2]. There was to be a single meeting of two hours per class: the objective was not to pass on new skills,

but to set up a situation where students could express the relational reasoning and reflective skills they already possessed.

The purpose of this article is to summarize the methodology of philosophical games, and discuss the results obtained so far.

## **2. The philosophical games**

### **2.1 Relational aspects of game**

To promote philosophy as a moment of creative reflection, it is important to create a situation in which the role of the conductor gradually disappears, giving way to a free discussion of the peer group. For this reason, a very different method from that employed in Philosophy for Children was adopted. In fact, in Philosophy for Children the conductor has to lead the ongoing discussion towards various predefined options: [8], [9] his/her action then follows a closely defined protocol and thereby inevitably loses the open aspect of philosophy, that is, the possibility that any assumption, even the most obvious one, is questioned [11]. Even when students are not aware of the fact, because the lines of reasoning they are following are new to them, the facilitators are in a position that does not allow a full exploitation of divergent thinking: therefore, they have to channel and reinterpret the contributions of the group, sometimes neglecting the most original ones.

The solution that was found was an intervention that at the beginning is highly structured and then gradually becomes a completely free discussion. The game offers the ideal setting: a game is in fact by definition different from reality. It sets a framework in which the rules no longer apply when the game ends. Starting a discussion with a game makes it possible to demarcate clearly two different contexts: on one hand, a first highly structured context (the game, in fact) in which the conductor has a prominent role, and can start the activity; on the other one, a second context (the discussion), in which, relations are horizontal. Moreover, the game is a situation that characterizes what is happening as "not serious", thereby eliminating the worry about evaluation, requires active participation and leads to greater closeness than in the normal school setting. The initial game created a playful and non-judgmental atmosphere, facilitating the participation and the expression of all members. Previously studies showed that a kind of the halo effect helps the creative situation after a playful activity [5].

### **2.2 The game as an introduction to a philosophical issue**

The game proposed to start the discussion consists of a short group activity, which can be interpreted metaphorically and linked back to the topic under discussion. In this way, the choices made during the game have a double value: from the viewpoint of the player their function is simply to achieve the purpose of the game, but on the other hand, they can also be interpreted philosophically. The game looks like a simulation game, as used, for example, in educational psychology. The key difference, however, is that the game of philosophy has moments of ambiguity. These are "imperfect" games, which work on the basis of free interpretations that participants give to the situation. For example, to introduce some topics of philosophy of science, the students were shown a piece of white cardboard, with three windows through which a drawing could be seen. The aim was to guess what the drawing represented. The group had to make hypotheses, and had also to decide where to open a window of predetermined dimensions, in order to obtain more information. In this situation, the rules of the game do not determine uniquely the choices to be preferred. Players will therefore base their choices on additional and implicit assumptions: for example, there will be those who think that the center of the sheet can give further information, while others will try to guess which figure can be found and will seek confirmation, and others may think that it might be useful to open a nearby window to those already open, or a distant one. It is easy to give a metaphorical interpretation of this situation: the drawing represents reality, open windows are the experiments that allow you to discover small pieces of it, and the class is the scientific community. In this way the choices, mostly implicit and instinctive of participants, can be seen as metaphors of different theoretical positions about the relationship between knowledge, reality and experiment.

This way the ambiguity of the philosophical game works as a kind of projective test: each participant, in interpreting the situation, reveals assumptions that then become a discussion topic.

### **2.3 The transition from playing to discussion**

In the transition, from playing to the discussion, the facilitator has to balance conflicting positions: on the one hand it has to be very clear that the context game is over, and that the discussion will take place at a more abstract level; on the other one the pleasant and nonjudgmental atmosphere should be preserved. It is important that the game does not suggest, to the participants, that a vision is to be

preferred to the others. For this, the facilitator stopped the game after about 20-30 minutes, without coming to a conclusion. In the example of the game on the philosophy of science, the game was abandoned without revealing what was the hidden drawing. In this way it was avoided that some interpretations of the situation are to some extent confirmed by the conclusion of the game.

The facilitator asked a simple question, that is, how the students had experienced the situation and the reasons for their choices. The question was subjective, it did not require structured or complex arguments, and it kept the atmosphere of the game light and playful. All the students wrote their answers: in this way each one had available a moment of individual reflection, without being influenced by others. Then each participant, in turns, was able to explicate his/her own impressions. After hearing the answers, the facilitator summarized them as philosophical hypotheses and put forward new problems to the group. Then, when everyone had proposed an idea and the ice had already been broken, the discussion began.

### 3. Conclusions

From the relational point of view, this methodology seems to favor the horizontal structure of roles, not only facilitating participation in the discussion, but also creating a dynamic in which individual actions are open to interpretation and are completed through the comments that others will make.

The majority of participants expressed satisfaction with the activities. The reasons mainly concerned the freedom of expression of ideas; the pleasure of being able to communicate in a group; the curiosity about other people's ideas; the feeling of being able to reason and express a high level of abstraction.

Students have the opportunity to feel more competent than they normally feel at school. They also have the opportunity to exercise creative skills that are usually poorly valued in the school setting: this enhances the sense of self-efficacy and favors, later, a more positive relationship with the school, as teachers observed [1], [4]. The fact that teachers see students in a different light, might promote a more relaxed and positive relationship. Some criticisms relate to the fact that the discussion did not produce any certain result: philosophy, however, is just a set of open questions, rather than the place of the answers, and the discomfort that comes because of the uncertainty is actually due to the way one forms his/her own opinions.

Teachers and facilitators judged the quality of the discussions very positively. In fact it seems that students can show a specific reasoning ability that teachers are not able to record in other contexts. However, measurements of objective outcomes of the project are still missing, although there are protocols for the observation that can be used to obtain reliable data [2], [3]. We believe that further investigation, especially in terms of data collection, is needed in order to further verify the outcomes of how philosophy learning at school can be considered not merely as a set of contents, but as a way to improve competences, such as thinking critically, reasoning, and communicating one's own experience.

### References

- [1] Bandura, A (1996), Il senso di autoefficacia personale e collettivo. In Bandura A (a cura di), "Il senso di autoefficacia. Aspettative su di sé e azione", Erickson, Trento, 1996.
- [2] Battaglia, F., Bontempelli, L., Battaglia, F., Trinchera, O. (2012). Peer to peer philosophical discussions. ICERI2012 Proceedings.
- [3] Battaglia, F., Bontempelli, L. (2013). Improving creative skills by unwrapped discussion and sochratic method. INTED2013 Proceedings.
- [4] Hill, K. G., & Amabile, T. M. (1993). A social psychological perspective on creativity: Intrinsic motivation and creativity in the classroom and workplace. In S. G. Isaksen, M. C. Murdock, R. L. Firestien, & D. J. Treffinger (Eds.), *Understanding and recognizing creativity: The emergence of a discipline* (pp. 400-432). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- [5] Howard-Jones, P.A. , Taylor, J. and Sutton, L. (2002) The effects of play on the creativity of young children, *Early Child Development and Care*, 172 (4), pp 323-328.
- [6] Johnson-Laird, P. (1998). Freedom and constraint in creativity. In Sternberg RJ (ed), *The Nature of Creativity: Contemporary Psychological Perspectives*.
- [7] Legrenzi P., Girotto V., Johnson-Laird P.N., (1993) Focussing in reasoning and decision making. *Cognition*.
- [8] Lipman M (1976), *Philosophy for children*. *Metaphilosophy*, 7, 1, pp. 17-33.
- [9] Santi M (2006) a cura di, *Philosophy for children: un curriculum per imparare a pensare*. Liguori Editore, Napoli.

- [10] Sironi S (2005), La creatività nelle rappresentazioni di insegnanti di scuola primaria. *Imparare*, 2/2005. <http://www.ledonline.it/imparare/>
- [11] Vansieleghem, N (2005). Philosophy for Children as the Wind of Thinking. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 39 (1)