

The Experience of Organizing the First Italian Youth Debating Championship

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Abstract

We present here a report about the first Italian Youth Debating Championship (IYDC, Campionato Italiano Giovanile di Debate 2021) from an organizational and management perspective. We show the complexity of the event's implementation and the importance of managing information and communication technologies. We underscore that not only have the participants recognized that the IYDC is a powerful method to improve participants' soft skills and active citizenship, but the European Commission and the European Parliament have officially as well. While the IYDC would not have been conceivable and viable before the COVID-19 pandemic, as organizers of informal education activities, we are convinced that this innovative educational model presented will continue to spread even after the pandemic ends.

Keywords: Debate Methodology, Organization of Educational Innovation, Post-Pandemic Pedagogy, Active Citizenship, Education Platformization

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This paper offers a report on the experience of a project and an innovative training process in an Italian informal educational context: the first Italian Youth Debating Championship 2021 (Campionato Italiano Giovanile di Debate 2021).¹ While it can be observed from multiple perspectives (pedagogical, sporting, and sociological), this paper is intended to illustrate its management and organizational aspects.

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¹ In the Italian-speaking community, the acronym CIGD is used to refer to the Italian youth debate championship. This paper uses IYDC, as this acronym is formed with the initials of the tournament name translated into English.

In fact, the paper does not intend to illustrate and evaluate the practice's effect on improving the skills of the participants in the event. There is solid evidence in pedagogical research that proves the methodology's effectiveness in improving critical thinking, research attitude, teamwork, and communication skills (Akerman & Neale, 2011).² Instead, the paper's goal is only to report the experience of organizing the debating championship as a process of building an online learning environment. The hypothesis is that a critical reflection on these aspects can be significant for the debate movement in Italy in the near future and, more generally, for innovations in learning and teaching. This paper is divided into three fundamental sections: the first concerns the design of the championship; the second, its realization, and the third, its outcomes. These sections are introduced with a brief account of the stages in Italy's official recognition of the teaching methodology of debate and the COVID-19 pandemic's effect on it. Finally, the conclusion offers reflections on the experience and its management process.

1. The official recognition in Italy of the debate as a teaching methodology

Snider (1984, 2003), one of the most authoritative scholars of the methodology of teaching debating, argued that the academic debate should be conceptualized as a decision-making role-playing *game*. The “*gaming paradigm*” has achieved wide consensus among scholars of debate (Strait & Wallace, 2008), and we have defended it by discussing its rules (Giangrande, 2019a, pp. 5-14) and by arguing that it should be considered a mental sport (Giangrande, 2019b). Therefore, in this report, when we use the term debate, we mean a role-playing game between two *teams* whose purpose is to argue better than the other for or against an *assigned* thesis in the context of a *rule-based* discussion.

If we consider the history of education in Italy after unification,³ then it can be said with certainty that the history of the debate in Italy begins in the second

² For a critical perspective on the debate methodology, see also Johnson and Johnson (1985).

³ It is probable that *disputatio* as a teaching method survived in the practice of teaching philosophy in high schools in Italy at least until the mid-19th century. This is the only explanation I can give for the presence of extensive descriptions of different forms of disputation as a didactic methodology within Johann von Lichtenfels's philosophy handbook “for use in secondary schools” (Milan, 1845), by Baldassarre Poli (Padua, 1844), by Giambattista Peyretti (Turin, 1856), and by Pier Antonio Corte (Turin, 1862). However, to my knowledge, the subject has not been investigated at all. The only work

half of the first decade of the new millennium. Generally, despite the fact that, beginning in the 1970s, debating began to become a mental sport that spread in schools and universities globally, Italy, like France and other countries in Mediterranean Europe, has no tradition in debating.⁴

Unlike the American scenario (Bartanen, 2014), the absence of a cultural tradition of “*Speech and Debate*” could slow the growth of the debate movement in Italy. However, even if this were true, its effects are not visible. In fact, let us consider the main stages of the short history of the debate in Italy from a managerial and organizational perspective.

First: in 2013, the school network of “WeDebate” was established. Through the vision of Prof. Benedetto Di Rienzo, a school director and a strong supporter of the educational potential of debating in students’ future lives, six Lombard schools constituted the first nucleus of a network that today includes more than 180 schools in all regions of Italy. More importantly, this growth has been increasingly widespread to date.⁵

Second: in 2014, the “Avanguardie Educative” schools’ movement, powered by INDIRE, the National Institute of Documentation, Innovation and Educational Research, which is intended by statute to innovate teaching and learning, adopted a debate methodology (Cinganotto, Mosa, & Panzavolta, 2021).

Third: on 2016, the Italian Ministry of Education planned and financed a project “DebateItalia” to train teachers and students the method of debating on a national scale. This led to the organization of the first “Debate Olympics” in the following year. The winning team represented Italy at the *World Universities Debating Championship*.

Fourth: in 2019, during the second edition of the “Debate Olympics,” the Italian Debate Society (Società Nazionale Debate Italia, SNDI) was established to disseminate the practice of debate in civil society, and in 2020, it was recognized as a member of the International Debating Education Association (IDEA). Among its many current activities, it coaches the team that represents Italy at the World Schools Debating Championship. The Italian Debate Society, chaired by Prof. Manuele De Conti, has more than a thousand members from

to my knowledge that describes the history of the evolution from *disputatio* to debate as we know it today within North American educational institutions is Potter (1944). The spread of “positivist” culture in the sciences is the primary historical reason that explains the decline of disputation as a teaching and research practice in European universities since the mid-19th century. For a history of disputation, see Weijers (2013).

⁴ We could present much evidence to support this fact but will simply point out that no Italian team has ever participated in the *World Universities Debating Championship*.

⁵ Information on the structure and purpose of the “WeDebate” school network can be found on <https://www.debateitalia.it/pagine/wedebate>.

all Italian regions. It also promotes research works and teaching materials in Italian on the debate (De Conti & Giangrande, 2018; De Conti & Zompetti, 2019; Giangrande, 2019a; Andrič, Bartanen, Frank, Llano & Zompetti, 2021).

Similar to literally all human activities worldwide, the COVID-19 pandemic and the physical distancing measures governments adopted in March 2020 to combat it have influenced the developmental trajectory of the debate movement in Italy profoundly.

Prior to the pandemic, we were accustomed to the idea that to engage in debate, the participants had to meet *physically*, which for groups of teams of debaters meant agreeing on a meeting time and canceling other dates and meetings, *but also* having a physical space available in which to meet, often after significantly expensive long-distance journeys.

However, no one could meet physically during the lockdown. Did this also indicate that it was impossible to debate? In fact, we found that it was not. Many teachers have found that debates, both in the classroom and in extracurricular and competitive settings, have maintained “ethical proximity” in faceless (masked or online) classrooms, despite the physical distancing and stress this has caused students and teachers (Dickman, 2021). During the physical distancing period, our classrooms were *less* socially distant than they might have been *not despite*, but precisely *by virtue of, onlife* (Floridi, 2014). This has cushioned the difficulty of adolescents living in isolation.

In response to the pandemic, the Italian debate community Prof. Giovanna Colombo led organized the third edition of the “Debate Olympics” in April 2020, which was the first online debate tournament in Europe during the pandemic. In doing so, they discovered that it could be done.

Rief (2021) noted that the intercollegiate debate is one of the few academic activities that can be conducted virtually well and that the technological solutions numerous debate communities have adopted to continue their activities raise questions about the necessary and sufficient conditions of valuable (rather than mere) participation in events. In the concluding remarks, we comment on this theme briefly by associating it with the trend toward using a platformization of education that challenges traditional educational institutions.

2. Project design for the Italian Youth Debating Championship (IYDC)

The entire Italian debate community found that organizing a complex event, such as the final phase of a national debate tournament, in the online mode in April 2020 was an unprecedented challenge. Every organizational and

managerial aspect of debating online was analyzed and planned, as this was the first online debate tournament in Europe since the beginning of the pandemic. The fact that everything went well made everyone involved realize that the online mode of debating was not only a “surrogate” for the face-to-face mode but could be better in some respects.

Obviously, the worldwide debate community preferred online debating to doing nothing, and rules and procedures for the “e-debates” began to be developed.⁶ The competitions at academic sites, usually held with hundreds of debaters and coaches in attendance, turned into massive online classrooms. After long and sophisticated internal reflection, the debating world championships were held on Zoom.

The members of the Italian debate community also reflected on the “face-to-face vs. face-to-screen” issue. The discussion was characterized by the fact that they thought about a post-pandemic scenario immediately. It was assumed that the “e-debate” would not be simply a “surrogate” for the “real” debate, as online debating was so real and as worthy as debating face-to-face.

It is nearly trivial to list the advantages and disadvantages of online meetings v. those face-to-face. The primary clash appears to be between the ease of access the online mode offers (lower costs, less travel, and more flexibility) and the quality of communication and interpersonal relationships that the face-to-face mode appears to provide. It would be futile to deny that, from an organizational point of view, the online mode reduces some costs (travel, food, and accommodations) drastically. Further, the organizers are well aware that the affordability and ease of participating in an online event increases the expectations that must be met to motivate the users to participate in a face-to-face event.

The organizers of debating activities in Italy are aware of all of this and are also aware that the smaller the budget that public or private institutions need to invest in debate education, the greater the strength of the economic reasons in favor of online, rather than face-to-face, events. In any case, their approach to addressing this question has been primarily educational and not economic.

A national face-to-face debate tournament has the peculiarity that it cannot be repeated several times during the year without interfering heavily with the debaters, coaches, and judges’ other activities. Although everyone knows that only the constant and repeated practice of certain exercises allows particular skills to be refined, conducting a national debate tournament face-to-face several times during the year would also require budgets and time that no Italian institution or organization appears to be willing or able to provide.

⁶ IDEA, *Online debating review and lessons learned*, available at <https://www.sn-di.it/debate-online-valutazione-critica-e-indicazioni-per-il-futuro/>.

It is also true that the quality of communication and interpersonal relationships in online meetings decreases largely depending upon the number of participants. Frankly, it is not researchers' job to undertake the phenomenology of online sociality. However, this report is not alone in attesting that we can all empathically perceive others and their experiences in certain online situations, because the "lived body" can enter online space and is available to others there empathetically (Osler, 2021). Debate meetings between small groups (six to eight students) satisfy the conditions for an empathic experience. We all agree that the debaters' socio-emotional experience in a large real tournament cannot be replaced with that experienced in a large virtual tournament. However, this may be less true for individual debate meetings.

By virtue of these reasons, we are all convinced that, with the pandemic underway, it would have optimized our educational *desiderata* not only in the organization of a single large tournament⁷ to be carried out online of necessity,⁸ but also in a series of online debate meetings at constant intervals throughout the school year between as many teams as possible from all Italian regions. We have called this second option "Championship" (*Campionato* in Italian). As we wanted to embrace the youth population beyond the scholastic framework and timetable (and officialism), we qualified it with "Youth."

Clarification. In defense of online debating, the argument for the online mode's equal effectiveness at a lower cost for "small groups" will continue to hold true even after the pandemic. It is possible that the online mode with small groups could be a focal point from which educational innovation will move in the near future. It is not difficult to hypothesize, as happened with the gig-economy, the development of platforms able to gather, organize, arrange, and, of course, monetize the myriad of meetings between "small groups" flexibly for educational purposes.⁹

The design of the Italian Youth Debating Championship derived from the conviction that the greater the constancy in practicing debate matches, the greater the educational benefits.

- This basic idea led the organizers to structure the championship in three phases: a preliminary five-team groups stage (the move to the next stage for

⁷ In fact, the fourth edition of the "Debate Olympics" took place anyway.

⁸ It was easy to predict in the summer of 2020 that the pandemic would have multiple waves.

⁹ The trend in online studio-rooms, promoted on Facebook, Tik Tok, LinkedIn, YouTube, and Slack, is just an epiphenomenon of this ongoing process that the pandemic has only accelerated.

the top three in each group), a single-group central phase with four rounds, and a knockout phase beginning from round 9.

- Each team can have up to six debaters and two coaches.
- The only limit to the number of teams participating is the availability of judges.
- All debate motions up to the third round of the singles round would be *impromptu* motions.
- The debate matches would take place every three weeks throughout the school year. The dates and times of the debate were agreed between teams and assigned judges through a system to *match* everyone's preferences. We called this phase "consultation" (*concertazione*), which the online classroom tutor managed. The tutor also managed recording the debates and uploading them to YouTube. These organizational choices were dictated by responding to the main challenge of keeping everyone's motivation high throughout the year.

The organizing bodies of the championship were the Organizing Committee, headed by Prof. Marco Costigliolo; the Judges Council, whose chief is Prof. Diana Collu; the Ethics Committee; the Motions Commission; the online classroom tutor group, and the social media communications team. All members of the organizational staff and all 120 judges gave their professionalism, commitment, and time absolutely voluntarily and freely.¹⁰ However, it is an example of the community of educators and pupils' robust resilience to the effects of the pandemic, as well as their desire to keep alive a network of relationships and activities that has prevailed over all other motivations.

3. Implementation of the IYDC 2021

Here, we characterize the context and motivations that inspired the design of the IYDC 2021. The championship was the largest and longest debate tournament ever organized in Italy. The numbers are impressive: 76 teams, 400 debaters (56% women and 44% men), 85 coaches, 120 judges, and 45 online classroom tutors.¹¹

¹⁰ This is not in itself a note of merit. On the contrary, it highlights an organization's point of vulnerability.

¹¹ All of the results, rankings, motions, and videos of the debates during the championship are available at <https://campionatoitalianodebate.it/stagione-2020-2021/>. The video of the final debate can be seen at <https://campionatoitalianodebate.it/riguarda-il-video-della-finale/>.

From the organizational perspective, the challenges of this educational event were the management of the IT infrastructure, communication between the participating members, and progressive optimization of the system to match everyone's preferences. We opted to hold the championship within the Google educational platform of the Italian Debate Society. Each member had his/her own profile and email address, and a tutor to whom debaters, coaches and judges referred to if necessary protected and managed each classroom. The tutors were the link between the debate matches and the organizational bodies.

The matching system worked best when the communication latency between the organization, teams, and judges was reduced. Therefore, on the organizational side, communications within the championship took place through two channels: formal via email and informal via messaging. Another aspect to highlight was the fact that communication was often decentralized. This choice was based upon the implementation of the principle of "subsidiarity," so to speak. Although a centralized and anonymous model was certainly more efficient, we wanted a member of the organizing staff to be close by the debate matches, the teams, and the judges, and thus be able to respond promptly to any needs.

One of the principal reasons that motivated establishing the Italian Debate Society was the desire to disseminate the culture and practice of debate extensively in Italian civil society. The first step in pursuing this goal was to raise the wider public's awareness of debate and its political value in a broad sense. The Championship offered the opportunity to do so.

Thanks to the sponsorship of Coop Lombardia, one of Italia's largest cooperative systems, we developed and implemented a communication plan with media partners ANSA, the leading wire service in Italy, and Rai Scuola, an Italian free-to-air television channel that broadcasts cultural and educational programming. In this way, the Championship and, with it, the debate world, appeared several times in national newspapers and on television. The Championship's website (www.campionatoitalianodebate.it) gradually became the official channel through which curious viewers saw the Italian debate world. As a follow-up, we have begun to collect and view matches, teams, and players' statistics more accurately.

Because of the pandemic, we have not been able to organize a finale phase with all of the participants and offices actually present together. This situation was foreseen, as all of the debate matches were debated online in the final stages, and each debater was in a separate room. All of these matches were streamed live and had a relatively large audience of supporters and fans. The semifinals and finals were particularly surprising. Both Rai Scuola and Ansa broadcast these matches via live streaming, and a real television studio managed the streaming.

The main organizational innovation of the event was the development of an increasingly sophisticated, flexible, and immediate system to match the teams and judges' preferences. This will allow the supply and demand for debate (or other educational activities) to be mediated more and more and bypass bureaucratic, geographical, and time constraints. Compared to pre-pandemic, this will result in the proliferation of opportunities for students to improve their soft skills through debate.

However, we realized only during the implementation process of this Championship that, in this way, debating as a game was becoming “*platformized*”, was becoming a mental sports discipline that was beginning to spread in public discourse and, in a certain sense, was beginning to be observed.

4. Achievements of the IYDC 2021

As organizers of educational activities, we believe that this event achieved its goals. First, the total number of debates was a remarkable 259, which required more than 800 hours of effort to prepare, debate, and debrief. All of the testimonials from judges and coaches attested to the students' strong human growth and increased skill. The debaters themselves were aware of their growth and talked about it in some newspaper interviews. Participating in the championship helped the students strengthen their soft skills, and as organizers, this outcome more than justified our investment.

Second, the intense activity had the general effect of improving the entire Italian debate movement by leveling out certain differences that had been created over the years. This was true for both debaters and judges and can only increase the determination to expand future debating activities. Our hope is that the Italian university system will be able to appreciate the huge patrimony of debating skills that students develop during their school years. There is a strong will at the Italian Debate Society to support the organization of debating activities and competitions at the university level. However, this will not be sufficient if the Italian university system does not recognize the debate methods as part of its centuries-old history, its legitimacy as an institution, and as part of its *raison d'être*.

Finally, the first IYDC received the patronage of the European Commission and the European Parliament for its high educational value in promoting the next generation's development of active and aware European citizenship. We were honored that on the day of the championship finals, which coincided deliberately with May 9, Europe Day and the launch of the Conference on the Future of Europe, the European Parliament President, David Sassoli, opened the finals with a brief speech. This testifies to the European institutions' support

for activities such as debating that promote an awareness that European citizens are prepared for the global challenges that our times have presented to us.

Ultimately, the IYDC's achievements can be subsumed under the concept of recognition. Students and teachers recognized the effect of the debate on improving soft skills and enhancing personal growth. This recognition has extended to both families and the school world in general.

5. Concluding remarks

This paper provided a report on the first IYDC from an organizational and management perspective. In fact, this report is a testimony.

We demonstrated that this event would not have been conceivable and viable before the pandemic. We also illustrated the complexity of its implementation and the importance of managing information and communication technologies. Finally, we made this achievement known, as European institutions have recognized the IYDC officially as a powerful method to improve soft skills and active citizenship.

These concluding remarks need to mention the ongoing trend of platformization of higher education (Tolmayer, 2019). However, this trend consists not only of the development of university-level, massive open online courses (MOOCs) or smartphone applications that allow the acquisition of knowledge through spaced repetition algorithms. This trend also consists of platforms based upon software matching that allow a myriad of small groups of students and teachers with similar interests to meet and practice their activities socially and online. The IYDC was only an epiphenomenon of the ongoing underground processes and reveals its potential in recruiting and employing talent if performed at the university level.

These education platformization trends present a historical challenge for the future of school, and particularly university, education. This trend is inherent in the way the technology of the first decade of this millennium has developed. Regardless of whether we like it or not, as educators, organizers, and managers of education processes, we all operate within this framework that tends to platformization. If we exclude the eremitical way of life, we have only alternative ways of operating within this framework.

It is reasonable to believe by analogy with what has happened in other markets that have become platformized, that in the future, transnational private platforms can satisfy the demand for a quality education even better. This will certainly depend upon the school and university systems' social credibility and on its ability to respond to both the civic and productive needs of the

contemporary world while maintaining public and general functions and interest.

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