

Teaching how to dialogue: transforming duty into reality.

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According to Tugendhat, moral learning is achieved through the acceptance of new perspectives that extend ours and show that the former hid our own interests.¹ In this line, and given that dialogue is a vehicle to approach new perspectives, we can say that the practice of dialogue is a form of moral learning for managers and organizations. That is, dedicating time to dialoguing and reflecting together with stakeholders companies can become more just.

However, we know that companies today are far from practicing dialogue with their stakeholders in a deep and recurrent manner. And that should not be a surprise if we think about the education that most managers received: in traditional education, dialogue has only been present between teachers and students –and one could argue that it is not proper dialogue since it is situated in a relationship of inequality in which the teacher is expected to enlighten or illustrate the student.

In order to reach a state where companies have "a perspective of dialogue that goes beyond the mere debate and that becomes a powerful form of mutual understanding and creative action",² we will have to first of all teach future managers how to dialogue –a skill that they have not yet learned.

The type of communication that is promoted in the competitive environment of a business school is the debate. A struggle between arguments with the objective of persuading and winning. True dialogue instead "is carried out not as an attempt to influence others or to coerce them, but through attentive listening with empathy, the expression of hidden assumptions, focusing on common interests and the search for conceptual progress."³ Only by learning this type of communication will managers "be able to build relationships with stakeholders in a collaborative way –which is the necessary condition of an ethical company– and jointly design creative strategies that will benefit all stakeholders."⁴

This article aims at describing, analyzing and reflecting on a course that wants to break the classical paradigm of management education and turn the classroom into a space for dialogue between peers. "*Socratic dialogue: Philosophy and narratives that improve our management skills*" is a course offered at the

¹ Tugendhat, E., 1984. *Probleme der Ethik*. Reclam, Stuttgart.

² Halal, W.E., 2001. The Collaborative Enterprise. A Stakeholder Model uniting profitability and responsibility. *Journal of Corporate Citizenship*, vol.2, p.30.

³ *Idem*.

⁴ *Idem*.

ESADE business school, within the CEMS in International Management⁵ Master's Degree and based on the Socratic method, where the teacher acts as facilitator of a dialogical approach to some of the fundamental questions of human life, such as happiness, fear, justice or responsibility.

The objective of the article is threefold:

- Offer a first-hand account of an original pedagogical experience, its foundations and its objectives.
- Offer clues and advice for those who want to embark on a similar venture and make the lessons learned in the experience explicit.
- Reflect on the impact that the experience had on the participants.

Research methodology

The article will present the results of the course through a qualitative phenomenological⁶ research. To carry out the research, reflective journals⁷ and final essays that participants wrote during their participation in the course were analyzed. This type of exercise "requires that students reflect on what an experience or event means to them",⁸ that they write it down and that they make a narration of their experience that will be to a certain extent 'public' –given that

⁵ CEMS is a global alliance of academic and corporate institutions dedicated to educating and preparing future generations of international business leaders. The CEMS academic and corporate members work collectively to develop knowledge and provide education that is essential in the multilingual, multicultural and interconnected business world. The joint CEMS Master's in International Management is the main vehicle for achieving this goal. Common to all activities is the aim of promoting global citizenship, with particular emphasis placed upon the following values: The pursuit of excellence with high standards of performance and ethical conduct; Understanding and drawing upon cultural diversity with respect and empathy; Professional responsibility and accountability in relation to society as a whole. (www.cems.org)

⁶ This approach was introduced by Husserl after realizing that the scientific method was appropriate for the investigation of physical phenomena but not for the study of human thought and action (Bernard, HR, 2000, 20) and its purpose is to study and describe the essence of lived human experience (Van Manen, M., 1997). It departs from the idea that "experience consists in the operation of active processes that encompass and that constitute the diverse contents that are present in consciousness" (Polkinghorne, D., 1989). In this sense, the subject of knowledge –in this case, the participant in the course- plays an active role in the learning process, instead of being a passive receiver of what happens around her. What is made present to the consciousness about an experience is thus formed by "the objects of perception, and also those of memory, imagination and feeling" of the subject that knows. (Polkinghorne, D., 1989). Therefore, phenomenology creates an adequate research base for studies on experiences that are not foreign to us, but whose meaning we cannot fully understand since it does not focus on the description of objects but on the description of experience in itself (Melek Karaka, F .; Oktay, B., 2016).

⁷ Reflective diaries are defined as "written documents that students create by reflecting on various concepts, events or interactions over a period of time with the goal of penetrating self-knowledge and deepening their learning." (Thorpe, K ., 2004).

⁸ O'Connell, T. ; Dymont, J.E., 2011. The case of reflective journals: is the jury still out?, *Reflective Practice*, v.12 n.1, p.49.

the teacher will read it. In that sense, it is an instrument especially useful for the purpose of this research: understanding the meaning and impact of the experience on its participants.

The sample analyzed is composed of reflective journals and final essays of 100 students who have participated in 5 courses of 20 students carried out during two academic years: 14/15 and 15/16⁹. The diaries and final essays were sent by email and, subsequently, they were subject to descriptive analysis by means of coding. The content of the journals was grouped by themes or codes according to their similarities.¹⁰

Conceptual framework

The course seeks to train future managers who can contribute to promoting a decent and responsible society: one that respects people and recognizes their rights but also their differences and uniqueness. To achieve this, we argue that it is necessary to establish open and participatory dialogue mechanisms that offer everyone the opportunity to speak and participate on equal terms. Therefore, a responsible business in a decent society¹¹ will be one that establishes this type of relationship with its stakeholders.

The course assumes that, in order for this ideal of a decent society to become a reality, there is an active role that business schools should play: train people on how to engage in dialogue –which is a necessary condition of an ethical and decent society.

Socratic dialogue is the method that is used throughout the course in order to learn and practice the art of dialogue, deepen the relationship with others, improve empathy and trust, as well as increase self-awareness and reflective capacity. The course takes advantage of the multicultural origin of the participants to work in a context similar to that which students will encounter in their professional future –which is also adequate to force the limits and the capacity for tolerance, questioning prejudices and improving the understanding of others.

The conceptual framework behind the course is that of the Arendtian question, also of a Socratic nature, about the possibility that, through the exercise of thought, we are able to distinguish the just from the unjust, the good from the evil. We ask ourselves: can the activity of thinking, the habit of examining what happens or attracts attention, beyond the specific results and contents, improve our capacity for judgment and, in this way, make us refrain from doing wrong or condition us against doing it?

⁹ In order to use them as an object of study for the present work, a written consent was requested from each of the students.

¹⁰ See Annex.

¹¹ Margalit, A., 1998. *The decent society*, Boston: Harvard University Press.

Our mission will be to strengthen the capacity for moral judgment of future managers in such a way that they can better withstand the onslaught of the context in which they will work. Students themselves complain about this: "in most courses we learn to blindly reproduce schemata about strategy or operations, an activity that almost never implies reflecting but simply learning something from memory and executing it".¹²

The contrast that the course of Socratic dialogue provokes is obvious: "this course reveals to us how, deepening in basic questions, we can develop a better understanding of ourselves and society. This is unheard of for many business students, who have been taught to think in a one-dimensional way." And this contrast opens up new dimensions to students: "I have now understood the power of dialogue and the willingness we all have to share things; how desperate we are to express ourselves and to be understood. Because, especially in Business Schools, we live by schemes and standards that promote efficiency and we are always accelerated. Now I have realized how many things we take for granted, how many things in life we do not ask ourselves and about which we have never reflected".

This article will analyze the perceptions of students about the course in order to reflect on the impact that it had both in their personal and professional lives.

¹² We will reproduce literal quotations from the journals and final essays of the students anonymously.

Annex

Table 1. Codes and themes

Codes	Themes
Management studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comments on the education received at Business Schools. • Comments on the mindset transmitted to management students.
The method	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Characteristics • Strengths • Differences from other courses • Expectations
Speak and listen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact of the course on the communication skills • Impact of the course on the listening skills
Prejudices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness of one's prejudices • Disappearance of prejudices
Tolerance and openness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Openness to others • Tolerance towards differences
Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact on trust • Self-trust • Trust on others
Relationships with others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact on relationships with others • Relationships outside class
Self-awareness and reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depth of reflection • Awareness of the self • Awareness of one's own values • Awareness on hopes and desires • Awareness on external conditioning
Justice and empathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of empathy • Link between empathy and justice
Management skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Link between the method and management skills • Decision making • Team work • Responsibility

General comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="619 197 1244 235">• Comments on the course at a personal level<li data-bbox="619 246 1292 284">• Comments on the course at a professional level
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