

Matthew Lipman's Model Theory of the Community of Inquiry

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Introduction

In an earlier publication, titled, "What Happens in Philosophical Texts,"¹ I present what I refer to as Matthew Lipman's model theory of the philosophical text. I argue there that the distinctive form of Lipman's own philosophical novels—the curricular flagship of the Philosophy for Children program—lies in how they perform a modeling function, in the sense of being both a *model of* and a *model for* philosophical thinking. In addition, I attempt to locate through this theoretical rendering the place that Lipman's novels occupy in the history of written philosophical discourse, and argue that the novels are simultaneously retrospective and futuristic: harkening back to a time when philosophical texts served as a technology with which we form our philosophical thinking, rather than as an exposition to which, as readers, we are merely exposed; and, at the same time, I suggest that Lipman's novels point toward a hoped-for future in which narrative discourse might once again establish a position of priority over exposition in the development of philosophical curriculum.

Throughout this inquiry into the theoretical foundations of Lipman's philosophical novels I became more and more struck by the extent to which Lipman relies upon the notion of a model and of modeling to account for the pedagogical importance of these otherwise peculiar texts. Lipman's philosophical novels teach philosophical thinking and participation in a community of inquiry by presenting, in narrative and contextualized form, models of philosophical thinking and community of inquiry. They are not intended merely to dramatize philosophy, or to make philosophy more developmentally appropriate, nor to provide a classroom community with a set of problematic situations about which to inquire. Rather, Lipman's philosophical novels contain within them an educational trajectory—they aim to be formative, not simply informative.

In this paper I seek to extend the aforementioned work by exploring Lipman's use of the notion of a model to account for his rendering of the community of inquiry. In likewise fashion, I wish to present a model theory of the community of inquiry (CI) as Lipman both understood CI, as well as the way in which he developed CI as a teaching and learning practice. While my ambition in this paper is somewhat modest—I seek mainly to recapitulate Lipman's theory of CI and to highlight the significance of CI's modeling function, and in so doing will rehearse points which many students of Lipman and CI are already well aware—I believe that the upshot of the discussion will be a recalibration of the received view of Lipman's theory of community of inquiry, a view which tends to see CI primarily as a *needed environmental condition* for the development of reflective educational

practice. Rather, what I believe Lipman's model theory will show us is that community of inquiry is a model of reflective educational practice for the development of a more salutary community. As Lipman puts it in a seldom cited, but I believe crucial essay which I will turn to shortly, "it is inquiry that makes for community and not community that makes for inquiry."²

While Lipman's reference to the modeling function of the philosophical novel is substantially developed in several of his writings, most notably in the chapter, "Teachers and Texts: The Springs of Inquiry," in the first edition of *Thinking in Education*,³ the notion that the community of inquiry itself serves as a model is developed much less coherently, with just few references sprinkled throughout Lipman's work. In fact, if we were to turn to Lipman's framing of CI in its barest most essential outline-form, as he transcribes in both editions of *Thinking in Education*, and also in *Natasha: Vygotskian Dialogues*, we see that the initial step in the process of forming a community of inquiry is "The Presentation of the Text," where the text functions as "a model, in story form, of a community of inquiry."⁴ It would seem, then, that it is the text itself that serves as the model of and for the community of inquiry, a model that the community utilizes toward achieving its own formation, but that the community of inquiry itself does not follow or reflect any modeling function of its own.

I was mainly convinced of this perspective—that according to Lipman, it is the text, and in a somewhat weaker sense the teacher too, that serve as models of and for the community of inquiry, but that the community of inquiry itself is not a model—until I came across a passage in the seldom cited piece that I alluded to earlier, titled, "Pixie and the Relationship Between Cognitive Modeling and Cognitive Practice," a chapter Lipman wrote for an edited collection of essays on the philosophical novel, *Pixie*. There he writes the following:

But if the model is a novel, what happens to the live teaching in the actual classroom—isn't he or she supposed to be the model of thinking for the live pupils, and of thinking about thinking and all those other good things as well? My own opinion is that classroom teachers have seldom been in a position to provide their pupils with a model of inquiry into inquiry or learning to learn, nor is it essential that they think they need to be in such a position. The responsibility for such modeling can be appropriately delegated to the novel and the classroom community of inquiry.⁵

Now, in addition to the clear declaration that Lipman makes about delegating the responsibility for the modeling of thinking and 'all those other good things' to both the text *and* the community of inquiry—a statement that I will unpack in greater detail in what is to follow—is the seemingly striking opinion that it is inessential for the teacher to serve as such a model.

My sense, however, is that this is a much more modest and familiar appraisal of the role of the teacher in the light of Lipman's understanding of the modeling function of the community of inquiry. Indeed, the teacher is seldom expected to serve as a model of inquiry precisely because, as is

the case in more traditional educational landscapes, reflective inquiry is seldom expected to be practiced. But in a community of inquiry it is not the sole responsibility of the teacher *qua* teacher to model for the community its inquiry procedures. Rather, that modeling function can be taken up by the text—if it is so designed—as well as the community itself. To reiterate, this is not to say that the teacher can never model inquiry in CI, but that insofar as the teacher does serve such a function it is because the teacher is a full-fledged member of the inquiring community, and not because the teacher has a special and distinctive status as a model of inquiry. As Lipman says, “We should be wary of ascribing all the modeling for higher-order thinking to the teacher...True, the teacher does serve as a model, but not as a model for reasoning procedures. I think rather that the teacher provides the model of someone who transcends rather than rejects right-wrong answers in the sense of caring more for the process of inquiry itself than for the answer that might be right or wrong at a given time.”⁶

The point to the above discussion concerning the limited extent to which the teacher serves as a model is to underscore the more important point which I want to make, and that is that the community of inquiry, along with the philosophical text, are the primary models of inquiry and philosophical thinking. In what follows, I shall attempt to make clear what Lipman’s understanding of a model and the function of modeling is and how the notion, when applied to the community of inquiry, carries with it profound educational and social significance. For Lipman, modeling is itself a significant activity that any healthy community of inquiry actively engages, so that community of inquiry itself functions as a model of the very inquiry procedures and social relationships which it engenders. In addition, I seek to show how for Lipman it is mainly the practice of inquiry modeled by the CI which becomes a model for the formation of a more salutary community life, rather than that the practice of community which the CI models functions as the model for the formation of inquiry.

Lipman’s Notion of a Model

As one might have detected thus far, I have been using the term ‘model’ more or less interchangeably in two main ways—one being what might be called a *noun-sense*, in which the term ‘model’ refers to a thing, in the sense of a replica, or a smaller-scaled version of an original, and perhaps, ‘more-real’ object; the other sense of model being a *verb-sense*, in which an object is fashioned or formed in some intentional manner. The difference here is between a *model of* something or other, and a *model for* some state of affairs. This manner of usage, I argue, is consistent with the understanding Lipman employs throughout his writings, and reflects a distinctive understanding of the notion so as to contrast it with other possible uses of the term. As I hope to make clear, this is no mere argument in semantics but rather a crucial point to be clear on as it helps clarify the educational and social significance of Lipman’s theory and practice of community of inquiry.

Initially, it will be helpful to turn, albeit briefly, to Lipman’s view of the philosophical novel in order to better tease out these two senses of the notion ‘model’. First of all, then, what are the philosophical novels a *model of*? They are a model of their own schematic mode of organization. The novels are narratives, but like most works of fiction they are composed schematically rather than

conceptually in that they arrange and organize states of affairs in a more organic and dynamic way so that, as Lipman puts it, “every detail counts and adds to the quality of the whole”.⁷ Conceptual organization, in contrast to the schematic mode, tends to arrange facts and states of affairs in a static way, as when, for example, a biographer assembles the details of a person’s life according to the *concept* of chronological time in which decade increments, the 1950s, the 1960s, and so on, serve as chapters. Lipman’s novels are arranged schematically according to cognitive tools and inquiry procedures, such as relationships, in the case of *Pixie*, or the rules of formal and informal logic, as in the case of *Harry Stottlemeier’s Discovery*. In this way, the novels are models of the schemata of thinking, the stuff that there is to learn from reading the novels.

Secondly, the novels are also models of the history of philosophy. Similar to the manner in which the texts serve as models of cognitive tools and inquiry procedures, arranged schematically rather than conceptually, the history of philosophy is also arranged according to its themes and modes of thinking, rather than say historical epochs, systems of thought, or the major figures of the tradition. When in *Elfie*, for example, the title-character wonders whether or not she is actually thinking at a given moment, she replies, “Dummy! If you can wonder, you *must* be thinking! And if you’re thinking, then...you’re for real.”⁸ Here we have in the text a clear appropriation, not of the concept of the Cartesian *cogito*, but of the manner of thinking peculiar to Descartes and the philosophical tradition. Following the first manner of being a model of the cognitive tools and inquiry procedures of philosophical thinking, Lipman’s novels are also a model of the history of philosophy in this sense. As models, the texts therefore are the reflections and embodiments of the rational and creative thinking that Lipman envisioned as operative in the full-fledged philosophical community of inquiry.

But what are the texts *models for* in the verb-sense that I describe above? I believe Lipman answers this at least provisionally when he writes that the philosophical text ought to be:

[A] work of art that has a specific job to do—to be consummatory in providing the experience upon which reflection will take place, and to be instrumental in providing trails leading toward that reasonableness and judiciousness that are characteristic of the educated person.⁹

Here we can see that what is at stake in the engagement with such a philosophical text is the experience and the formation of the reading subject, not the truth value of the propositions contained therein, or the exposition of the author’s thinking. The philosophical text is therefore a model for, as Lipman puts it, the practice and development of reasonableness and judiciousness. It does not *inform* us of philosophical thinking, but works to *form* us in philosophical thinking.

Before explaining how this double sense of ‘model’ is applied to the community of inquiry, I want to be sure that the notion, at least in Lipman’s rendering, is precise and does not imply other senses in which the term might be employed. By determining the contours of the notion of a model we should be able to get clearer on Lipman’s understanding of CI so that we can begin to critique the view that CI is primarily an environmental condition or structural situation in which philosophical

inquiry can be free to take place. I am suggesting, then, that when we talk about the community of inquiry model in a Lipmanian manner we must remain within the contours of the double sense of a *model of* and a *model for*, and that the notion of a model as a kind of deep educational structure in which we may have, for example, a “traditional model”, a “reflective model”, and so on, will weaken and thin the significance of the model and the modeling function in our understanding of CI.

The notion of an educational model in the structural sense suggests a foundation or configuration that would allow for certain educational practices to take place. In this way, when we think of a community of inquiry, and in particular, a classroom community of inquiry, we can assume that there is a larger system or structure inside of which that specific community would operate, for example the school system itself, or perhaps even the larger social structure. Now we may refer to this structure as a model, as in when one argues that classroom communities of inquiry require a reflective model of education to flourish.¹⁰ But I question whether we can refer to the community of inquiry itself as such a deep structural model, or if instead CI is a collective discourse phenomenon that occurs in concert with, or in spite of, the structural model that may surround it.

When Lipman refers to the community of inquiry as a model he does not employ the notion in the structural sense, though he does acknowledge the existence of such structural models. Instead, he employs the notion strictly in the noun and verb senses that I describe above and in accordance with the idea of being a *model of* a state of affairs and a *model for* a state of affairs. The question to turn to now is what, precisely, does the CI model?

The Community of Inquiry as a Model

Lipman gives us our initial indication when he writes the following:

In any community of inquiry, children will use other children’s behavior as models for their own. Each child’s conduct is seen as exemplary. If one child is silent, the others may be likewise. If one child asks a question, the others may again do likewise. These behaviors gradually become normal practice within the community.¹¹

Based on this passage, it would appear that the community of inquiry, by virtue of its constituent members, models behaviors. However, we must probe more closely to determine which specific behaviors are to serve as models of CI. After all, we know from the social theory of cognition, whether from early theorists such as Mead and Vygotsky, who heavily influenced Lipman, or more recent work by the likes of Bandura, that any social matrix will engender those social relationships in which the behaviors exemplified by the prominent members of the group are modeled and then, in turn, get appropriated by the newest members.¹² We can therefore ask, focusing on the details of this passage from Lipman, whether the silent behavior of the child actually functions as a model *in the community of inquiry* if, in fact, such behavior becomes ‘normal practice within the community’? While such modeling may be a sign that social learning is indeed taking place, my sense is that such modeling

would not indicate especially that social learning within a community of inquiry is taking place. Similarly, if question-asking functions as a model, is it the sort of question-asking behavior that would indicate whether the community of inquiry is modeling the behavior, or would we be looking at some other social matrix?

We must conclude that if we are to consider the community of inquiry as a model of certain behaviors, we need to be precise as to what those behaviors are. In this respect, much scholarly work has been dedicated to both detailing and actualizing those specific behaviors that would prevail in the community of inquiry. An excellent example of such scholarship was presented at the 1998 NAACI conference, in a paper by Maughn Gregory titled, “A Behavioral Pedagogy for the Community of Inquiry”.¹³ In this paper, Gregory makes an important distinction between virtues of inquiry and behaviors of inquiry. By way of a hermeneutical blending of both the virtue ethics of Aristotle and the semiotic pragmatism of Peirce, Gregory arrives at a definition of inquiry virtues as those “habits of cognitive behavior that are useful for rational deliberation.”¹⁴ Examples of such virtues would include habits such as impartiality, consistency, and reasonableness. But as Gregory is keen to point out, such virtues are not yet behavioral terms, but rather terms that describe dispositions to behave in certain ways which aim at furthering inquiry. So, in Gregory’s analysis, a cognitive virtue such as ‘reasonableness’ stands for the disposition to engage in more specific behaviors, such as ‘giving and asking for reasons,’ and ‘using criteria’.

With such an analysis in mind, an important question to raise at this point would be whether it is the virtue or the behavior that serves as a model? At first glance it would appear that there is not much of a distinction to make for it would seem a reasonable assertion to claim there exists models of virtues such as reasonableness, for example, and models of behavior, such as using criteria. However, a closer look at the manner in which models actually function, according to Lipman, should reveal that it is the behaviors and processes specific to the community of inquiry that serve as models, for the function of modeling entails that what gradually becomes normal practice or habit—that is to say, the behaviors themselves, and the virtue that *stands for* the disposition to engage in those behaviors—is what is ultimately being modeled.

This modeling function—of gradually becoming habit—is what Lipman calls, following Vygotsky, the process of internalization.¹⁵ In this process, any sign or sign-system emerging externally, from the culture or social group, is transformed into an internal form within the individual’s cognitive structure, thus securing the further self-regulation of action and behavior of that individual.¹⁶ For Lipman, a vast series of characteristic behaviors of the community of inquiry thus serves as models which get internalized so as to become individualized self-regulating behaviors—for example, when members of the CI request of each other reasons for their beliefs, individuals will internalize such behavior and begin to reflect on their own reasons for belief and action. Lipman writes, “And so with countless other cognitive acts and processes: They begin in each of us as adaptations of group behaviors. And since thinking is individual emulation of social norms and social conduct, the more rational the social or institutional conduct, the more rational will be the internalized reflection. A

community that has institutionalized patterns of criticism among its members prepares the way for those members to become more self-critical, self-controlled, and autonomous.”¹⁷

Therefore, what the community of inquiry is a *model of* are those behaviors that, as Maughn Gregory puts it, are “useful for rational deliberation”. Strictly speaking, the CI is not a model of inquiry virtues, such as reasonableness or judiciousness, or even of affective virtues such as empathy and care, at least not until those models have been internalized so as to become habit and normal practice with the community. But does this suggest that the modeling function would therefore cease once a clearly defined set of inquiry-specific behaviors is internalized by each individual and so institutionalized within the community? I think that such a suggestion would imply both that there is indeed such a limited set of inquiry-specific behaviors, as if altogether new behaviors, whether cognitive, affective, somatic, and so on, would no longer appear in the long run; and that each possible behavior could be so internalized by every individual that the community of inquiry would no longer in effect model those behaviors whenever they happened to manifest. While in principle it is the case that the modeling function could therefore cease, my sense is that if such a situation did emerge, the community of inquiry would lose its formative potency insofar as there would be no new behaviors to learn, no new way in which to be transformed behaviorally by the community itself.

In this sense, we might even consider—though I suspect that some behaviorists may object—that modeling itself is a behavior which is modeled within the community of inquiry. I am thinking here especially of those very intentional communities of inquiry that develop procedures for practicing inquiry-specific behaviors, such as assigning to specific members the making of specific inquiry moves—asking for reasons, offering counter-examples, etc.—so as to model those behaviors for others and to evaluate the degree to which the CI progressed or matured. If we agree that such procedures aim at generating models, then even the most advanced communities of inquiry may come to establish them and “come to think in moves that resemble [these] procedures”.¹⁸ Such communities of inquiry resemble Lipman’s philosophical novels in both the way they are intentional regarding their modeling function, as well as the way in which they model their own mode of organization—that is, as the novels are crafted schematically so as to model the schematic dimensions of philosophical thinking, so too would communities of inquiry with intentional modeling procedures be organized in accordance with the very behaviors they seek to model.

To summarize, then, the community of inquiry is a *model of* inquiry-specific behaviors, even of modeling itself insofar as such a procedure would aim at facilitating the internalization of those inquiry-specific behaviors. But we are still far from grasping the meaning and import of Lipman’s claim that it is “inquiry that makes for community and not community that makes for inquiry.” It is my understanding that when we look at the community of inquiry as a model in the second sense that I describe above, in the verb-sense, as a *model for*, in which an object or state of affairs is actively formed and fashioned in some way, then I believe that we shall see how it is that the modeling function of inquiry-specific behaviors in the community aims at the transformation, not only of that particular community of inquiry, but of communal life generally.

In a passage from *Philosophy Goes to School*, Lipman writes the following:

If we begin with the practice in the classroom, the practice of converting it into a reflective community that thinks in the disciplines about the world and about its thinking in the world, we soon come to recognize that communities can be nested within larger communities and these within larger communities still, if all hold the same allegiance to the same procedures of inquiry. There is the familiar ripple effect outward like the stone thrown in the pond: wider and wider, more and more encompassing communities are formed, each community consisting of individuals committed to self-corrective exploration and creativity.¹⁹

Here Lipman draws an image of the classroom community of inquiry as a model, not so much as a model of larger communities still, but as a *model for* them. While it is indeed true that communities of inquiry provide opportunities for the appropriation of the larger culture, Lipman gives us the sense that it is the community of inquiry itself which can be utilized by other participatory communities. While participation in a community of inquiry ensures that models of inquiry-specific behavior are internalized by each member, this internalization is then intended to be projected outward and brought forth into subsequent participation in additional communities, serving as models again for their transformation. This is why Lipman, in addition to referencing the community of inquiry as a *model for* community life, often uses metaphors for CI such as seedbed, a nucleus, and a stone thrown in the pond. The idea is that more than just being a model of salutary communal life and democratic social practice, it is a model for the transformation of other participatory collectives into inquiring communities.

This dimension of the community of inquiry as model for communal and social transformation underscores the need to be wary of the view that the community is solely the desirable environmental situation for the promotion of inquiry in Lipman's rendering of CI. This is not to suggest that the environmental situation is insignificant, but that it is the inquiry, along with the behaviors which are modeled, that pave the way for the formation of communities of inquiry. The model theory of the community of inquiry therefore takes into account models of inquiry-specific behaviors as being models for the formation and transformation of community life in general.

I would like to conclude by offering a brief framework of Lipman's model theory, incorporating both the modeling function of the philosophical text and of the community of inquiry. In this framework, it is the philosophical text that serves as a model in narrative form of philosophical thinking and community of inquiry, which in turn, functions as a model for the formation of philosophical thinking and communities of inquiry. The community of inquiry, in turn, serves as a model of inquiry behaviors which are internalized and function as models for the transformation of communal life in general. Here we have a framework that maps the modeling dimensions of Lipman's

Philosophy for Children program—from the text as model, to the community of inquiry as model, to the formation of reasonable and judicious communal life.

Endnotes

¹ Darryl Matthew De Marzio, “What Happens in Philosophical Texts: Matthew Lipman’s Theory and Practice of the Philosophical Text as Model,” *childhood & philosophy* 7, no. 13 (2011): 29-47.

² Matthew Lipman, “Pixie and the Relationship between Cognitive Modelling and Cognitive Practice,” in *Studies in Philosophy for Children: Pixie*, ed. Ronald F. Reed and Ann M. Sharp (Madrid: Ediciones De La Torre, 1996), 35.

³ Matthew Lipman, *Thinking in Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 212-25.

⁴ *Ibid*, 241; also, Matthew Lipman, *Thinking in Education*, 2nd Edition (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 101; and, Matthew Lipman, *Natasha: Vygotskian Dialogues* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996), 11.

⁵ Lipman, “Pixie and the Relationship between Cognitive Modelling and Cognitive Practice,” 29-30.

⁶ Lipman, *Thinking in Education*, 219.

⁷ *Ibid*, 220.

⁸ Matthew Lipman, *Elfie* (Upper Montclair, NJ: Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children, 1988), 2-3. [emphasis in original]

⁹ Lipman, *Thinking in Education*, 221-22.

¹⁰ See, for example, David Kennedy, “The Community of Inquiry and Educational Structure,” *Thinking: The Journal of Philosophy for Children* 9, no. 4 (1991): 20-23.

¹¹ Lipman, *Thinking in Education*, 219.

¹² See, especially, G.H. Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934); Lev Vygotsky, *Mind In Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, trans. M. Cole (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978); and, Albert Bandura, *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.: 1986)

¹³ Maughn Gregory, “A Behavioral Pedagogy for the Community of Inquiry,” *Analytic Teaching* 19, no. 1 (1999): 29-37.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 30.

¹⁵ Vygotsky, *Mind In Society*, 52-57.

¹⁶ See, especially, the ‘Afterword’ by Arkady A. Margolis, titled, “A Comparison between the Philosophy for Children Approach and the Cultural-Historical and Activity Approaches: Psychological and Educational Foundations,” in Lipman, *Natasha: Vygotskian Dialogues*, 117-29.

¹⁷ Lipman, *Thinking in Education*, 52.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 16.

¹⁹ Matthew Lipman, *Philosophy Goes to School* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 20.

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