ISSA Proceedings 2006 – Dialectical Ideal And Dialectical Training

1. *Introduction*

Since the publication of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca´s *La Nouvelle rhétorique* and Toulmin´s *The Uses of Argument,* argumentation theory in general and normative argumentation theory in particular have made great advancements. Most notably some complex models have been developed that allow for a better analysis of argumentative discourse and present a normative ideal for effective argumentation and the solution of differences of opinions. Among these, the pragma-dialectical theory with the model for a critical discussion developed by Frans van Eemeren and Rob Grotendorst stands out as the most complete and influential in recent times.

At the core of this model stands a group of fifteen rules for a critical discussion that guides the behaviour of ideal discussants on their way to solving cooperatively their difference of opinion. By reconstructing the discourse and showing derailments from these rules it is possible to analyse problems that have occurred during the discussion and to explore their causes. This pathological or ex-post function of the critical discussion is a very powerful tool for argumentative analysis of discourse and among other benefits also offers the most coherent modern theory of fallacies. These rules have been shown to have both a very high problem validity and conventional validity (comp. van Eemeren, Grotendorst 2004, pp. 131-34), so adhering to them supports an optimal solution of a difference of opinion and is also generally held to do so by ordinary language users.

Yet this pathological analysis of what went wrong in an argumentative exchange is only one side of pragma-dialectics, and is necessarily mirrored by what could be called the 'medical function' of trying to prevent a discussion from failing by offering optimal guidance to partners in the discussion. Of course it might be difficult (if not impossible) to lead an ideal critical discussion under the typical constraints of limited time, incomplete information and different social backgrounds, but while this might be true, it should nevertheless be possible at

least to approach this ideal with reasonable discussants and under favourable circumstances. Discussants should be able to adhere voluntarily to the set of fifteen rules (van Eemeren, Grotendorst 2004, pp. 135-157) or the more concise "ten commandments" (van Eemeren, Grotendorst 2004, pp. 190-196) of a critical discussion if they try to solve their difference of opinion in a reasonable way. However, any attempt to do so will quickly reveal that even under very favourable higher order conditions and with the best intentions to discuss a matter reasonably, most ordinary language users find it very difficult in practice to act in accordance with the ten commandments for a critical discussion while engaged in an argumentative exchange.

The question that directly follows from this problem and that will guide this paper is how can the necessary faculties for reasonable arguers be trained to enable them to approach a critical discussion in their everyday conversations? This main question can be divided into two steps: a) which abilities need to be developed to approach a critical discussion; and b) how can these abilities be trained? This paper will explore these two steps and in addition suggest a training method for some of the faculties that are needed for a critical discussion. This method is the competitive dialectical training format "Modern Disputation" which has been recently developed at the University of Tübingen and has since been successfully used for training in small groups as well as academic tournaments. In this context the basic elements of modern disputation will be described, and an attempt will be made to show how the trained faculties correspond to the necessary faculties for a critical discussant.

2. *Which abilities need to be developed to enable a discussant to engage successfully in a critical discussion?*

The complexity of this speech situation is such that an attempt to create an exhaustive list of abilities would go well beyond the scope of a single paper, and could easily fill several textbooks. For the purposes of this paper, it is enough to concentrate on some of the core abilities that are needed for a critical discussion and that are not usually sufficiently developed in ordinary language users. In this context it will also be assumed that the higher order conditions in the discussions under question do not play a dominant role in preventing a reasonable argumentative exchange. Five central abilities that a reasonable arguer needs can easily be distinguished:

1. the ability clearly to define and present one´s own point of view, claim, or position (including understanding a position that is presented in such a way by

the opponent);**[i]**

2. the ability to use valid and relevant argumentation schemes in support of one´s own position (including analysing the validity and relevance of the opponent´s argumentation);**[ii]**

3. the abilty to evade contradictions between any arguments that are presented in support of one´s position or the implication of an argument, and the position itself (including detecting and being able to describe such contradictions in the opponent´s argumentation);**[iii]**

4. the ability to see the dependence of claims on certain premises that necessarily follow if the claim is to be upheld (in both one´s own and one´s opponent´s argumentation);**[iv]** and

5. the tolerance and patience to grant the opponent the widest possible freedom of speech and right to speak.**[v]**

Taken together these abilities do not guarantee that the respective person will be optimally prepared for a discussion and even less so that the discussion will lead to the optimal result, but it is hard to imagine how any discussion in which one or more of the participants fundamentally lack any of those abilities can lead to a satisfactory outcome. It is not surprising then, that all of these abilties are prerequisites for participants in a critical discussion and that few, if any of the ten commandments can be followed by discussants who lack them to a large extent. As a result, a training form that wants to prepare for a critical discussion would be well advised to include some, and if possible all, of the above mentioned fields in its training.

3. *How can the necessary skills for a critical discussion be trained?*

Due to the variety of different goals and procedures in rhetorical and dialectical training, it is hard to find a valid, general definition of the opitmal training form. Some elements can however be distinguished that give a good guideline. Slightly simplified, this guideline could be formulated as: a successful rhetorical or dialectical training form should be easy, realistic and competitive.

What does this mean? The first and almost preliminary quality of a rhetorical or dialectical training is its simplicity. To be effective, a training format must reduce the complexity of the original situation it is preparing for so as to enable the students to concentrate fully on the few skills to be developed during the exercise. Of course there is value in just repeating the original situation, but this repetition is always limited. A soccer player may slowly improve by just playing

soccer every day for a couple of hours, but to best develop his natural abilities he would be better advised to include a variety of sprints, fitness and coordination elements into his training. However, whether training for sports or verbal ability this quality should never be viewed in isolation because it creates a constant tension with the second quality: realism.

Training is always conducted with a view to an end goal. Unfortunately, the more a training format modifies the original situation for the sake of simplicity or competitiveness, the more it is in danger of training abilities that help the student succeed in the exercise itself, but not in the overarching goal. Taking the same soccer player again, it might be helpful if he can balance a ball on his feet, arms and neck for half an hour, but if it is not clear how this skill helps him on the field he will soon be limited to impressing his family and friends at garden parties without significantly improving his soccer skills. Neat examples can be found in the antique and modern rhetorical training formats that at one point stopped being seen as training, and instead were seen as art for its own sake. The most prominent of these are the classical *suasoriae* and *controversiae* that moved from a training for the forum, to a public display of a schoolmaster and his students (Seneca 1974),**[vi]** and some modern debate formats that stopped training speakers and started creating debaters who would succeed nowhere outside an academic debate competition. (Hoppmann 2000, pp. 194f.)

The third quality of a good rhetorical or dialectical training format might not be as immediately evident as the first two. Competitiveness in the sense used in this paper means that a training format gives the means to clearly distinguish the level of success with which a training has been completed (often with the help of a set of adjudication criteria applied by a third party), and following on from that usually a ranking of the students who are training simultaneously or subsequently. This competitiveness is a very valuable feedback tool for the student, and one of the most important motivational factors in any training or game in general. Many rhetorical or dialectical training formats might be simple and sufficiently realistic, but have the severe problem of becoming dull after a few repetitions. That does not mean that they should therefore be abandoned altogether, but that they can only usually be used either in a situation with high institutional pressure (a school, university etc. where intrinsic motivation can be substituted by the outside pressure of grades or other means of success), or by students with an outstanding intrinsic motivation and diligence. In most other contexts these formats will be abandoned by the students a considerable time before the amount of repetitions leads to a visible result. Translated to the

situation of the soccer player, competitiveness means that he will enjoy playing his game more, and repeat it more often, if he is playing with a team against another team (perhaps occasionally assisting on, or scoring a goal), rather than just dribbling a ball around a field without goals. The success of the aforementioned formats (declamation and debate) shows that competitiveness is a key quality for the success of a training format, but it also shows that competitiveness can create the same tension with realism as simplicity does. (comp. Bartsch, Hoppmann, Rex, Vergeest 2005, pp. 81-83)

In the following section of this paper the dialectical training format Modern Disputation will be introduced as a means to train some of the abilities for a critical discussion. While this format is not particularly simple, it still considerably reduces the complexity of the original speech situation. Its competitiveness has been proven lately by its success at both club and tournament level. To show that it is also realistic, and could therefore be a valuable tool for the training of a critical discussion, is one of the aims of this paper.

4. *What is Modern Disputation?*

The training format Modern Disputation is based on the idea of what we know from the peripatetic dialectical training as described for example in Aristotle´s *Topics* (comp. Slomkowski 1997, pp. 14ff.) , but tries to translate this idea into modern circumstances instead of blindly copying it as closely as possible. In order to make the disputation fully usable for modern training, two major adjustments were necessary, one philosophical and one practical.

First, Modern Disputation finds a completely different social and philosophical background from its Aristotelian counterparts, and even more so from the scholastic disputations. To fully understand the importance of this difference it is necessary to remember the two distinct aims of a successful disputation. The first, easier and more prominent aim of a disputation is the testing of the consistency of a claim with all of its necessary premises. Can this claim be upheld without leading to any contradictions in itself or between its arguments? This first aim is fairly independent of the philosophical background given a basic stability of the core logical principles. Once this aim is fullfilled and the testing against contradictions leads to a positive result, the second aim becomes dominant: Is the claim under scrunity "capable of truth" (wahrheitsfähig), i.e. is it not only consistent in itself but also with those premises in society that have a high level of endoxity and are generelly held to be true? This second aim now is highly dependent on what is considered to be true and whether there is anything that is

considered to be necessarily true in a given society. And here it could easily be argued that the amount of premises that have a high endoxity in modern, western and mostly post-religious societies is way smaller than in classical Greece and even more so than in medieval cristian societies. While Aristotle could still claim *"For those who feel doubt whether or not the gods ought to be honoured and parents loved, need castigation, while those who doubt whether snow is white or not, lack perception"* (Arist. Top. 105a5ff. trans. Forster) and the same is certainly true for the time of scholastic disputations, it would be far less evident today. As a result of this difference a modern disputation needs to change its second aim from "Is the claim capable of thruth?" to "What are the least endox premises that are necessary for upholding this claim?" Thus Modern Disputation needs some rules to test and value some of the premises that are revealed in the course of the disputatation relatively rather than absolutely.

Second, a practical adjustment makes Modern Disputation more easily usable for dialectical training: The introduction of a set of adjudication criteria. The classical peripatetic and scholastic disputations depended on the presence of at least one superiour master in any disputation to evaluate its success. While this constitutes little difficulty in the institutional context of the Peripathos or a medieval school or university, it would do so in modern training especially between peers, as for example in academic societies. Additionally those adjudication criteria are needed for the full competitiveness of a training format. The effect here employed is easy to see: Most people would strive to do their best and to win against their opponents in a competitive format that gives them a clear feedback about their level of success. If then doing something better in order to win a disputation, debate or declamation also means to improve as a speaker in the original situtation, then this is the most efficient way to use personal ambition as a training tool. This translation from winning a format to improving as a speaker can only be successful however, if the adjudication criteria employed are as realistic as possible, gratifying productive behavior and punishing rhetorical or dialectical flaws while at the same time being simple and clear enough to be used in an understandable and fair way by an average adjudicator. The second necessary adjustment of Modern Disputation against its classical counterparts is therefore the creation of adjudication criteria for disputations.

How do these adjustments then influence the aims and the setting of a Modern Disputation? Modern Disputation is a dialectical training format for two active participants (the defendant and the opponent) who compete against each other in a dialogue of approximately 25 minutes. The direct aim of this format is the

testing of a selected thesis for its consistency and the endoxity of its premises. The indirect aim is the training of the participants for argumentative dialogues and other real speech situations with dominant elements of argumentation or argumentative analysis. (Bartsch, Hoppmann, Rex, Vergeest 2005, pp. 200-207) A Modern Disputation consists of three distinct consecutive phases, each with differents rights and duties of the disputants and distinct aims that are evaluated by two or more adjudicators with the help of adjudication criteria for each phase. The principle goal of the defendant in the disputation is to choose a thesis and defend its consistency without having to admit premises with a low level of endoxity, especially not those that are considerably more contested than the original thesis. The principle goal of the opponent is primarily to show contradictions between the thesis and some necessary premises and thus to destroy the thesis entirely, and secondarily, should this not be possible, to show that upholding the thesis leads to upholding premises that strongly run against the common sense. These principle goals of the two disputants result in specific aims in the three phases of the disputation – the exposition phase, the examination phase and the evaluation phase – which are divided by short breaks for preparation.

During the *exposition phase* it is the duty of the protagonist to present a certain thesis (e.g. "It can be virtuous to lie for a friend!") that he has selected out of a previously announced topic (e.g. "Friendship is the highest of all values!"). For this task he is given three minutes of uninterrupted speaking time to give a clear description of his thesis and definitions of all significant terms as well as a brief argumentation for his claim. The defendant will be evaluated during this phase on the basis of the clearness of his exposition ("Are all relevant definitions given and is the general line of argument clear?") and the choice of his thesis ("Is the thesis courageous considering the topic or is it already very endox?"). During the exposition phase the opponent remains largely passive and uses the information given by the defendant to prepare for the examination phase.

During the *examination phase* the defendant is questioned for ten minutes by the opponent about his thesis. The opponent has the liberty to inquire about any aspects of the thesis, as long as she uses closed questions (those that require an answer of "yes" or "no") and aims them at the opinions rather than mere factual knowledge about related topics of the defendant. She may not use these questions to make independent arguments. During this time the defendant is completely limited to a simple "Yes" or "No", with the exceptions of unclear questions or

questions concerning knowledge ("Is the divorce rate in Germany higher than 22%?") rather than opinion ("Is it beneficial for a person to marry?") to which he may respond "Unclear" or "Irrelevant", respectively. If in this phase the opponent believes to have found a contradiction in the answer of the defendant she may interrupt the interrogation and present it to the adjudicators. If they agree, the defendant must retract part of this contradiction or, if this is not possible, drop his thesis which leads to the end of the disputation. If the adjudicators do not agree with the opponent the examination will continue. The opponent may end the examination phase early if she sees no advancement. The two disputants are evaluated differently during the examination phase: The opponent receives points for contradictions in the thesis that she discovers as well as for her cooperative behaviour during this phase, while the defendant scores for all affirmative answers given and also for his cooperation.

The last and (usually) decisive part of the disputation is the *evaluation phase*. Here the opponent presents three of the questions from the examination phase with the respective answers that she believes to be least endox to the adjudicators. Each presentation is followed by a correspondingly brief explanation of the defendant. After these presentations the adjudicators evaluate each of these three claims seperately and grant the opponent points according to the level of endoxy, with higher scores meaning lower endoxy. The results of all three phases are added in the end and decide the level of success of the participants and the win and loss of the disputation.

5. *How does training disputation help to develop the abilities for a reasonable solution of a difference of opinion?*
As outlined above in 2) there are a number of crucial abilities that are essential for a reasonable discussant in the attempt to solve a difference of opinion. Not all of these are trained with the same intensity by both active participants in a Modern Disputation, so it will be convenient to look seperately at each position and note how it can help to train the respective ability. It is easy to see that while nearly everything that is trained by the opponent also affects the defendant who is training to escape flaws and contradictions, the reverse is not the case. So the descriptions given below for the training of the opponent also entail the defendant whereas the training of the defendant is largely exclusive.

The main abilities that the opponent trains when trying to succeed in a Modern Disputation are outlined above as numbers 2, 3 and 4.

2. *The ability to use valid and relevant argumentation schemes in support of one´s own position*
Even though it might appear so at the first glance, the party mainly engaged in argumentation during the disputation is not the defendant of a thesis but his opponent. While being limited to questioning the defendant she is concerned with all basic elements of an argument. In choosing her questions she tries to get the defendant´s concession for her premises. These premises are then linked together with the help of valid argumentation schemes and eventually presented in support of the exact negation of one of the defendant´s claims when the opponent tries to prove a contradiction during the examination phase. This task of the opponent is of course eased if the initial argumentation of the defendant in the exposition phase or his thesis already includes or quickly leads to apparent contradictions. Seeing these and being able to present them clearly therefore is the second ability that an opponent needs to succeed in a Modern Disputation.

3. *The abilty to evade contradictions between any arguments that are presented in support of one´s position or the implication of an argument and the position itself*
The last element which is mainly trained by the opponent in a disputation is slightly more complicated and needs his full concentration (and a good memory) during the examination phase.

4. *The ability to see the dependence of claims on certain premises that necessarily follow if the claim is to be upheld*
Since the defendant tries to evade an immediate contradiction, he will hardly directly grant his opponent the premises she needs for the negation of any claim. It is therefore necessary for the opponent to extradict these concessions indirectly by first requesting more general answers which seem to have little or no connection to each other or to a possible negation, but which necessarily lead to others that do. She therefore needs and develops a good understanding of the implications any claim has. These three core abilities then are trained by the opponent actively and by the defendant ex negativo in a disputation and any advancement in them will lead to a gratification from the adjudicators and a greater success in the competitive activity.

In addition to these three shared elements of training of both disputants, two more are trained by the defendant alone. These are the numbers 1 and 5 outlined above.

1. *The ability clearly to define and present one´s own point of view, claim or position*

This ability, one most evidently lacking in the majority of everyday discussions and debates, is trained in the exposition phase of the disputation. If the defendant fails to give a clear outline of his thesis and the definitions he uses, not only will he be judged less positive by the adjudicators, but he will also widely open the doors to all kinds of contradictions in the examination phase. Of course this skill is not trained uniquely or even primarily by disputation. Other training formats such as academic debating or declamations require a comparable amount of clear definitions. The emphasis that is put on it in Modern Disputation is however one of the highest compared to the other formats and the visible consequences of failing in this task lead the student to concentrating on it very quickly.

The last trained aspect that was introduced above is in its kind however quite unique to disputation.

5. *The tolerance and patience to grant the opponent the widest possible freedom of speech and right to speak*

Being strictly limited to answering only "yes" or "no" most of the time during the examination time teaches tolerance and patience to the person speaking that should be trivial for anybody engaged in argumentation but in reality are not. And it does so in a twofold way for the defendant in that phase. Not only is he barred by the rules of the disputation to interrupt his opponent (a rule that will be enforced by the adjudicators if acted against) but it is also in his own vital interest to listen very carefully to any question in all its details to avoid contradicting answers. If only for this ability to let the other person speak, finish his point and be heard carefully, training dialectical situations with the help of disputations would already be useful. Taking all five elements together it should be even clearer that this exercise can have tenable positive effects for the development of the abilities necessary for a critical discussion and reasonable solution of a difference of opinion.

The positions put forward and arguments expressed in this paper try to suggest that the competitive dialectical training format "Modern Disputation" can make a little contribution towards the long process of training someone to speak and discuss reasonably and thus to cooperate better with his or her communication partners. This of course neither means nor implies that this way of training is the only possible way or is alone sufficient, nor is it supposed to suggest on the other

hand that the only function of disputation is dialectical training. A disputation is also a very useful tool for the actual testing of a "real" thesis. Or, as Aritotle writes about the purposes of the dialectical art and disputation: *"They are three in number, mental training, conversations and the philosophic sciences."* (Arist. Top. 101a27f., trans. Forster)

NOTES
[i] For the necessity of this ability for the fullfillment of the rules and commandments of the critical discussion comp. esp. rules 1 and 15; and commandments 2, 3, 5 and 10 (van Eemeren, Grootendorst 2004).
[ii] For the necessity of this ability for the fullfillment of the rules and commandments of the critical discussion comp. esp. rules 6, 7, 8 and 9; and commandments 2, 4, 7 and 8 (van Eemeren, Grootendorst 2004).
[iii] For the necessity of this ability for the fullfillment of the rules and commandments of the critical discussion comp. esp. rules 6, 7, 8 and 9; and commandments 4, 7 and 8 (van Eemeren, Grootendorst 2004).
[iv] For the necessity of this ability for the fullfillment of the rules and commandments of the critical discussion comp. esp. rules 6, 7, 8, 9, 12 and 14; and commandments 4, 6, 7, 8, 9 (van Eemeren, Grootendorst 2004).
[v] For the necessity of this ability for the fullfillment of the rules and commandments of the critical discussion comp. esp. rules 1, 10, 11 and 15; and commandment 1 (van Eemeren, Grootendorst 2004).
[vi] One of the nicest examples of this effect is given by Seneca in Contr. 7, Prae 6-8 where he tells the story of the famous declamator Albucius who completely failed in front of a real jury and as a result refrained from ever speaking in court again.

REFERENCES
Aristotle (1976). *Posterior Analytics, Topica.* (H. Tredennick & E. S. Forster, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press & London: William Heinemann Ltd.
Bartsch, T.-C., Hoppmann, M., Rex, B. & Vergeest, M. (2005). *Trainingsbuch Rhetorik*. Paderborn, München, Wien & Zürich: Schöningh.
Eemeren, F. H. van & Grootendorst, R. (2004). *A Systematic Theory of Argumentation: The pragma-dialectical approach.* Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.
Hoppmann, M. (2006). Rhetorisches Training – Zwischen Agonalität und

Realismus. In: R. Soudry (Ed.), Rhetorik: *Eine interdisziplinäre Einführung in die rhetorische Praxis* (2nd ed.). Heidelberg, München, Landsberg & Berlin: C.F. Müller.

Seneca, the elder (1974). *Declamations*. (M. Winterbottom, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press & London: William Heinemann Ltd.

Slomkowski, P. (1997). *Aristotle's Topics.* Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers.