

## BOOK REVIEWS

Baruch B. Schwarz & Michael J. Baker (2017). *Dialogue, argumentation and education: History, theory and practice*. New York NY: Cambridge University Press.

Reviewed by Anne-Nelly Perret-Clermont (University of Neuchâtel)

### Introduction

Argumentation plays a central role in mediating relationships from early infancy on. Very young children are quick to start questioning their environment by curiosity, or in order to decide on the sense of obeying certain prescriptions, or just for the fun of seeing the environment react to their ‘why questions’. Of course, not in every family or setting is the child, with his/her ‘low status’ of ‘newcomer’, entitled to ask for justifications; nor do persons in power always feel accountable for their deeds, sayings or beliefs to lower status partners. Very interestingly, Baruch Schwarz and Michael Baker have chosen to start their book, *Argumentation and Education: History, Theory and Practice*, by recalling their own personal life-long experience with argumentation. Let’s note on the way that in these memories, not by chance, they relate mostly to authority figures (parents, teachers, experts) and not to peers. Yet, in the present state of theory, interactions with peers would be expected to facilitate critical discussions allowing for ‘symmetric’ confrontations of viewpoints and arguments. The authors very courageously choose to review this contradiction and many other issues by examining the challenge of designing learning situations in which argumentation in dialogue is a lever for cognitive, social and moral growth. This has something very important to do with relation to power (not to be confused with authority, as it usually is in school) and to socialization in a democratic society respectful of its members and argumentation-based institutions (e.g., parliaments, courts, science, etc.). Education is supposedly the means to this last goal – but is school an argumentation-based institution?

The status of talk in education is as old a question as our civilization. In this very interesting and useful book, Schwarz and Baker take the reader by the hand to explore history, philosophy, linguistics, psychology and theories of argumentation in search of keys to open up debate and research on these questions. It is challenging: education is a very complex endeavor that cannot be reduced to naive sets of beliefs, preconceptions and prescriptions – except if the intention is to prevent critical reflection and nourish power games. And there are numerous power

games around education because it is seen as a major lever in conserving and/or transforming the social and ideological order (and, of course, also the material and technological order, we would add). In a period of 'forced change', under the pressure of wars, technological mutations, migrations, climate change, etc., schools cannot remain static and isolated from vivid controversies. Argumentation is at work.

In their very rich, intellectual journey, the 'red thread' that Schwarz and Baker hold to is the search for a better understanding of the role of *argumentation in dialogue in education*. They consider argumentation not as an abstract skill but as an activity in situation: argumentative interactions between students working in groups. One of the main claims of this book is that "consideration of situations of argumentation where inquiry, complex reasoning, conceptual change, mutual reflection and knowledge co-elaboration are at stake – that is, collaborative learning or even collaborative design situations – will require new visions of both argumentation and learning" (p.79). A second claim concerns the often overuse of the term 'argumentation' to mean "debate, dispute or simply talking together whilst exploring reasons for or against an issue". "Types of talk have distinctive learning outcomes". "What we call argumentation dialogue is a very specific kind of talk with potentially considerable learning outcomes" (p.1).

The reader who engages in attentively following the authors in their considerations will certainly come out with many new ideas for research in different fields and renewed creativity for setting up opportunities for dialogue and critical examinations of beliefs, 'facts' (Latour and Woolgar 1979) and theories.

### **From learning to 'argue' to 'argue to learn': a historical, theoretical and empirical perspective**

In Chapter 1, the authors present some autobiographical elements of their personal experience to introduce in a lively manner fundamental issues that they will then deal with. They provide nice summaries of the chapters to come, very useful to the reader and we don't need to repeat them here. As a consequence, we will concentrate on some comments for each chapter, hoping to raise interest in readers for the many 'layers' of this rich opus.

Chapter 2 explores the relations between the presence and absence of dialogical and argumentative practices in education and the general political, ideological and philosophical context. Schwarz and Baker know the risk of underestimating societal complexities, cultural contexts and historical reconstructions, but their panorama offers educationalists opportunities to discover the roots of still ongoing debates and practices, fears and aspirations. Very different scopes and prac-

tices have supported young people with opportunities to develop their intellect. The role of talk – and of the right to talk – is considered at different historical times and spaces, with attention to ‘revolutions’ in this regard. Among others, the authors refer to Plato to discuss the distinction between opinion and knowledge, the importance of experts who know ‘what goodness is’, the balance between dialogue, dialectic. They explore philosophies of dialogue and point to the many ways in which dialogue has been seen: a form of expression, a mystical quest of fusion between the soul and God, a logical game of questions, a partnership in elaborating ideas, an educational practice for other goals (autonomy, construction of the self, learning, critical thinking, etc.), a subversive activity, a source of constructive social change for a society in which truth, freedom and justice would prevail, an encounter with ‘Otherness’, etc. This consideration of the potential richness of dialogues is accompanied also by the story of the ancient and still growing consciousness of the systematic distortions that prevent mutual and reciprocal understanding, the risks of manipulative social influence, the loss of meaning in content-free rhetoric, the difficult conciliation of multiple traditions, the challenges to authority – even in the definition of what ‘authority’ means. Within which limits is one allowed to debate – and of any topic? In this very rich chapter, exploring these questions and many others, the reader is led to different pedagogical arenas (e.g., Ancient Greece, Medieval debates in Islam, Judaism, and Christianity; progressive education in Modern times, revolutionary movements in Latin America, present dialogical pedagogies). Of course, this tour has to be very quick so as not to exceed the pages allocated, and every point made merits discussion. But this is exactly its interest: the place of *talk in education* is very intimately connected to the material and symbolic situation, to the resources at hand, to the social order and the place of the teacher (as ‘craftsman’ of knowledge; or as ‘simple’ reproducer copy-pasting knowledge and opinions from society into students’ minds; as a judge, political activist or mere companion, etc.). The authors don’t just refer to ideas about the possible place of talk in education but offer precise examples of its historically and socially situated practices and its consequences, such as argumentative uses of texts; argumentative settings in medieval universities as contributing to the further development of scientific methods of inquiry, etc.

In the next chapters, Schwarz and Baker examine two important distinctions: between discursive and structural visions of argumentation, and between monological and dialogical perspectives of verbal productions (in discussions and texts, including texts generated via computer-mediated communication in collaborative groups and in social media). They present dialogue and texts as central to intellectual and societal development. We wonder why they have not included the artifacts produced by craftsmen, engineers, and laymen: artifacts also are con-

structured in dialogue and have important consequences for education. The book remains centered on the verbal activity around declarative knowledge, as do so many contemporary authors in philosophy, psychology, education, and linguistics. But it does this with specific attention to various domains (e.g., mathematics, science, history, civic education); this is an important step taken to situate talk and thought in action and context. In Chapter 3 they turn to theories of argumentation for different appraisals of the argumentative structures and processes. Many educationalists have been confined to a very restrictive understanding of Toulmin's model and an abstract understanding of argumentation as a higher order individual skill. By distinguishing *monological versus dialogical* and *discursive versus structural* perspectives, Schwarz and Baker offer educationalists a renewed entry into present theories of argumentation. This distinction has important consequences when addressing present hot issues in education, such as the tensions between assessment of individual performance and the wish to develop social skills and attitudes; learning cooperation and/or competition; teacher's controlling role and student's expected autonomy; co-construction of knowledge and stimulating socio-cognitive conflicts; fixed texts and instability of knowledge; design of learning settings and freedom to manage emergent phenomena; and 'melting pots' and respect for minorities.

Schwarz and Baker point to a major difference: theories of argumentation have been developed mostly in domains such as politics, media, or the law court to convince or to make proper decisions, whereas in education argumentation it is a means for *cooperatively elaborating new understandings* (other possible goals can be set to argumentative practices in school but this is the one at the center of this book). In Chapter 3, Schwarz and Baker consider some specific contributions, in particular from Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, Stephen Toulmin, Christian Plantin, and Frans van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst, and show how they shed light on processes at work in educational situations. The reader well understands then that the present use of argumentation in classrooms is an ill-defined enterprise: there is no single definition or theory of argumentation. Hence 'promoting argumentation in the classroom' remains a very vague ambition, and Schwarz and Baker feel the need for a new theory that could support the work of teachers with more precise goals and means. The contributions they examine can serve as very useful *introductions* to this yet unexploited mine of inspiration and analytical resources. Their critical discussion of these contributions can inspire researchers interested in developing theories of argumentation that would consider what happens when standpoints are under construction, arguments partly implicit, issues set mostly by the institution, questions gradually emerging, and rules of dialogue not yet mastered by the students (and often not by the teacher either, Greco, Mehmet and Perret-Clermont 2017).

Chapter 4 reviews the interplay between new educational movements with ambition for a democratic responsible society and advances in educational theories. There is a growing role for argumentation in these modern practices but with different perspectives: monological for critical thinking; dialogical in a relativistic perspective for critical pedagogy; integrating dialectical and dialogical dimensions for dialogic pedagogies. Special attention is paid to the present aspiration of pedagogues to initiate their students in the *practices* (and not only to the ‘findings’ and theories) of scientific researchers, which requires re-discovering the role of debates. But classrooms are specific institutions not comparable to scientific fields: how argumentation develops in classrooms has to be empirically investigated and this is done in Chapter 5. It reviews and discusses lines of research to which Schwarz and Baker have abundantly contributed, notably in science education, mathematics, history, civic education, and computer-mediated collaborative discussions. A specific interest of this chapter is the presence of detailed examples analyzed in a very pleasant and interesting way. They are not ‘demonstrations’ but exemplifications of the kinds of events and process that researchers and teachers face. They will certainly inspire further advancements.

Argumentation in classrooms certainly happens all the time and at almost every moment. But when are there collaborative argumentative discussions *conducive to learning*? When do they support the kind of learning that is a real in-depth comprehension (a co-re-construction of the knowledge), advancement in thinking (Sorsana and Trognon 2011), and not just rote learning? And is it possible that this type of learning can be aligned with the teacher’s intentions and the curriculum’s established knowledge? It certainly cannot be just to let it happen by chance, because it would be much too rare. Precise design is required. This is the central question to which Chapter 6 is devoted. The difficulties met in the chapter are numerous: design but also assessment (how should learning gains in the understanding of the space of the debate be evaluated?), definition of the teacher’s role, use of technical resources, etc. In our opinion, there are two main difficulties when such a dialogic pedagogy enters the school. First, it has to face the omnipresence of heavily institutionalized (non-argumentative) practices: focus on individuals and their monological competencies, fixed (closed) knowledge, truth and power in the hands of the teacher, administrative requirements (rigid time tables, records, etc.). And second but not least, the monological psychology that prevails in school creates double biases for teachers but also for researchers who suddenly, even when attempting dialogical processes, start to use the supposedly universal gross concepts of monological abstracts, such as ‘gender’, ‘social class’, ‘motivation’, ‘personal opinion’, ‘individual differences’, etc., and search for supposedly general quasi-mechanical pedagogical principles transcending situations, context and personal creative engagement.

This Chapter 6 is centered on some of the educationalists' responsibilities (designing, teaching) but the student's perspective is often forgotten: Why should I learn? Why and when can I trust the teacher and in which respects? What for? What are the costs? The engagement of the student, even if left implicit, is always argumentative, as well described by Eddo Rigotti (2014) with an example taken from the emerging intellectual turn of the late Middle Ages.

## Conclusion

To an interdisciplinary audience, Schwarz and Baker offer a really useful book that reviews the past and present state of argumentation in dialogue in education: it is very well documented, it reviews many debates (not all, of course), asks new questions, and opens the route to a deep reconsideration of some of the presuppositions of the field. In hot moments of this exploration, it even helps the reader with a touch of humor!

## Acknowledgements

With thanks to Athena Sargent for the language revisions and to the Swiss National Research Foundation for the research grant N100019-1566 (Applicants: A.N. Perret-Clermont, S. Greco, A. Iannaccone & A. Rocci).

## References

- Greco, S., T. Mehmeti and A.-N. Perret-Clermont. 2017. "Do adult-children dialogical interactions leave space for a full development of argumentation? A case study." *Journal of Argumentation in Context*, 6 (2): 193–219.
- Latour, B. and S. Woolgar 1979. *Laboratory Life : The Social Construction of Scientific Facts*. London: Sage.
- Rigotti, E. 2014. "The Argumentative commitment of learner and teacher in Dante's vision." In *Activities of Thinking in Social Spaces*, ed. by Tania Zittoun, and Antonio Iannaccone, 149–166. New York: Nova Science.
- Sorsana, C. and A. Trognon 2011. "Contextual determination of human thinking: About some conceptual and methodological obstacles in psychology studies." *Human Development*, 54 (4): 204–233. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000329844>

## Address for correspondence

Anne-Nelly Perret-Clermont  
Université de Neuchâtel  
Institut de psychologie et éducation  
Espace Louis Agassiz 1  
NEUCHÂTEL 2000  
Switzerland  
[anne-nelly.perret-clermont@unine.ch](mailto:anne-nelly.perret-clermont@unine.ch)