



“Bridge for Peace”

The Educational and Social Function of Bridge

*By Prof. Elsa Cagner
Member of Italian “Bridge at School Project” Commission
Member of the MIUR – FIGB Commission*

The World Bridge Federation and its Zonal Conferences and NBOs, one of whose aims is to increase general interest and the number of people playing the game, operates in the youth education sector with the following objectives:

- developing of education concerning the game of bridge;
- contributing to improving the quality of training offered in schools;
- synergistic action in the training field with scholastic training agencies;
- offering new training opportunities appropriate to the specific needs;
- reinforcing training.

REFERENCE POINTS

In analysing the educational function of bridge one should identify the essential points of the current educational system which have brought about a radical change in tendency in society and consequently in the school. The crucial points are the following:

1. **The centralisation of instruction and education**, essential instrument for the policies of social, cultural and occupational development. One objective of the new school must be to substantially raise the general cultural level of work training. The irremissible educational value of culture for the development of personality has been recognised. Knowledge is no longer only for the chosen few. The need to know is now a condition for

access to work for all. (EEC Resolution –1989: *the qualitative and quantitative improvement in levels of teaching is one of the principal conditions of its economic, social and productive development*). The economic scenario has changed completely: the job market is continually evolving, mobility has become part of the system, people need to keep learning new things. In the social sphere the phenomena of drugs, delinquency and organised crime strongly feel the effect of cultural poverty.

- 2. The transformation of the traditional concept of knowledge:** there must be a strong link between the disciplines of study of future programmes and the forms of practical and operative skills essential for the students of tomorrow. In a school which is equipped for the future, which creates in its pupils an open and dynamic mentality capable of evolving with the evolution of society, the fundamental knowledge cannot be defined and definitive disciplines but rather inter-disciplinary skills involving the co-operation of different disciplines and ways of educating. The citizen of tomorrow will have to be able to understand and make decisions, have the capacity to foresee, to orientate himself, to begin processes of integration on a social and professional level. A new didactic environment and more appropriate teaching methods must evaluate simultaneously the cognitive, social, emotional and relational aspects of any learning. Due to this change of knowledge in the didactic sphere, the use of various educational structures is required. The increasing widening of horizons and the forever more frequent social and professional changes necessitate knowledge that everyone must master to live in today's world and to orient himself with awareness.
- 3. Living in increasingly complex systems:** in the contemporary world uncertainty is the epistemological and existential condition which conditions the world of knowledge and the world of choices. In a world where uncertainty will be increasingly evident and where it is difficult to hypothesize which disciplines will be subject to greater developments and in which direction research will go, one thing however appears clear: the transmission of codified knowledge is unacceptable. In a time when certainties are decreasing the school of the future must know how to build up the capacity to make decisions in conditions of uncertainty which are important in orienting oneself and acting in increasingly complex systems. Each single competence must be subordinate to the necessity to *think in general* in this complex framework. The problem of the single training area loses its local character and becomes part of a complex picture.

EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIAL FUNCTION OF BRIDGE

Previous experience and studies carried out have affirmed that Bridge has a strong educational function in today's society since it has positive effects both in the socio-emotional and the cognitive sphere.

- In fact in Bridge there is a **strong element of establishing social relations**: precisely because it is a pairs game and one involving relationships Bridge contributes greatly to creating a community spirit and a sense of belonging to the institution and consequently to improving relations both with one's companions, teachers and with the institution. It is precisely the creation of such an environment which contributes to the pupil's involvement and combats the lack of will-power so common in young people and, on the contrary, stimulates their motivation.
- Bridge promotes the **capacity to construct one's own personal identity** since it allows one to acquire a series of behavioural assurances. Since it is a game of simulation it allows one to experience situations which if actually faced would provoke excessive anxiety and would be rejected for fear of failure. The simulation guarantees each one the protection from consequences too negative due to what is done or said in the progression of the game.
- Bridge helps in the acquisition of new knowledge and improves one's ability to study different disciplines: according to cognitive theories, in the learning phase it is best to gain competence in using neutral material to lessen the anxiety of the testing experience. Bridge is not only a neutral subject but is particularly captivating in that it has a ludic aspect. If learned in a pleasant way it is simpler to learn.

BRIDGE AND THE ENVIRONMENT OF SOCIAL RELATIONS AND AFFECTION

1) The strong game element of socialising and aggregation

Until a short time ago the Italian school had undervalued the social empathy aspects, all the aspects which bond the child to the school and which come into Anglo-Saxon culture. In our school they were excluded since they were considered to belong to a secondary culture or marginal phenomena; these however offer an important contribution to the process of children's socialising.

By its very nature a game involves a strong element of socialising and aggregation and contributes in a determining way to creating a community spirit. In bridge, unlike chess, the individual game by definition involves building a relationship with the partner; the two individuals of the couple accept each other, overcoming any character differences.

“Bridge is not only a card game which sharpens the mind, but is also a means of being in company and breaking isolation: since I have been teaching Bridge it seems that I am helping people meet each other” (Di Stefano).

It is a game which creates strong ties: it is played in a team and in collaboration with others. It becomes vital to get to know one's partner, build the couple, sacrifice a part of one's own personality for one's companion, have relations with others, assimilate habits, behaviour, customs and mentalities different from one's own. Thus there is the possibility to set up beneficial interactive relations with others. It requires effort, enthusiasm, understanding, concentration and will to win and take the correct decisions together.

Bridge, with some of its rules, simulates the necessity for dialogue and communication, important factors in teaching and building up valid and lasting interpersonal relations in everyday life. The study and reading of codes which create the basis for interaction and co-operation between participants, represent the main nucleus of the first phases in the bridge teaching programme.

Another positive element concerning socialising is due to the totally consistent participation possible, without limitations for character types which is a discriminatory factor in almost all other sporting disciplines. Bridge promotes the most unexpected socialising between people of different ages, sex, race, educational level, culture, and character. All this is a most important element in gaining intercultural values.

(2) Play Activity reinforces the relationship with the educational institution

A non-curricular activity such as bridge contributes to the strengthening the bond between the student and the school environment. The real and progressive involvement of pupils is clearly evident, as is, in some cases, the resultant improvement in their attitude towards this environment.

In this improved relationship with the school, the student-teacher relationship is also improved: teaching bridge to young people or learning it with them, permits the development of an even more articulate and valuable relationship, with greater probability of reaching formative objectives proposed by the school.

(3) Deep involvement eliminates scholastic lack of will power and stimulates learning

Experience has shown that improving relationships between pupils and teachers and creating ties to the school outwith the curriculum can be a way of combating the most dangerous of school problems, **lack of will power**, which *originates from a total uninterest in the school and is a lack of communication and of reciprocity* of interest between pupil and school.

Many children create their own lack of will power from their failures: they convince themselves that they are beyond help. In these cases a very positive experience in another direction can change this usual behaviour.

With bridge, even from the very beginning of starting to study it, one can note how the pupil is drawn in and interested in learning more about a subject which requires logic and synthesis, the capacity for analysis and memory, determination and self-control and gives immediate results which depend on quality of play.

The ludic-competitive aspect of bridge stimulates enthusiastic participation and contributes in the creation of the core element of any activity: motivation to learn.

BRIDGE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF PERSONAL IDENTITY

Bridge is a game which allows one to acquire a series of behavioural assurances since being a game of simulation it gives one the opportunity to experience situations which if encountered in reality would provoke excessive anxiety and would be avoided for fear of failure.

The game generally permits one to

- **increase one's self-esteem:** the game brings the team or pair of players very important results involving the sharing of objectives and it promotes positive behaviour. Achieving an objective contributes to increasing faith and esteem in oneself.
- **appraise and self-appraise:** bridge lessens the traditional teacher-student polarisation. In fact during a session normally comments on the student's play are unnecessary. The individual's or team's progress is always evaluated according to pre-set scores, therefore most games are not subject to the subjective appraisal of the instructor, who in fact has a different role.

The simulation involved in playing also gives one the opportunity to try new ways of behaving, to risk making mistakes in order to become more self-assured. Certain forms of behavioural assurance are essential for scholastic success.

Bridge contributes to:

(1) Creating and reinforcing one's decision-making capacity, which is the basis for active and conscious autonomy.

The simulation is particularly efficacious for solving problems which provoke decision-making processes. The development of one's decision-making capacity represents one of the school's principal objectives and it is directed towards promoting in pupils those capacities of planning and re-planning throughout one's whole life. Bridge is particularly efficacious in developing such capacities. In fact bridge accustoms one to decide in such a way as to make conscious choices and to be flexible in these choices, accepting to modify them in case of mistakes, new knowledge or acquiring new values. From this derives problematic attitude in face of reality which forces one to look again for possible alternative solutions.

Giving one the chance to experiment in real situations constitutes, therefore, the opportunity to identify the skills necessary to manage the

situations themselves, to use the acquired knowledge before and during the simulation itself and to verify the use of strategies and tactics for problem-solving. All this takes place in a game environment which allows pupils to have a more relaxed attitude when faced with problems, without the fear of being penalised for mistakes.

(2) Developing the capacity to compare

Playing with a partner, managing relationships, the possibility to compare results in a game environment and consequently to self-assess, permits one to acquire:

- awareness of one's own and of others' roles in a scholastic situation;
- management of comparison to assess and evaluate one's own abilities and work.

After simulating each player will have at his disposal behavioural data and new knowledge. The aim is not so much to identify winners and losers, but to compare the different strategies used by players and thus to base on this comparative criterion one's own evaluation and learning.

Playing with a partner and managing relationships allow one to acquire interpersonal strategies and promote in the pupil a suitable social attitude. In this way young people can face certain social situations more appropriately, can become accustomed to being aware of themselves also when interacting with others, and can self-assess.

(3) Offering the opportunity to cope with mistakes

Error and the origin of almost all human learning and play is a way of getting used to error, Accepting and managing mistakes is not easy for young people, so the experience with bridge is particularly useful for them as bridge is a game of probability and mistakes: thinking of being able to dominate fully is purely utopic. For this very reason bridge holds so much fascination for those who know it and those who play only occasionally.

Teaching the use of the experience and mistakes is certainly an impediment to the traumas which future failures could cause young people encountering the first real problems of youth.

(4) Offering the opportunity to cope with defeat

Young people are not used to being faced with defeat, since adults do their best to get rid of the obstacles and difficulties which arise. So at their first defeat they do not know how to react, while it is precisely at this time that most force is needed. *Discouragement is a temptation. The temptation to let oneself go, to give in to sleepiness, to give up: but living means knowing how to cope with defeat: as in any sports competition. Even the best team loses sometimes. One must never give in to depression. The loser must use the defeat to understand how to react in order to change, create, to find new methods, to invent new strategies.*

In the ludic dimension of bridge defeat is common for all, so in sharing defeat one can learn more easily how to manage it.

(5) Encouraging the acceptance of rules

If we distance ourselves temporarily from the concept of sport as exclusively a physical activity, of action and movement, in bridge we can find all the components of sport: discipline, rigour, ethics, ability, performance, competition, competitive spirit, surmounting difficulties, application, study, training, fatigue, sacrifice, stress.

It is precisely through bridge, that one can reach understanding the importance of the necessity to adapt to rules since the practice of the game allows one to experiment and simulate situations in which the essential condition is to accept rules.

The rules constitute the structure of the game and represent a level of analysis of the reference system and they repropose the real mechanisms of interaction among people and with situations.

If one considers that the phenomenon of bullying is one which is worryingly on the increase, one can understand how useful it can be to underline that rules lie at the very root of civil society.

(6) Stimulating the rational organisation of study

The methods, employed in planning actions in the game and the bidding, in the choice of timing in the game and in the identifying of priorities, allows the children to acquire the correct mentality to obtain the concept of the necessity to organise any activity. Concerning the concept of transfer, with the help of the teacher the pupil will transfer what he has learned with the game to his studies and work.

Bridge helps one to acquire strategic behaviour: this means not so much the capacity to understand rules but the capacity to organise a coherent behaviour, to define a strategy based on the comprehension of the implicit structure of the game. In this way are activated logical abilities such as the capacity to consider different variables and make choices based on predictions, the capacity to grasp the symbolic dimension which makes the game a simulation and to understand the model as a interpretative one of real processes.

(7) Preparing for employment

Various international research underlines that of the difficulties encountered by young people in employment those related to theoretical performance (subject knowledge, use of work instruments...) are not as significant as those deriving from the inability to fit into the work environment adequately.

In fact the way in which an employee deals with his work experience is considered a decisive quality for success in his career and his own socio-psychological development.

The analysing of resources continuously throughout a game of bridge and the defining of objectives, is a model which reproduces on a small scale, but exactly, some work activities and their related problems.

BRIDGE AND COGNITIVE SKILLS

Alberto Oliviero, a professor of psycho-biology at "La Sapienza" University in Rome, affirms that the greatest divarication which presently exists is that between the mental structuring of young people and the type of learning required by the school, characterised by abstractness and total lack of concrete activities. Our school, unlike those in northern Europe, is characterised by total lack of concrete processes, general procedures, little activities and the capacity to observe. One must not forget that total abstractness and lack of appeal induce scholastic alienation.

Lack of concreteness and the inexistence of empathetic and emotional moments could be eliminated by small actions. It is a question of changing mentality and moving towards concreteness. Techniques of simulation are valid since, in addition to reducing or neutralising the tension and frustration which characterise phases of learning, they can supply the means to experiment with concrete activities.

With bridge in particular the students have the chance to use in an active way the notions learned, activating capacities such as categorisation, the deduction of inferences, which represent ways of thinking common to all subjects and permit the transfer to others of knowledge learned in a given environment.

In this way there is an osmosis between interdisciplinary and disciplinary knowledge, without denying the peculiarity and specificity of the latter.

The learning process must allow the student to impose problems on himself and to make hypotheses according to the ways of thinking characteristic of the subject he is learning.

Learning therefore takes the form of the capacity to manage methods, theories, concepts and techniques through the use of models; bridge, thanks also to the acquisition of a problematic attitude, favours learning exactly by its concreteness and the possibility to practise a series of skills useful for study.

Bridge permits, by increasing the degree of freedom, the acquisition of knowledge and the qualitative and quantitative improvement in global and transverse skills which are usually difficult to achieve with normal didactic practices.

Now let us examine more precisely how bridge can improve the cognitive structure of pupils and the skills which are useful in curricular subjects which bridge can promote.

It should be stated in advance that all components of the game, both theoretical and practical, have an absolute logical, mathematical and statistical matrix and this requires continual reasoning, improves the capacity for concentrating analysis, forces one to cope with continuous strategy problems, and increases mnemonic possibilities.

Bridge therefore, especially in the play phase and the analysis of play, requires of and improves in the player mental co-ordination, increased capacity of attention and concentration, memory and technical knowledge, all of which are characteristics developed in the first phase of study. This results in the formation of a more analytical and mature critical capacity in the immediately successive phases.

Thus in general the skills which bridge promotes and develops in the cognitive ambit are:

- 1) capacity to communicate;**
- 2) logic skills;**
- 3) prerequisites for learning: attention, memory;**
- 4) Specific tranverse skills.**

Recent studies on the learning of pupils show how the lack of these particular skills creates most curricular difficulties for the pupils.