

# **A Presentation of the Betzavta Method for Teaching: Description and Possible Adaptations for Language & Literature Classes\*<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract:** Betzavta is a method for teaching democracy, based on play. It simulates situations which imply decisional processes and centers the educational experience around a dilemma which must be solved. Such an approach to education leads to a more intimate and genuine learning experience for the students, allowing them to engage with the content of the class and own the consequences of their actions. However, such a method presents a number of difficulties when trying to implement it in formal educational contexts, and as such launches the challenge of adapting it, rather than simply adopting it. In this article, I present a brief description of the method itself, as well as some studied consequences of teaching through games and simulations generally. (There is little literature on the consequences of this method itself.) Additionally, I present two options for adapting exercises from this method to the teaching of English language and literature classes at high-school level, with possible adaptation for college seminars as well.

**Keywords:** Betzavta; education; games; simulation-based learning; English language teaching

## **1. *Betzavta*: Presenting the Method**

The Betzavta method for teaching democracy was developed in 1993 by dr. Uki Maroshek-Klarman of the Adam Institute for Democracy and Peace as a response to the need to teach students about democratic values and attitudes. It has since spread to

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\* I would like to thank Ana Maria and Daniel Rusu, the people who have introduced me to this method back when I was their student.

various parts of the world, and now it is used predominantly in non-formal educational contexts. The method is based on play, games which are specifically designed to create a space that encourages collaboration and debate. Each game has a central dilemma which touches on subjects such as freedom, individual and group responsibility, discrimination, and more. Some of the key features of this method are equality, transparency, and acceptance. As such, there is no right or wrong answer during the workshops, since all participants are encouraged to speak their minds and look for a way in which to solve a problem together.

The usual development of a session is to start with an icebreaker, in order to get the participants accustomed to debating and communicating freely, and then to introduce them to the game. The facilitators of the workshop present the game in such a way as to allow for significant freedom of choice for the participants. After the game is played out, a discussion follows it. During this discussion, facilitators ask the participants questions regarding the game, their own choices, and the results. Questions are particularly important to this method, since their role is to guide the conversation and moderate it, without imposing beliefs or creating presuppositions to lead the discussion towards a previously agreed-upon point. The conflicts and dilemmas in Betzavta games arise from the development of the game itself (the way in which moral judgements are emitted, contrasts between actions and attitudes, the behavior of participants, etc.). This stage is followed by the feedback moment, when each participant is asked to share one thing that they will remember, that surprised them, or that made them question some things, attitudes, or ideas. Although many sessions might have the same starting point, i. e., the same game, there are not two sessions that share the same development, since it all depends on the reactions and the choices of the participants.

Betzavta combines several educational methods in order to achieve its goal:

The combination of methods that are characteristic of Betzavta education consist of: [m]ethods for creating and working through conflicting values and dilemmas; [m]ethods involving group dynamics; [t]riggering and cooperative learning and teaching methods (Wolff-Jontofsohn n.d.: 13)

The goals of these methods are: to help participants internalize problems and translate them into conflicts or dilemmas, to help formulate questions regarding their own principles and values; to place the participants in a group environment so that they become aware of their own behaviors (productive and responsive), as well as the processes and reactions of others; and to help participants communicate, negotiate, and eventually compromise to reach a conclusion, based on democratic values. These processes help develop traits and skills that are essential for the 21st century, including critical thinking, problem solving, and collaboration. Furthermore, being essentially a simulation, Betzavta is very much centered around discussion, debate, and argumentation, and as such it presents an ideal setting for the teaching of languages, creating a context in which students can use their target language independently. The third part of this article will present ways in which Betzavta can be specifically implemented in English classes.

Logistically, a Betzavta session lasts for a minimum of an hour and a half, which makes it more difficult to integrate at a high school level or below, where classes occupy a span of 50 minutes. However, through identifying some key underlying aspects of the method and exploring the ways in which they can be implemented in traditional English classes, adaptation is possible. In contexts such as university or college, on the other

hand, as well as within extra-curricular activities and clubs, the traditional form of the method is a valuable teaching technique for the development of the aforementioned skills, which can take the place of more traditional methods such as debating or active learning, because it both implements and supplements them.

## **2. Learning through Games and Simulations**

This part of the paper presents the theoretical framework for employing this method as a means of developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills. The literature about Betzavta and its impact on the development of students/participants is scarce, as there are few people who study the method. In Ulrike Wolff-Jontofsohn's *Learning the Language of Democracy with Betzavta*, the underlying methods and educational approaches of Betzavta are explored. As such, it becomes clear that this method was elaborated with its educational consequences in mind. However, I have not found studies which measure its impact on the participants, and for this reason I decided to look at studies on the cognitive and developmental consequences of teaching through games, play, and simulations, as an underlying argument for the impact of the method.

Games and play are intrinsic to human nature. Johan Huizinga explores this throughout his book *Homo Ludens*, where he treats play

as a special form of activity, as a 'significant form', as a social function [...]. We shall not look for the natural impulses and habits conditioning play in general, but shall consider play in its manifold concrete forms as itself a social construction [...] [and] try to understand play as a cultural factor in life (Huizinga 1949: 4).

Creating a stage onto which to exercise real life is important for younger children, but it is applicable to a more mature audience as well.

The entire idea of creating a simulation of a democratic process through the Betzavta method is akin to the effects—and attractiveness—of computer simulation games, albeit without a flashy user interface. In this simulated space, students take on different roles which allow them to shed insecurities and the fear of consequences, and experience freedom to a large degree. The space is by no means consequence-free, since participants are responsible for everything they say and do; yet, there are no “traditional” consequences that are found in formal education. They are not penalized for not knowing a word or a grammatical structure and there is no number to evaluate their competences at the end of the experience. As such, this space allows them to engage with a more intrinsic learning experience, encouraging participants to practice introspection and problem-solving. This latter skill is considered an essential skill for the 21st century, understood—as summarized in a 2019 systematic review—as “the ability to find causes of a particular problem or problems, find different solutions, weigh different options, make decisions about the best solution, implement the solution, and finally evaluate the implementation” (Kailani et al. 2019: 1129).

Kailani et al.'s (2019: 1127-1137) systematic review included studies spanning from 2009 to 2016 published in peer-reviewed journals, on the topic of problem-solving as a consequence of game-based learning in educational settings. A core finding of this review is that feedback and interactivity increased student engagement, which then correlated with a higher likelihood of the student engaging in problem-solving.

Timing of feedback and the content displayed are very crucial in the design, as some feedback may encourage the player to critically think about the problem at hand while others, for example a constant indication of right or wrong answers, can hinder gameplay and disengage the player from the game and the problem in the game. (Kailani et al. 2019: 1131)

This issue raised a discussion point around the design of the interface for games employed in educational settings. However, as Betzavta is not a computer-based game, the issue of a well-designed interface is not pertinent. Additionally, the setting of this method supports engagement, as the game is centered around an activity. Feedback in Betzavta is integral, as each round of the game ends with an open discussion about the assessment of the issue and the development of the game itself. Students are all encouraged to think back to the events of the past hour and discuss relevant aspects that had an impact on the gameplay.

Simulations differ from games as understood traditionally, where there is a competition, a set of rules, and—inevitably—winners and losers. In an essay on educational games and simulations, Margaret Gredler (1996: 521-540) explores the composition of both games and simulations, at what she calls “deep” and “surface” structures, and defines three ways in which simulations are different from games:

1. “games are competitive exercises in which the objective is to excel by winning, [while] participants in a simulation [...] are executing serious responsibilities, with the associated privileges and consequences”
2. “the event sequence of a game is typically linear, whereas a simulation sequence is nonlinear”

3. "the mechanisms that determine the consequences to be delivered for different actions taken by the students in the exercise [are different in games and simulations]." (Gredler 1996: 522-3)

To elaborate, in simulations there is no competition in which some participants win, and some lose, but rather a common goal which is achieved through teamwork or collaboration. In the same spirit, when the participant arrives at a point of decision making in simulations, there are multiple outcomes, depending on the decisions taken thus far by the player. This makes consequences more real and immediate, offering participants a chance to engage in a retrospective analysis of their actions. Finally, games are defined by the rules which govern them, which include what a participant is allowed to do and what not. Gredler (1996: 521-540) explains that "the basis for a simulation is a dynamic set of relationships among several variables that (1) change over time and (2) reflect authentic causal processes" (523). One defining aspect of a simulation is that we can predict or foresee outcomes based on the behaviors which are likely to occur.

Considering the features described above, one could claim that the Betzavta method is based not only on play, but more precisely on a simulation for social and democratic processes. Gredler (1996: 521-540) mentions that "[g]iven the recent emphasis on students' constructing knowledge during learning, this model [i.e. «experiential simulation»] or a similar one can provide information to teachers about specific student difficulties" (533). This is already a first argument for adopting an exercise such as Betzavta, at least as a way for the educators to better understand the different ways of thinking—and therefore the specific needs—of their students.

The benefits for such an approach do not end here. Studies looking at cognitive and developmental consequences of learning

through games and play show that—despite logistical difficulties—students are often more engaged and attentive while participating in such activities. "[G]ames provide opportunities for authentic, reflective, and critical thinking practices that are not only pertinent, but essential for success in the 21st century" (Cicchino 2015: n.p.). Although most such studies focus on computer games and simulations, implementing a non-virtual simulation should, in principle, present fewer downsides. Gökür Kaplan Akilli (2007: 1-20) presents a synopsis of some of the areas explored thus far, related to the impact of games and simulation on learning:

Critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Rieber, 1996), drawing meaningful conclusions (Price, 1990), some inductive discovery skills like observation, trial and error, and hypothesis testing (Gorriz & Medina, 2000; Greenfield, 1984, cited in Prensky, 2001; Price 1990), and several other strategies of exploration (Prensky 2001; Provenzo, 1992) were other positive effects of games on learning. (Akilli 2007: 5)

Another meta-analysis of 123 studies (carried out from 2010 to 2016) presents some of the consequences observed when using games and simulation for higher education. The observed consequences concern three areas: “cognitive, behavioral, and affective outcomes” (Vlachopoulos & Makri 2017: 15). Pertinent to the present article are some conclusions related to simulations, although others might also contribute to the understanding of the consequences of using such methods for teaching. In the meta-analysis, the authors point out that “some reviewed studies indicate improved learning, while others show no positive effect on knowledge and skill acquisition compared to traditional learning methods” (Vlachopoulos & Makri 2017: 15). However, from the different types of games put under analysis, simulations

prove to bring more significant value in terms of knowledge acquisition:

[t]he value of simulations can be examined from the perspective of content change [...]. Simulations are directly linked to the course content and students are given the opportunity to apply and better understand theoretical concepts. Additionally, simulations provide an environment in which students can experiment with different strategies, adopt different roles, and take charge of their own decisions by assuming responsibility. (Vlachopoulos & Makri 2017: 15-16)

From the perspective of behavioral consequences, simulations again seem to have an edge over traditional learning:

Simulation games are often seen as powerful tools in promoting teamwork and team dynamics (Stanley & Latimer, 2011; Tiwari et al., 2014; Lin, 2016; Wang, 2016), collaboration (Hanning, 2012), social and emotional skills (Ahmad et al., 2013), and other soft skills, including project management, self-reflection, and leadership skills (Siewiorek, 2012; Wang et al., 2016), which are acquired through a reality-based scenario with action-oriented activities (Geithner & Menzel, 2016). (Vlachopoulos & Makri 2017: 19)

When looking at affective outcomes, especially student attention and motivation, game-based learning appears to be more beneficial to the students; however, as I also mention in this paper, this might be a result of the novelty of such methods—a stark contrast to what students are usually exposed to in formal learning—and not necessarily of the methods themselves. As is acknowledged in the meta-analysis, “motivation is not always related to GBL [game-based learning], [as some researchers are]

emphasizing cases where students who use games in solitary or collaborative environments experience no significant difference in terms of learning motivation” (Vlachopoulos & Makri 2017: 21-22). However, in a study from 2015, Cicchino explains that the attractiveness of game-based learning needs to be considered, as it is congruent with what high-quality teaching produces as well, specifically "student engagement, student choice, and student-driven learning (Cicchino 2015: n. p.)." According to this study, these metrics provided by "constructivist-style learning environments (such as the GBL [game-based learning] intervention examined in this study) are harmonious with great teaching" (Cicchino 2015: n. p.).

As the literature shows, there are many ways in which a game can influence a student, and it is not always easy to predict how. Yet, the consensus is that properly designed games render positive effects on students. The Betzavta method is reliant on a simulation, but the behavior and the choices of the participants create the game. In this way, the game that is at the core of the method is a result of the individual choice of participants, making the experience one that is relevant for each student.

However, the problem at the center of this article is not as much with the impact of Betzavta—although this is important and additional studies are needed—but with adapting it to fit the current educational system. In his article “Learning the Language of Democracy with Betzavta”, Ulrike Wolff-Jontofsohn puts forth some ways in which Betzavta could be implemented in schools.

Betzavta is in no way a program limited to politics, community, and social studies lessons. Exercises from Betzavta can complement political, historical, philosophical, and cultural lesson topics via political and moral perspectives. Reference to actual situations can be drawn from this, correlations between personal experiences and

factual topics demonstrated, and students aided in seeing situations of conflict and the regulation of conflicts through "democratic eyes". (Wolff-Jontofsohn n.d.: 24)

Wolff-Jontofsohn explains that there are two ways in which the method can be implemented in schools: as "individual exercises" or as "exercise blocks" (24). Considering the same delimitations on curriculum and schedule, the proposal is to take units and pair them with the relevant subjects: "A history lesson on the topic of the «social contract» can be opened with an exercise on «the importance of a contract»" (Wolff-Jontofsohn n.d.: 24) and so on. Next, I explore ways in which such ideas can be integrated in language learning and literature classes.

### **3. Adopting Betzavta in the School System**

As previously mentioned, the integration of Betzavta in the school system has been explored by Ulrike Wolff-Jontofsohn:

Learning democracy can be seen as a task that stretches across subjects for all school types. It takes place at a number of levels in the school environment

- In politics and social study lessons as knowledge
- In all other subjects as an expansion of the way in which things are viewed
- In all school situations as social learning
- As a component part of a democratic school culture (25)

However, for the people who have not experienced Betzavta, this can be difficult to grasp. Educators need to understand the principles of teaching democracy, as well as the objectives they have: to highlight conflicts and dilemmas that arise during the simulation and discuss them appropriately during the discussion phase, as well as to allow the events to unfold according to the unique group dynamic.

In what follows, I briefly present two activities used in the Betzavta method. These exemplify how this type of education can be used to promote the development of 21st century skills as noted above, as well as communication (especially assertiveness) and language skills.

### *3.1. Language Classes*

Implementing an entire session of Betzavta in a language class can be done by choosing a topic which would subject the participants to using a certain type of construction. In an advanced class, such exercises are useful for teaching students how to create and maintain the structure of argumentation (for instance for students of a debate club, or for students practicing English for legal reasons), how to make their speech more persuasive, or how to answer questions more effectively. This method would help shift students' perspective from seeing the specific linguistic structure—the topic of the class—as an end in itself, to perceiving it as a means, something more immediately useful. As such, they will use these structures during the simulations more naturally and intentionally.

For the example presented below, there are multiple objectives. The lesson is thought out so that participants need to use the conditional mood in constructions such as “If I gathered enough votes, I would make a rule to benefit all of us”, while also learning how to use the dialogue in order to negotiate. This means listening to their peers in order to understand and reply with a relevant response, as well as creating a speech strategy that helps them convince the audience.

The game that this lesson is based on is the card game, where each participant is given a slip of paper on which they need to write their name. The goal of the game is to gather as many slips as possible; at the end, whoever has the most slips can formulate a rule which applies to the entire group, for the duration

of the session. In itself, it is a lesson on voting, compromise, and negotiation, but it can be very useful in an English class as well.

Example 1: The Card Game – Learning to collaborate to win

- Key concepts: equity, power, majority, consent
- Game objectives:
  - The students will be involved in the simulation of a decision-making process.
  - The students will discuss what makes the process a democratic one and how the nature of the process affects them.
  - The students will reflect on their own involvement in the decision-making process and the consequences of their action/inaction.
- Language-related objectives:
  - The students will exercise their knowledge of conditional clauses and irrealis verb moods.
  - The students will build their own argumentative structures and test them in a simulated negotiation.
  - The students will learn persuasive mechanisms of language.

As mentioned previously in the paper, by making language a secondary part of the game, the students will shift their focus on the objective of the simulation and have a genuine and more natural interaction with language.

### *3.2. Literature Classes*

Literature classes are crucial for the early development of critical thinking. Although these are usually more engaging for students than language classes, there is still a tangible distance between students and the material. When tackling stories that concern themselves with political and social problems, exercises

derived from the Betzavta method are optimal for creating a simulation in which the students can better understand the central issue, themes, and goals of socio-political stories. The following example of a Betzavta game tackles the issue of discrimination. Each participant is marked with a sticker or a stamp, and they are asked to form groups. The discussion that follows is based on what strategies the participants use to form groups.

#### Example 2: Stamp/Sticker Game

- Key concepts: majority, minority, prejudice, discrimination
- Game objectives:
  - The students will explore the way in which groups are formed in society, based on more or less artificial reasons.
  - The students will explore the way in which prejudices are formed and discrimination ensues.
  - The students will explore the way in which prejudice blocks communication.

Opening a literature unit with this type of lesson allows the students to better internalize some values which bring nuance to the development of a story, especially on social or political topics. They can understand the situations which arise out of group dilemmas and disagreement, as well as follow along the path to resolution. They will also be able to identify mistakes that were made during the decision-making process which can lead to unfortunate developments within a story.

### *3.3. The Difficulties of Integrating Betzavta in the School System*

Adopting Betzavta in the school system presents some logistical difficulties, including the time limit of traditional high school classes. For this reason, blocks of exercises work better at

this level. However, a full Betzavta session fits well within the time limit of college seminars and practical courses. Another issue which results from the potential integration of Betzavta as a subject in schools is grading. Because there is a high degree of transparency in the simulation and because the consequences are felt within the space of the simulation as well, grades do not fit the Betzavta method. This is why it is more feasible to use this method as an adjuvant to teaching, and not necessarily as a class in itself (at least initially).

However, the advantages of using such a method encourage the search for solutions. There are teachers who are already using Betzavta in their lessons, albeit in a different system than the Romanian one. As I have already mentioned, the literature on the subject is too scarce to back up any claim made throughout the article, and therefore it falls onto future studies to experiment and measure the impact of Betzavta—or at least partially-integrated exercises—in schools. To supplement the lack of literature, I reached out to a person who is teaching Betzavta at university level: Tali Padan, director of Mellem Education. She first became familiar with the method in 2013 and has been organizing workshops ever since. I interviewed her for an expert opinion on this matter.

The first question relates to the feedback Padan receives after a Betzavta workshop. “These days, I teach Betzavta as a course at a university, and it usually receives very good feedback,” Padan said. “The setting is different, as they are mostly university students who comment on how different the course is, compared to their other courses. When I was involved more in trainings, the feedback was mixed. Many people loved it and found it a unique learning method, while some seemed a bit skeptical.” The different nature of Betzavta stimulates the participants, yet indeed the risk when presenting it as a separate

method is that the fascination of its novelty will take away from the main goals of a class. By incorporating the attitudes and the features of Betzavta and using them as methods in various courses, it can help students more easily navigate their own mental processes and internalize what they are being taught, whether that be English, history, or politics.

When asked about the different skills that participants develop, Padan mentioned "the art of being in a group. This means dealing with and sometimes struggling with the dilemma between differing perspectives and personalities. One skill that I see people developing is letting go of their own assumptions in order to accept other perspectives into their world. This is a way that people can open up and become willing to cooperate and empathize with others."

In discussing the feasibility of Betzavta as a method implemented in school, Padan mentions with certainty that this is a practical and possible endeavor. "I definitely think it is possible to implement [it] in schools, and I am doing it at a university right now. These are a bit different, but they share similar limitations, for example the idea that the teacher is the ultimate authority or expert. In Betzavta, every participant is responsible for their own learning process, and I think this would be very valuable at a school where students often are guided only by what the teacher says." This novel aspect that appears when implementing Betzavta in schools is likely to help with student engagement and motivation, as a different dynamic appears that students need to navigate and assume more responsibility than for a traditional class. "Of course, it is important to keep some kind of structure, but there is also room for creativity in schools," Padan continued. "There may be some practical challenges, as some activities require more time. Another practical challenge is the grading issue, as Betzavta is not really meant to be graded, especially not

by someone other than the learner. I am dealing with this right now in the university, and it is possible to integrate this conversation into an activity and talk about an ideal way to assess the learning. The good thing about Betzavta is that all these issues can be integrated into the learning!”

When discussing recommendations that Padan has for educators wishing to adopt exercises or blocks of exercises from the Betzavta method in their regular teaching, she mentioned that “[t]here are already teachers doing this, so my recommendation is to talk to them! From my experience, it is also a learning process for the teacher, and they will also be confronted by uncertainties and dilemmas that students present. So, I would say to be open to learning from these, learning from the students, and consider everything a part of the Betzavta experience.”

Betzavta is overall a positive experience that can stimulate participants to be more critical and to make value judgements on their own actions and reactions in certain scenarios. As a simulation, it provides a stage for students to experience something they might not have often been a part of—a decision-making process. Within it, they can understand individual and group responsibility and evaluate their own relation with democratic values and principles. Whether its implementation in traditional school systems is possible has been answered: it is possible, but we still need to understand its impact on the development of students.

#### **4. Conclusions and Suggestions for Further Research**

As a method—or a means—Betzavta is a fruitful tool for the teachers willing to embrace creativity and to try on a different approach to learning. It better frames the goal of a lesson, it allows for freedom of speech, and it creates a space in which the students see the immediate consequences of their decisions, contextualizing their individual responsibility. When it comes to

the implementation of Betzavta itself, there are logistical difficulties, as presented in the article, among which time management and grading. However, we can steer clear of these by choosing to only add exercises and prompts from the method to enrich our teaching.

The most important issue to be tackled by future research is to check how this method impacts the students, especially at a younger age and in high school. A possibility of this is A/B testing, with a control group; however, the final grade in a class or the results on certain exams are perhaps not the best indicators of the results of the method, but they can act as a starting point. A clearer methodology for testing should be elaborated.

Finally, I believe it is the duty of an educator to understand the needs of their students, adapt their teaching style, and adjust the contents to fit these needs. Personally, I find that Betzavta is one of the most stimulating methods for encouraging and developing critical thinking and encouraging students to collaborate and resolve dilemmas in groups. As the field advances, the goal should be to find the balance between systematic and creative learning, in order to account for the equal development of these skills, and to provide a better fit for the diverse ways of learning for each student.

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