

ISSA Proceedings 2002 - Arguing In Organizations: The Struggle Concerning Rules And Meaning



In modern types of organizations individuals do not simply fulfil roles. They are neither independent and autonomous individuals. In the daily functioning of organizations many types of discussions can be found, some of which are of an explorative nature, others are rather negotiations and in still other cases proper argumentation takes place. The aim of this paper is to develop a model of the place of argumentation within the different types of verbal interactions taking place in organizations. In this model, which takes into account the variables of identity of the participants, of the hierarchical power relations between the participants, the urgency of a decision to be taken and the general mission of the organization, I will show that in all cases some aspects of argumentation are present, combined and interlinked with forms of negotiations, fights and other interaction games. However, the rules of argumentation used will be adapted to the power differential of the participants, the urgency of finding a solution and the general mission of the organization. To begin with I will present a case study in some detail and based on this case study and other references I will outline the general model of arguing in organizations.

1. A case study from a multicultural school

A research project in which I participate aims to collect data over two years of verbal and non-verbal interactions in the classrooms and in grading meetings of two multicultural schools with an important percentage of Moroccan students. In one of the schools two thirds of students are migrant children, with a large percentage of Moroccan origin, in the other it is one third. With the help of several video recordings a number of mathematics lessons are recorded and also some other lessons in the same school. Parts of these recordings are discussed immediately after the lesson with the teacher and with some students, with questions such as: 'what did happen here?' This is the so-called 'stimulated recall' interview method. It was also possible to record some of the discussions in meetings of the teachers in the schools, and in particular some grading meetings

where all the teachers of a class discuss the results of each student, and decide what kind of measures should be taken.

The recordings were made in the so-called 'orientation'-year, which is situated between primary and secondary education, in principle at age twelve. This year is very important, because at the end of this year students will go separate ways, according to the school career which they are judged to be able to pursue.

The central question of this large research project was rather modest. With the help of a variety of methods of (micro)analysis a large inventory of the characteristics of the various interactions should be established with the aim to identify specific types of interactions or specific characteristics of interactions which are connected with school success or which are connected with school failure.

In the Netherlands state schools are obliged to publish every year a self-presentation with a standard format, called 'schoolgids'. This information is sent to all parents with children in the school and also to all others who might be interested in the school for their children. Here follows a translation of one specific point from the self-presentation of one of the schools where the research data have been collected.

Identity and general atmosphere

We are a state school. Every pupil is welcome, regardless his/her philosophy of life or religion. We demand of all pupils and staff members that they communicate with each other and learn to know each other better with respect for each other's philosophy of life, religion, origin, sexual preference and gender. All this happens in a pleasant, open and safe atmosphere; we suppose that the encounters between many different perspectives and cultures will be an enrichment for each individual and an appropriate preparation for society. Also in society our pupils encounter a diversity of people. Knowledge of this diversity stimulates our pupils to be more prepared and mentally richer. Not only our pupils, but also the staff members have various cultural backgrounds. Therefore we are in many respects a multi-ethnic school, a kind of small society. But it is one which a pupil can get to know with confidence.

It is precisely because we as school do not choose for a certain philosophy of life, we think we can reach this goal. We would like to provide our pupils with more than simply a diploma.

To work and learn together presupposes a certain number of agreements in order

to guarantee a pleasant atmosphere. Respect for each other is the most important one. This respect for each other's culture, conviction en property must be evident in the behaviour of everyone. Respect is also the key notion in the interactions between adults and pupils.

This school presents itself explicitly as a multicultural, or multi-ethnic school, and indeed when visiting the school this multicultural character is quite evident. In this self-presentation, this school starts with affirming some basic civil rights, but goes on immediately by affirming that these norms and values are realised in the daily practice of the school. Therefore, this school presents itself as a good and safe learning context for students with the perspective to be well prepared for the multicultural society at large.

In this presentation, the notion of respect is quite central. It is interesting to note that the term 'respect' is used familiarly by many members of the migrants groups which reside in the Netherlands. They greet each other for example with the formula 'hay, respect man', an 'anglicism' which points to a certain form of acceptance and solidarity. Here, I would like to point out the astonishing association between culture, conviction and property in the last paragraph of the cited passage.

The other school, where data have been collected, does not present itself explicitly as a multicultural school, but in the self-presentation one can find many photographs, and at least a third of the pictures depict clearly children from one or the other immigrant group. In short, the other schools does not underline its multi-ethnic identity, but does not hide either. These two schools were really motivated to receive our group of researchers, and the direction and the staff of the schools was eager to learn something new from the research. And in fact, several meetings have been held, in which the researchers presented a selection of video-recordings made, and the staff discussed this material. Moreover, one school has expressed the wish that one researcher will be affected part-time to this school after the official termination of the research period, in order to review the teaching material and the didactic methods.

Finally, it should be said, that all the researchers having visited the two schools got the impression that there seems indeed to be a very good climate at these schools, as far as contacts, openness, contacts between students and teachers and the personal engagement of the teaching staff and the direction are concerned.

Case study: Hennia

In this paper one particular case will be analysed. Hennia, a Moroccan girl who came recently to this school with the following motivation: (extract from an interview with Hennia): "I came to this school, because in my last school it was fighting every day, here I would like to get a diploma." In other words, she presents herself as a motivated student, who would like to look for more than a very limited vocational training.

Here follows a passage from a grading and general evaluation meeting of the teachers of the class Hennia is in. These grading meetings take place three times a year, and there will be mainly discussions of students situated in the so-called "danger zone", which means that these students risk to be oriented towards a low and rather practical further education. This meeting took place in april 2000, three months before the end of the school year.

Teacher English: *I would like to discuss Hennia (others nod agreement)*

Concerning comprehension she is really weak; I'm afraid, really afraid that it will not work out; she has some low marks, she hasn't delivered her reading list.

Teacher Mathematics: *We have to find something for; maybe an obligation for extra repetition, to put her in this ...*

Teacher Drawing: *I'm worried more about her behaviour in the future; there has just this to happen and she bursts with anger; she might soon beat up one of the boys, this Maktoub or Assad;*

Teacher Dutch: *Yes, with Ionica; a few days ago Maktoub made a remark about sexual parts of Ionica's mother and Hennia got up in order to ...!*

Teacher Mathematics: *I think Hennia is a girl who is really smart; she has original ideas and can put them nicely into words;*

Teacher Dutch: *Yes, a little structure from the blackboard, she applied immediately ...*

Teacher Gymnastics: *She feels herself quickly discriminated; I asked her to get something from my bag, but she refused, "can't get something from the bag of the teacher because immediately I will be accused of stealing" ...*

Teacher Biology: *She makes fun of you; she tried something similar recently with me, looked and said "little joke!"*

Teacher Dutch: *She is slimy with me; from the beginning of the year: "miss, you are so beautiful, you should try another coiffure, and ... other remarks. (others laugh).*

Teacher Drawing: *She gets quickly into conflicts ...*

This passage is a literal translation of the part of the discussion concerning Hennia, starting after the discussion of another student from the 'danger zone', the English teacher starts by his remark this discussion concerning Hennia. And after the remark of the teacher of practical ability (drawing) another discussion starts immediately concerning another student.

Some other fragments from or on Hennia:

- Hennia is one of the six children of a single-parent Moroccan family, the father has left the house years ago, but there is still some contact with the father; Hennia is neither the oldest nor the youngest of the six children;

- Hennia (in an interview): *"I came to this school, because in my last school it was fighting every day, here I want to get a diploma..."*

- Hennia tells that she makes her homework alone, but sometimes other members of the family help her, her big friend is Patricia and also Nabila, Khadija, Hannan and Ouarda.

- Hennia (in an interview) tells that she has an older girl friend, also a Moroccan she calls 'sister' (but she is not a biological sister), who is very important for her;

- teacher mathematics on Hennia: (in an interview on interactions in the classroom): *"they must pick up things from the class, there are some doing this better than others; Hennia does this quite well, ... whereas Nouzha for example does not seem to learn anything from the discussion in class"*

- M in commentaries on video made of the mathematics lesson just after the lesson has finished: *"... Fabienne participates quite well, better than she does her other work, others like Edith, Nirmala and Jeroen you never hear, how do they work? Hennia is such a girl, you asked her at some moment what's happening, and she "oh, I already forgot", apparently there is a category of girls with their hands up without any goal"*

A first, superficial reading of the discussion of the teachers concerning Hennia shows that at least one teacher is worried about her school career possibilities, that a standard solution is suggested in the form of an obligation of supplementary teaching and that other teachers present various points which throw some light on this student. Such a reading and understanding of this discussion seems sensible because it fits a standard procedure followed in these evaluation meetings.

However, a more detailed analysis of this discussion among the teachers concerning Hennia reveals some disturbing imbalances and tensions, particularly

if one takes into account the supplementary information on Hennia, provided by herself and by her mathematics teacher. The mathematics teacher considers Hennia as “girl who is really smart; she has original ideas and can put them nicely into words”, and the teacher of Dutch language agrees and specifies: “yes, a little structure from the board, she applied immediately ...” These two evaluations concerning Hennia are clearly opposed to the rather negative judgement of Hennia by the English teacher, who started the discussion with: “...concerning comprehension she is really weak, I’m afraid that it will not work out ...” The question arises if Hennia has some particular problems with English or with the English teacher and is therefore considered as ‘weak’. Because the subjects of mathematics and Dutch language have a rather high status, one should take seriously the evaluations of these two teachers. At least the mathematics teacher seems to have a rather consistent perception of Hennia; see his remarks on Hennia in an interview on interaction in the classroom; see ‘other fragments’. The teachers participating in this meeting do not take up this challenge, but this is in fact not really astonishing.

In fact, the teachers never express any explicit disagreement during the sessions of this kind of grading and evaluation meetings which have been recorded. It seems that the implicit norms and rules applied during these meetings do not permit to argue and to point to apparent contradictions in contributions of a participant or to start a discussion on the presuppositions of the various participants or on the facts they base their judgements on. Without any explicit rejection of statements made some teachers do however succeed to introduce quite new and unsuspected characterisations of students, by telling a story or by presenting an experience with the student being discussed which attributes another identity to this student. Never reject explicitly an opinion of a colleague, that seems to be a rule of these meetings, but you should not hesitate to present your own opinions or experiences. That is why these meetings seem to be subtle forms of negotiations concerning the identity and the qualities of the students who are discussed (Maier, 2001), with some indirect moves of argumentation.

From this passage it is therefore not possible to arrive at a definite conclusion concerning the evaluation of Hennia; she is “really weak concerning comprehension” for one teacher, but for others she is “smart, original, able to find good formulations, she applies well general models to particular cases”.

But there is more. The teacher of Biology remarks to be more worried (is this also an implicit rejection of the judgment of the English teacher?) about the behaviour

of Hennia, because she can easily “burst with anger”. The illustrations offered by this teacher and by another one show that Hennia defends herself and a girl friend against sexist jokes made by Moroccan and Dutch boys. We do not know if there are also other examples, or if Hennia has a reputation to ‘get easily into a temper’. During the discussion in the evaluation meeting these questions are not explored at all, or in other words the meanings of the remarks made by these two teachers are accepted as such. As we do not dispose of any detailed psychological profile concerning Hennia, one can only speculate on the meaning of her behaviour. Hennia has chosen this school because she wants to get a diploma and she wants to avoid fights. In other words, she seems motivated and she has made choices, and, therefore, she can be considered as well integrated in the school community. As these choices had to be supported by her mother, one can suppose that her family culture is at least not characterised by a clear separation from Dutch ways of living, an attitude which some migrant families adopt in their private sphere. Hennia told us that she makes her homework alone, but sometimes other members of her family help her, which seems to confirm the preceding conjecture. Moreover, she has next to Moroccan friends also a Dutch girl friend.

In the last part of the discussion on Hennia, still other points concerning Hennia are made public. According to a superficial reading these remarks just give some specific information on Hennia. But it is also possible to consider this final part of the discussion as revealing another interesting aspect of Hennia’s way of functioning in the school community. According to these passages, Hennia is well known to make jokes with teachers and to tease them in various ways, without however being confrontational or aggressive.

Before saying more about it, let me underline here that during this phase, the interpretation of the behaviour of Hennia by one teacher is politely but resolutely rejected and corrected. The teacher of Gymnastics thinks that Hennia feels quickly discriminated, and he gives an example. This judgment is subtly rejected by the teachers of Drawing and Biology. These two teachers are convinced that Hennia is joking and teasing, and that the illustration offered by the teacher of drawing should be understood in the same way. Here the question should be asked if another remark offered by the mathematics teacher on Hennia should also be interpreted in this way. Indeed, this teacher (in a stimulated recall interview immediately after one lesson) said that Hennia can sometimes hold up her hand (popularly said to ‘hold up one’s finger’) in order to get the attention of

the teacher, but after some time when asked what she does want, she can say: "oh, I already forgot". This expression could also be interpreted as teasing, because sometimes students hold up their hand for a very long time before getting any attention by the teacher.

Hennia appears to enter quite regularly into explorative, joking interactions with several teachers, by teasing them or by revealing herself that it was a "little joke". Such a behaviour of Hennia could be interpreted as a manifestation of attempts to explore in detail the possibilities and constraints of norms and values governing interactions with Dutch teachers, and more generally with others in the Dutch multicultural society. Such an interpretation would not only be in line with the interpretation of the 'temper' of Hennia, as denoting a definite and active form of exploring 'integrative' types of interactions, but also with the possibilities offered explicitly by the school, as affirmed in the school-information, which has been discussed before.

Let me specify here that Hennia was not put down at the end of the year (two/three months after the recorded grading meeting) for a low vocational training. On the contrary, she was promoted to higher further schooling, but she was also advised to continue her schooling in a class where she will not be with some of the Moroccan and Dutch boys of her former class, because of the ongoing fights.

2. Arguing in organizations

As we know from many studies of organizations (Morgan, 1986, Apostel & Walry, 1997, Desmarais, 2001, Leising, 2002), fights, conflicts and various forms of discussions are to be found in most organizations. The modern organizations do no anymore attempt to apply strictly a model of classical organizations, which were based on a clear hierarchical order, with roles defined in order to work collectively for realising goals in a rational way. That does not mean that there are no longer hierarchies within the organization nor that there are no collective goals. On the contrary, the mission of an organization (profit, qualification of students, etc.) and certain hierarchies (direction, higher management, etc.) are dominant characteristics of modern organizations. Moreover, according to the mission and the interactions with the environment of the organization, it is sometimes necessary to react without delay, if the organization wants to guarantee its ongoing existence. As a certain degree of cooperation between the members of an organization is necessary for the survival of the organization, a

certain number of characteristics of the pre-conditions of argumentation will be very important for any organization. These pre-conditions can be summarized under the following three headings:

(a) the general disposition to argue, which means to be informed, to understand the consequences of propositions of others, to be able to formulate critical comments and/or alternatives, etc;

(b) the enter into cooperative discussion with others, even in a critical way, and

(c) to participate in evaluations of discussions, which means above all to adopt standpoints after a critical discussion and to review rejected opinions which could not be defended. But these dispositions of argumentation will not be independent of the power relations and the necessary compromises which have to be taken, in circumstances where urgency of decision is not excluded. In other words, arguing will be linked with forms of negotiation and fights. In order to understand these connections it is necessary to introduce the concept of constellations of power.

The constellations of power at work in organizations consist of a variety of forms of power. The forms of power can be independent of individuals (roles, wealth) or be specific human competencies, such as charisma or the ability to argue. The constellations of power form the context of interactions between individuals and groups with specific social, cultural and psychological identities (Maier, 1996). The constellation of power can be conceived of on the one hand as a system with some structural properties, but as power is always a cause of action and transformation, the constellations of power can never be completely stable, they will necessarily have to be conceived as sets of processes.

Power does not exist in isolation, a field theory of power is called for. Power can be defined as an action on an action, in other words, by the ways in which actions can be influenced by other actions, for example by restraining an action, by accelerating the action, by making the action change direction or by combining initially separate actions. There are various concrete forms of power, such as power by the exercise of physical force (in general excluded in modern organizations), power as sanction, power as status, power as charisma or argumentative power. These different forms of power can be compared with each other on the basis of the following parameters:

a. The domain of power: no form of power will be exercised in all areas of life.

b. The basis of power: the exercise of power is based on the use of certain means, for example only a nomination to a certain position gives status power.

- c. The source of power: the acquisition of a certain basis of power can occur in various ways, by inheritance or by a long training.
- d. The intensity of power determines the strength and immediacy of effects of the exercise of a specific form of power.
- e. The costs of power: the effective use of any form of power will affect the basis of power, as for example being tired after a struggle, or being tired - but in a different way - after an argument.
- f. The bearer of power: not all forms of power have persons as bearers, for example, advertisements can influence consumption, or wages paid do not depend on individuals, and if persons are bearers, they will never be it with the totality of their being. For argumentation, persons are bearers, but only as interlocutors and not as physical bodies.
- g. Finally, the objects of power, on which power is exercised. These objects can be human bodies with their potential to act, but never in their totality; these objects will for example be desires in the case of charisma or plans of actions and convictions in the case of argumentation.

There is no common measure for the various forms of power with their parameters, as in the case of economy, where value, expressed as monetary value, serves as general equivalent. In other words, the various forms of power are not comparable with each other in a simple way. The main reason of this complexity can be found in the nature of the different forms of power. These forms of power, taken two by two, exclude each other on the one hand, but attract and stimulate each other on the other hand. One example should be sufficient here to illustrate this form of dialectic relationship between the forms of power. Take status power and argumentative power. On the one hand, these two forms of power exclude each other, because somebody with status power does not really need to use arguments and vice versa. But if a holder of status power is not able to formulate subtle arguments, the basis of status power might be eroded progressively, and an excellent arguer might not be only depending on this functional capacity, but look for a stable position, in other words for status power.

From this field theory of power one can establish a certain number of general relations, see Maier (1996) for more details, one of which is particularly relevant for the present discussion. One general relation states that preservation of power will necessarily lead to attempts to increase power, as pure preservation uses power, and therefore diminishes power by entailing costs. However, to increase

power is not at all a simple affair. Indeed, an increase of power means

1. a greater independence of the sources of power,
2. an extension of the domains of power where power is exercised,
3. an increase of the intensity of power in each domain,
4. a multiplication of the objects of power and
5. a reduction of the costs of power. But it is impossible to realize all these points at the same time. For example, an extension of the domains of power and a reduction of the costs of power cannot be realized together. Therefore, power involves necessarily conflict and instability.

The effective and/or potential exercise of power is a general characteristic of interactions, and in particular in the case of conflicts or negotiations, which are quite frequent in organizations. Typical moves in negotiations are threats and promises, and they can only be understood by referring to power. A threat, for example, is to point to a future action which will effect the actions of another party in a negative way. The action may take a variety of forms, such as constraining the range of movements, or by a territorial arrangement which limits the access to goods which are necessary for certain activities, such as water, or by refusing the usual recognitions, such as the withdrawal of love, attention or respect. Threats use in principle the forms of power of physical force and of sanction. But in order to be effectively used, in general some form of status power will be called for executing the action. Promises use next to these forms of power also argumentative power, for example when promising to assist another party in difficult negotiations.

The execution of any such action will evidently affect the power base and cause costs. With the consequence that the means of power used will have to be replaced with one or another source of power, if the party executing the action wants to avoid that its position of power is diminished.

Threats and promises will only have an effect if they are considered as more or less realistic. In other words, the second party should be convinced that the first one (a) can execute the menacing action and (b) that this action will indeed have an effect on its own actions. In short, the probability and the effectiveness of the action will be considered in order to evaluate the seriousness of the threat. Empty threats and promises miss at least one of these two characteristics.

It is now easy to show that the potential or effective use of power will transform the social (in particular roles, the base of status power) and psychological identity of the participants. Identity can be defined as dynamic, with social, cultural and

eventually psychological aspects, involving self-identification and categorizations. My thesis is that during the process of interaction, the (potential) power play will reproduce the social, cultural and psychological aspects of identity.

Let me take once more negotiation as an example, elaborated in more detail in Maier (2001). During negotiations, the parties involved (as individuals or as representatives of organizations or states) will at least specify their reciprocal appraisal as actors using (potential) power. In other words, the participants will categorize each other by elaborating discourses, and at the same time change their own self-identification in reaction to the categorizations imposed by the other party, as we have seen in the case study presented before. Moreover, in situations where some effective use of power occurs, the necessity of replacement of the means of power from one source or another will entail a more or less detailed self-analysis. This self-analysis does not presuppose a self-awareness, but it involves at least an internal transformation (of the individual, the group or the community), because the initial arrangement of the parts has to be altered in order to secure the replacement of the means of power already used. For an individual, for example, this may involve training or looking for new areas of activity, and for groups and communities, it can be realized by raising new taxes or trying to find new partners with their own means of power. This self-analysis and transformation will have consequences for self-identification and by repercussion for the categorizations of the other parties.

4. A model of argumentation in organizations

Argumentative dispositions, such as the capacity to participate in critical discussions, as well in the preparation phase, in the argumentation and in the evaluation with all the consequences such an evaluation implies, will be extremely important for all members of modern organizations. Arguing presupposes that power relations are, at least temporarily, suspended or neutralized. However, given the mission of the specific organization, the power constellations and possibly the urgency of some decisions, the real interactions in the organization will involve also many aspects typical of negotiations and fights. Negotiations work mainly with promises and threats, and have compromises as outcome, whereas fights involve directly the existence of some participant. In modern organizations fights do not mean that somebody will be killed, but an employee may be fired or placed at a position in a department which is far away. My thesis is that the negotiations and fights, through the ongoing working of power constellations influence the norms, rules and forms of argumentative discussions

taking place in organizations. Examples of how different identities and forms of power influence the norms of argumentation and the forms of negotiations have been analyzed (see Maier, 1996 and 2001).

Let us imagine a rubber band where one finds in the middle the norms, rules and types of argumentation. However, when extended, one can identify the constellations of power at work at a given moment in an organization. That would be the model I want to suggest here for argumentation in organizations.

This model attributes a central place to argumentation. However, it also shows that the constellations of power and the identities of the participants (and in particular their roles) co-determine the norms, rules and forms of argumentative discussions which take place. The case study analyzing the discussion concerning Hennis in a multicultural school in the Netherlands illustrates perfectly this model. These teachers work together for quite some time, and they will continue to do this in the near future. Therefore, in the grading meetings they do not reject the standpoints of other participants by explicit arguments. On the contrary, they seem to agree, or they relate examples or experiences (with Hennis) which offer quite another picture of Hennis. In this subtle way, they reach more or less easily agreements or compromises, without using the strict norms of critical discussions.

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