

Contextualizing Community of Inquiry as a Democratic Educational Environment within a Wider View of Other Progressive Educational Approaches

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Abstract: *This paper takes a three-pronged approach to answering the question regarding the relationship between democracy and community of inquiry and other progressive pedagogies. First, a definition of a democratic educational environment will be provided within the larger context of democracy in general. Next, I will explore a number of democratic educational environments within a community of inquiry framework. Then, community of inquiry and Dewey's theory of democracy are examined together. This background leads to an overview of what a democratic community of inquiry looks like. I end by replaying the major themes of this paper.*

In its perfect sense, democracy "is not a fact and never will be." Nonetheless, without a guiding idea we would never engage in the work to eliminate the "restrictive and disturbing elements" which prevent a fuller flowering of democratic life.

[Citing John Dewey in The Public and Its Problems, 1927 (Boisvert, 1998, p. 57)].

Democracy as seen through Dewey's definition of freedom and equality

This paper addresses three questions regarding democracy and community of inquiry: (1) what is democracy, (2) what constitutes a democratic educational environment, and (3) how are democracy and community of inquiry integrated. The discussion of democracy looks in some detail at liberty and equality. The last issue we will explore here examines other examples of democratic education and provides a closer examination of community of inquiry in theory and practice.

Perhaps the hardest of the three questions to answer relates to defining a democratic educational environment. Within the definition of democratic educational environment, the term "democratic" is the one that is the most problematic. The reason for the difficulty is the complex and differing views of democracy itself. A way of beginning to address the joint problem of democracy and democratic education is by stipulating that democracy is defined as a process and not as a product, and maybe even more so as an ideal, something implied by Dewey's caveat regarding the definition of democracy, seen in the above quote. Seeing democracy as a process serves two purposes. First, it narrows the definition of democracy making it an activity and therefore a more useful concept for understanding individuals and groups engaged within communities: local, regional, and national. Second, democracy as a process and an ideal, as we will see later, is consistent with Lipman's (1980) understanding of a community of inquiry as an educational practice. Thus, we can at least get at what is supposed to occur in a community of inquiry, even if not all individual elements actually do occur in all inquiries.

Democracy

Dewey sees democracy as primarily a mode of associated living (Boisvert, 1998). This definition is essential to understanding the importance of both freedom and equality within a democratic society. Briefly, democracy, according to Dewey, is a way of living together that is characterized by a mutually created communication experience. “This means that the primary responsibility of democratic citizens is concern with the development of shared interests that lead to sensitivity about repercussions of actions on others” (Boisvert, 1998, p. 57). Dewey’s process definition is in contrast with the commonplace definition of democracy as a form of government, or legislative processes. Dewey is not primarily concerned with democracy as a form of government. Dewey is concerned with the way individuals live their daily lives in the company of others. It is from this Deweyan perspective that we will examine democracy and community of inquiry.

Democracy as a process involving conjoint communication experiences is built on two pillars that support democracy as a process: freedom and equality. Again, these concepts demand specific definitions. Freedom and equality, from Dewey’s perspective, are also defined as processes. These processes are not defined, however, in the typical way one would associate with discussions of democracy.

Freedom

Understanding John Dewey’s key concepts of freedom and equality is essential to understanding what it means to act democratically and what the role of education is within a democracy. Dewey examines freedom by re-visiting John Locke. Dewey argues that Locke and other Enlightenment writers, in arguing against the monarchy, saw the rest of the world as consisting of well-educated and privileged individuals much like themselves, rather than as the immigrant workers of the newly industrialized 19th century. What this meant in practice is that Locke defined freedom as the lifting of constraints. From his perspective, as a well-educated, middle class professional, all one needs to be free was to lift the constraints of oppressive laws or oppressive rulers. However, this definition of freedom is limited to those who have certain abilities and who attain a certain status. Dewey gives an example that I will paraphrase: If I speak English and French, all I need to be free to speak French is that there be no law that prevents me from using my language skills. However, if I speak only English, it is an empty statement to say that I am “free” to speak French. Therefore, in addition to seeing freedom as the lifting of constraints, Dewey also taught that freedom was related to growth. This conception of freedom as an ability that may be in need of development is essential to understanding Dewey’s democracy (that is, a mode of associated living), and eventually to understanding democracy within a community of inquiry.

Freedom as a lack of constraints, according to Dewey, was a simplistic concept that not only leads to a misunderstanding of democracy, but also, more importantly, to a misrepresentation of the human condition. Dewey suggests that there is no such thing as a completed self who only requires the elimination of extraneous conditions to reveal a full and complete human being. Rather, we are open-ended creatures, shaped and influenced by the cultures we inhabit, the languages we speak, and the relationships into which we enter.

Classic liberals, beginning with Locke, were wrong to conceive of freedom as something that exists antecedently and can be made manifest by the simple removal of restrictions. Rather, freedom is a capacity that may be developed through time and in conjunction with the aid of others. Freedom as the growth in power of effective action cannot emerge in a context where

one is merely free from interference. Indeed, increasing “effective” freedom often requires others (mentors, teachers, and colleagues) and, paradoxically, constraints in the form of discipline, effort, and practice (Boisvert, 1998, p. 620).

Freedom is practiced where one has the skills needed to be free, to make choices, to act effectively on the world. To act on the world is not to act in isolation from others but in concert with others. Freedom also requires sensitivity to the way our actions have repercussions on others. The reason we need to be sensitive to the way our actions affect others is because our actions also reflect back on ourselves. We are, after all, creatures who shape the culture we inhabit, the languages we speak, and the relationships we enter into. The shaping of the self is a process that takes place within a community; a community that is also shaped by many selves.

Dewey believed that the realization of a democratic life is a challenge requiring constant effort and attention. It cannot be reduced to the slogan “Leave me alone.” Instead of demanding a mere loosening of constraints, freedom requires self-scrutiny of our actions, especially the potential impact of what we do on fellow citizens.

Equality

Dewey has a unique understanding of equality, one that at first blush seems counterintuitive. Dewey sees equality as a form of individuality. He points out that even casual observers will notice that we are not equal, either by birth or by position in society. Further, if equality in its traditional meaning were to be achieved, it is not what most of us on reflection would wish for. A short story by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. called *Harrison Bergeron* provides an interesting case study for what that type of equality would mean in practice. Vonnegut’s trop is to set his story around the rebellion of a ballet dancer required to wear heavy weights, in his case, very heavy weights, because he is extremely physically talented. These weights are intended to make him equal to all the other ballet dancers who are less talented. This fictional example points to why Dewey does not advocate equality in the traditional sense of the word. Dewey celebrated difference, uniqueness, a sort of inequality. What Dewey criticized is a single standard to judge all individuals. In an open society that values equality we must, according to Dewey, have a variety of measures for excellence, not one measure that we are all judged by.

The idea of using only one standard of evaluation also works against our contemporary sense of identity as individuals and as groups or communities within the larger society. Charles Taylor in his essay called the “Politics of recognition” (1992) argues that one of the main themes of western societies is the recognition of the “self” as unique or equal in Dewey’s sense of the word.¹ Consistent with Dewey’s perspective, Taylor argues that identity is formed in communication communities or in dialogue. “The genesis of the human mind is in this sense not monological, not something each person accomplishes on his or her own, but dialogical” (Taylor, 1992, 32). The self is a creation of the community and not an individual act of volition. Even though the self, the individual human mind, is created in dialogue, humans still strive for a sense of recognition as individuals and as members of unique groups.

The demand for recognition

... is given urgency by the supposed links between recognition and identity, where this latter term designates something like a person’s understanding of who they are, of their fundamental defining characteristics as a human being. This thesis of identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them

a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves (Taylor, 1992, p. 25).

This desire for recognition (for individuals as well as for groups) is achieved by creating a system that values uniqueness. Dewey calls this type of uniqueness “equality,” while Taylor writes about dignity as his expression of recognition based on uniqueness and equality.

To re-emphasize the point, equality correlates with difference. Dewey’s perspective on equality is based on all individuals being members of communities. A community can only prosper if each member contributes to the community from her unique perspective with her unique abilities. To somewhat overstate the case, if we were all equal with regard to our talents and abilities, we would all make the same contribution to the community, severely limiting and weakening it.

Equality is a manner of regarding others, which refuses any absolute scale by which to judge them. People are equal in the sense that life offers multiple contexts within which to evaluate others. Democratic equality is postulated on the denial of any single, a-temporal universal context for judgment (Boisvert, 1998, p. 68). Equality, like freedom, is a creation of community. It denotes effective regard for whatever is distinctive and unique in each, irrespective of physical and psychological inequality. Equality is not a natural possession. Rather it is a byproduct, that is, a fruit of the community that comes about through action directed by the character and quality of the community (Boisvert, 1998, p. 68).

Neither freedom nor equality are given at birth, or even guaranteed by a legal system or a constitution except within large political bodies (e.g., national or provincial institutions). While constitutional and legal guarantees are essential for the workings of democratic governments, Dewey is more concerned with democracy as practiced in communal settings from neighborhoods to community groups to individual classrooms. Without democracy at these levels, democracy within a national context is empty; it is a sham.

Democratic educational environments

Given the above discussion of freedom and equality as essential elements of democracy, it follows that a democratic educational environment is one that promotes growth in freedom and equality. The key elements of a democratic classroom, then, is to encourage the training of students in freedom and equality. Pupils may not need to learn explicitly the uses of these two key terms, but it may help teachers if they understand in their practice that pupils cannot be given freedom or equality directly; they must be prepared to assume them.

A brief exploration of preparing for freedom might be in order. It is not too far out of line to think of freedom as an art. An art is “a skill at doing a specified thing, typically one acquired through practice” (Apple Dictionary, Version 2.1.3 [80.4]). Dewey views freedom in this light.

Is it possible to teach freedom in the classroom? To answer this question, we need to go back to our definition of freedom as the ability to act in one’s own interest while being aware of one’s actual and potential influence on others. In theory and practice this means that pupils need to learn metacognitive skills. They need to learn to think about the potential impact of their actions on others. This is a learnable and developmental skill. Robert Selman calls this the skill of perspective taking (2007). Selman’s skill of perspective taking provides teachers with some guidance on how to aid students in seeing things from the point of view of another. As a student moves from a perspective of seeing only his or her point of view to a reciprocal self-reflective point of view, and then ultimately to an in-depth societal perspective, the awareness of the

consequences of one's behavior on others increases (2007). Engaging students in discussions in which they present arguments and counterarguments helps them see more than their own perspective. Being able to see things from another's point of view is also one of the centerpieces of Dewey pragmatism. Specifically, the examination of consequences is implicit in seeing how one's point of view includes the consequences of one's own behavior. We will see later how the community of inquiry is a good place to take roles and examine consequences. The important point here is that this metacognitive skill of role taking is one teachable element of the art of freedom.

Freedom, as the ability to take effective action, implies some other learnable skills. Argument, I suggest, is one of the key skills of effective action within groups or communities. Deanna Kuhn's *The skills of argument* (1989) and *Education for thinking* (2005) are good sources for understanding how we can learn and teach this skill. Kuhn shows the similarities and differences between rhetorical and dialogical arguments, claiming that the similarities far outweigh the differences. Both types of arguments have the same structure: premise, support for premise, counter arguments, and rebuttal. The difference between the types of arguments is that in the case of dialogical arguments, the counter argument comes from the opponent, while in the rhetorical argument the counter argument is supplied by the writer of the argument. In a rhetorical argument, the writer must have an implied opponent with a stated counter argument, or the writer's presentation is not an argument.

This is but one skill that develops freedom for a pupil. A closely related skill tied up with the freedom "to do," or the freedom to act within a community, is the skill of inference making with regard to consequences of your actions or the actions of others. The ability to make good inferences is a skill that can be learned. With regard to inferring the consequences of an action, this skill is best learned in discussion within a classroom setting where one's fellow students' perspectives can be brought to bear on individual inferences. If we think about speech as action, many skills can be learned in a classroom discussion.

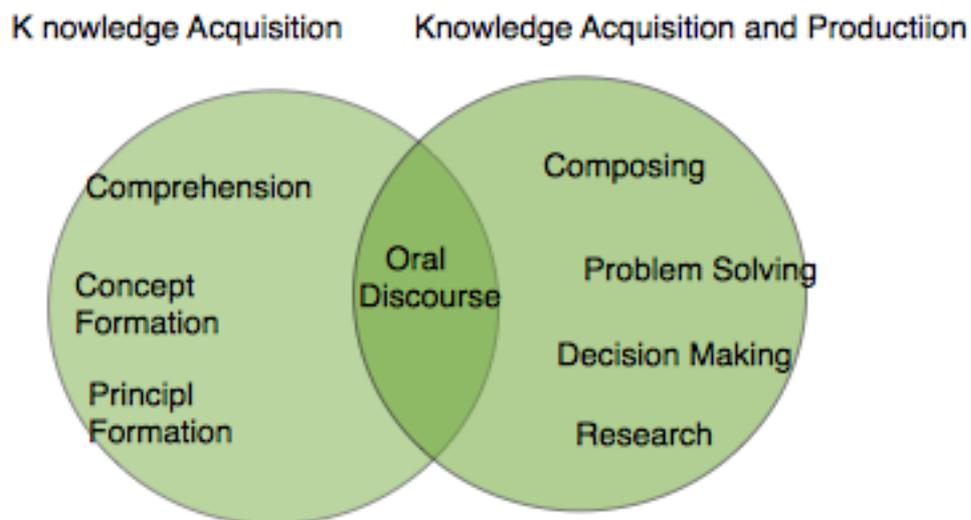
This concern for understanding through discussion would be an academic and moot point if the things learned in discussion were not usable in other situations. This leads to the question of transferability. Transferability is the application of skills and knowledge in new settings and to new information. Two elements of transfer will be explored. First, the traditional area of transfer, namely, what skills are learned and then transferred to a new setting. David N. Perkins and Gavriel Salomon (1988) explore the traditional understanding of transfer. The second area to be explored relates to the hidden curriculum, that is, what is the unintentional message students learn from the method of instruction. It will be argued that one learns that knowledge is tentative and learning is on-going from discussion oriented classes and that lecture classes teach a static version of knowledge and present learning as an accomplishment rather than as a process.

Perkins and Salomon outline two types of transfer: low-road transfer and high-road transfer. Low-road transfer is the type of transfer that occurs when I use the skills learned in driving a car to drive a truck. This type of transfer occurs in skills that are "over-learned" and in situations that have many surface similarities. Low-road transfer happens automatically. High-road transfer occurs in situations that do not have surface similarity (applying problem solving skills learned in math class to a new problem in social studies) and occur intentionally (Morehouse, 1992). To what extent is high-road and low-road transfer likely to happen in a discussion approach to teaching knowledge acquisition and knowledge production skills?

To understand what is learned and transferred in a discussion, the work of Marzano and colleagues (1989) will be used. These researchers list three skills that are used to acquire knowledge and four skills that are used to apply knowledge in a discussion. Oral discourse is the

conceptual space where knowledge acquisition and knowledge application overlap. The three skills that are involved in knowledge acquisition are: concept formation, comprehension, and principle formation. The four skills used in applying what has been learned are: composing, problem solving, decision-making, and research. Let's look at each of these skills in turn after briefly orienting ourselves to Marzano and his colleagues' understanding of oral discourse.

Marzano and colleagues look to the inventive and creative nature of oral discourse to explore its central role in building and applying thinking skills. The individual, in speaking, puts non-linguistic thought "into words in an act of invention" that brings into existence for the individual, and perhaps for the listeners, new distinctions that did not exist before verbalization (Marzano, 1989, p. 62). Marzano's understanding of conversation or discussion² includes the elements of informing, persuading, regulation, generating or expressing emotions, acquiring information, and stimulating divergence. The first of the knowledge acquisition components is concept formation. In discussing concept formation, Marzano points out the difficulties of helping students learn concepts: some highly abstract concepts resist direct instruction. In other words, these concepts cannot be learned by pointing, identifying another instance of the concept, finding concepts in a new context, etc. (p. 36). Enter the classroom conversation or discussion.



The concept of democracy is an example of a concept that cannot be taught directly. If some abstract experiences cannot be directly taught, then experiments, hands-on activities, life experiences, and discussions are the ways to indirectly teach and/or learn abstract concepts (Morehouse, 1992). In a discussion, students can generate examples, counter-examples, and model cases. They can explore and question assumptions, and then follow-up on the consequences of ideas (What follows from this?). These questions and probes can be taught by example and illustrated during discussions and during follow-up sessions and then applied to learning about abstract concepts.

Principle formation follows from and builds on concept formation. Principles are relationships between and among concepts in a discipline. As principles connect concepts, it follows that conversation, that is, a connection between two or more people, is a reasonable way to acquire an understanding of relationships. Four kinds of principles are discussed: cause and effect principles, correlational principles, probability principles, and axiomatic principles. The Philosophy for Children materials present many examples of ways to develop these principles in classroom conversations.

Comprehension, the last of the components in the knowledge acquisition side of the circle, is meaning making. Comprehension is making sense of the world around us by observing it in its various forms. Whether the information comes from books, films, observing an experiment or listening to music, comprehension encompasses the pulling out of new information and the placing of it with what we already know to produce new meaning(s). Making connections creates meaning by exploring what Lipman and colleagues call whole/part and means-ends relationships. It is also closely related to Arendt's idea of "inter-est." That which is between persons in a conversation, that which is interesting, is what connects people. Many strategies are currently being researched that aid students in comprehension or meaning making. These strategies include summarizing, predicting, and generating questions. All the strategies begin with the idea of building on what the student already knows and applying that knowledge to the new situation. As Marzano and colleagues point out many, if not most, of the strategies for developing comprehension are found in oral discourse or conversation.

These three processes are likely to be transferred to other situations if they are learned in the give-and-take of discussion. This chance of high-road transfer is greater if the cases are varied, that is, if concept formation, principle formation and comprehensive discussions have occurred in science classes, social studies classes, and language arts classes. Additionally, if these thinking processes are taught in a discussion format (and some research has indicated that they cannot be taught in a lecture format), this would seem to encourage students to be tentative in their conclusions, and to see learning as on going.

The four knowledge production or application processes taught in a conversational or discussion format are presented next. These processes are even more likely to encourage and instill the characteristics of tentativeness and life-long learning.

Problem solving, broadly considered, should include the ability to figure out restricted, narrow puzzles and enigmas, as well as fuzzy, undefined, open-ended issues and mysteries. Problem solving usually involves a general set of procedures, such as, defining the problem, breaking it into parts, exploring causes, and using metaphors and analogies. While these points can be presented in a lecture or a book, to be understood they must be examined, attempted, and reapplied ideally in a group setting. The conversation of a group of students will, under the watchful eye of the instructor, present solutions in a series of successively more helpful steps.

Competing alternatives, whether conscious or unconscious, are what distinguish problem solving from decision making. Alternatives imply action to be taken after the choice is made. Decisions have consequences, whereas problems have solutions. If groups make decisions together, they also share the consequences of the decision. Therefore, it is important that decision-making discussions are conducted only after the group has had some time to use discussion to form concepts, to form principles and to develop comprehension. In the process of these activities, the group becomes a community aware of the distinctive qualities of each member. They are thus in a better position to share responsibility for decisions.

Research done along these lines can be defined as scientific inquiry. The process has the following steps: describing phenomena, formulating hypotheses, and testing hypotheses. How can research be developed in classroom conversation? The answer is found in what comes before observation. Observation depends on having a theoretical construct in place in order that we have some context from which to observe. Karl Popper argues that it is absurd to say that we can start with a pure observation (1962). Therefore, I argue that while an observation may be done individually, the construct—the theory—on which and through which we observe can and perhaps should be developed in classroom conversation.

Composing, the last of the knowledge production or application processes, is the development of a product—most often in schools, a written product. Writing, and other product

forming, has three steps: planning, translating, and reviewing. Surprisingly, many experts see discussion as an essential requirement for writing. Process writing³ may be understood to include conversations with at least several other students at each step of the re-writing process.

Each of these four thinking processes is dependent on classroom conversation. Additionally, classroom conversations teach students about the tentativeness of knowledge and the on-going nature of learning. As conversations are always between distinct and equal persons, they are always open-ended. As they are always brought forth in tentative, incomplete statements, they encourage further exploration.

An implicit commitment to partial solutions and to continued exploration is perhaps the most important aspect of classroom conversation. Tentative solutions and continued exploration are built into the nature of conversation between equals. Built into the human condition is the need to make what is distinct about ourselves known to others. The advantage of a lecture is its efficient delivery of information. Research and experience have indicated that classroom discussion—under whatever name—is one of the ways to teach thinking skills that will be useful in new situations. When the value of community building is added to the teaching of thinking skills it becomes even clearer that conversation needs to be an essential part of any classroom.

If we follow Dewey's definition of equality as the recognition of the uniqueness of each individual, then equality too may be seen as an art. For Dewey, it is not just that we are unique—it is the recognition of that uniqueness that is of greatest importance to understanding how equality is developed. Freedom and equality reference abilities that allow us to contribute to the larger whole, and so should be seen skills to be practiced. To learn to listen to each person's perspective is to practice equality. To recognize the contribution made by each individual to defining a problem or contributing to a solution is to practice equality.

To paraphrase Raymond Boisvert (1998) in his chapter on democracy: A democratic classroom should be judged by the way that all of the pupils are able to develop their capacities and thus grow in effective freedom and genuine equality. A democratic classroom should be judged by the way that it encourages individuality, that is, the unique distinctive contributions its pupils are actually capable of making. Freedom and equality will then be a concrete present reality not a hollow echo from a mythical state of nature (p. 71-72).

How are democracy and community of inquiry integrated?

This part of the paper scrutinizes the theory and practice of CI within the context of a democratic educational environment and also provides a closer look at classroom practice.

Community of inquiry and democracy in theory

A working definition of community of inquiry is now in order. Lipman (1995) provides a good definition of a philosophical community of inquiry⁴. He states that a community of inquiry is a classroom “in which students can generate and exchange ideas, clarify concepts, develop hypotheses, weigh possible consequences, and in general deliberate reasonably together while learning to enjoy their intellectual interdependence” (p. 121). I begin with “learning to the enjoyment of intellectual interdependence” as it places all the other elements in perspective and stipulates the role of the teacher in a community of inquiry⁵.

The seemingly innocuous phrase “learning to” is important, as communities of inquiry are not a given; they are built, that is, we learn to make communities of inquiry together. This point is consistent with Dewey's idea about communities in general. Dewey states in *The Public and Its Problems* (1927) that community requires acting together toward an agreed upon good that

is consciously recognized and appreciated as a good by the group. Community also demands an effort by the group to sustain a recognized good. In a community of inquiry, we learn to recognize and appreciate common goods through the process of generating and exchanging ideas, developing hypotheses, weighing possible consequences, and deliberating reasonably together. (Lipman, 1995)

Intellectual interdependence can also be learned. It is about people and ideas. While ideas are (in some sense) independent from the people who state them, in a community of inquiry we must pay attention to both the person and the idea in order to give full weight to equality, that is, the unique contribution of each person.

Our exploration of interdependence begins with what Hannah Arendt calls interest. She defines interest as literally “inter-est” that is, “the space between” us. Interest comes about because we share a common framework as humans: the “web” of meaning. Arendt’s idea of interest is important to intellectual interdependence, to democracy, and to community of inquiry. A few words from Arendt will set the stage for the development of these points.

... the subjective in-between is not tangible, since there are no objects into which it could solidify; the process of acting and speaking can leave behind no such results and end products. But for all its intangibility, this in-between is no less real than the world of things we visibly have in common. We call this reality the “web” of human relationships, indicating by the metaphor its somewhat intangible quality” (Arendt, 1958, p. 183).

Arendt goes on to write that it is within these webs of meaning that we reveal who we are, that is, we tell our story through our actions in the world. A community of inquiry is also a “web” of meaning, a place where pupils’ stories are told; it is a community that remains intangible even as it is occurring. Stories shape and inform the community. These stories are not necessarily or primarily told as a narrative, but rather told as pupils speak their beliefs, their opinions, their critiques. These statements by students reveal not only what a person thinks, but also who that person is. “Sheer human togetherness” is what a community of inquiry strives to achieve.

The community of inquiry also reveals the “who” of a person as it unfolds. “This revelatory quality of speech and action comes to the fore where people are with others and neither for nor against them—that is, in sheer human togetherness” (Arendt, 1958, p. 180). Dewey’s idea of a community and Arendt’s idea of webs of meaning created by human togetherness are related in spirit and function. Both writers define humanness in terms of the way we come together. For both Dewey and Arendt, it is the way we come together that defines our humanness, each makes a similar case for defining humanness but from different perspectives. Dewey sees us functioning in community, while Arendt views webs of meaning as the way humans function as social beings. Both include an intangible sense of the good that is agreed on and committed to as key elements in defining this human coming together.

Dewey argues that we learn to be human. This learning occurs through the give-and-take of communication between the individual and distinctive members of a community. We understand and appreciate the beliefs, desires and methods of the community, and contribute to the use of our human resources and values (1927). In like manner, Arendt writes that action and speech are essential to our humanness. She argues that we cannot act in isolation—“to be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act” (1958, p. 188). Dewey’s emphasis is on learning, and Arendt focuses on the human condition. Human plurality is an essential part of the human condition. She defines the human condition as having the twofold character of equality (the ability to understand each other) and distinctiveness (the uniqueness of each person). This definition of humanness implies learning from each other. Being with others and neither for

nor against others (Arendt's phrase) is consistent with Dewey's definition of democracy as the manifestation of community life

Regarded as an idea, democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community itself. As Dewey put it, it refers to "...the tendency and movement of something that exists carried to its final limit, viewed as complete, perfected." (1927, p. 148). Since things do not attain such fulfillment but are in actuality distracted and interfered with, democracy in this sense is not a fact and never will be. But neither, by the same logic, is there or has there ever been anything that is a completed community, a community unalloyed by alien elements.

I hope that this short exploration of community of inquiry within Dewey's understanding of democracy and Arendt's work on action and speech make a case for community of inquiry as based on a theory of democracy. The case to be made now is whether or not a community on inquiry can achieve in practice what it purports to in theory.

Community of inquiry and democracy: What might it look like?

Rather than ask the rhetorical question "Is community of inquiry a democratic practice?" we will instead provide a model of what one might see in a community of inquiry classroom. It seems counterproductive and somewhat dishonest to ask a question that is inauthentic. To state my position clearly, I believe that community of inquiry, like democracy, is an ideal that can be approached but never fully achieved. I am using ideal as Dewey does when he writes that democracy "is an ideal in the only intelligible sense of an ideal: namely, the tendency and movement of something which exists carried to its final limit, viewed as completed, perfected." (1927, p 148) So what might a community of inquiry classroom look like? To paint that picture, we will look to typical individual and group behaviors as well as the dispositions and orientations of individuals and the class as a whole.

The physical organization of the classroom is likely to be the first thing that one notices. The desks will be in a circle and up to 20 pupils, along with the teacher, will sit around a large table. While this physical arrangement may seem to be a small and insignificant part of a community of inquiry, it is in fact quite important. If pupils see each other face-to-face, and the teacher becomes a part of the circle and does not stand apart, a sense of reciprocity and mutuality follows.

David Kennedy writes about the discursive space within a community of inquiry that he says is "symbolized by the space of the circle which we make as we're seated on the classroom floor or around a table" (1999). He sees the space created by the circle as allowing dialogue to occur with regard to posture, gestures, visual and phenomenological information as well as the actual words that are spoken.

I like to visualize the center of the circle as the conceptual space (Arendt's in-between that constitutes interest) as the place where the ideas being discussed reside. To appreciate this perspective, ask yourself where is the focus of a discussion when we are all sitting in rows facing the teacher? One possible answer is that the focus lies somewhere between the front row of desks and the teacher. While other perspectives are possible, at a minimum, the message of the "rows" arrangement is that of one to many (teacher to student) rather than one among many. In "rows" the exchanges of ideas is likely to be limited to teacher/idea/student/idea/teacher exchanges. If my metaphor of the "idea on the table" is a partial description of the place of an idea in a community of inquiry, then the dynamic of the classroom is altered in the direction student / idea / student / idea / teacher / idea, etc. While the classroom circle does not guarantee this dynamic, the "rows" arrangement clearly works against it.

Some of the behaviors likely to be seen in a community of inquiry classroom include “building on, shaping and modifying one another’s ideas” (Splitter & Sharp, 1995, p. 18). It is of vital importance that the topic for discussion is seen as a problem by the participants. If it is the teacher’s problem alone, a community of inquiry is hard to establish. While occasionally the teacher poses a problem, however, if this problem is to be engaged, it must become the classes’ problem. This is why, in the Lipman approach, the class generates leading ideas, rather than stipulates which ideas are to be discussed. “Ownership” of the ideas is essential in a community of inquiry. The students and the teacher will ask questions, pose hypotheses, and offer explanations that are directed toward a tentative solution to the agreed upon problem. A community of inquiry is shaped by the problem(s) it poses. While this problem may be redefined, expanded, or narrowed by the discussion, it remains in the “center of the table,” at the center of the discussion.

It is the central location of the problem at the metaphoric center of the table more than anything else that frames a community of inquiry. For example, if a community of inquiry is “self-correcting,” it is the problem that mediates the self-correction. An example might help. One possible place where a self-correction might need to take place is with regard to what counts as evidence. But the question of what counts for evidence is different depending on what type of problem one is addressing. If the problem relates to how people think about a problem (say, their opinion on a parliamentary decision), information from a pole is a legitimate source of information. However, if the problem relates to how a parliamentary decision *ought* to be made, then an opinion poll may not count as evidence—a different set of criteria are required depending on whether the problem is defined as moral, or as procedural.

To further illustrate the “idea on the table” perspective, David Leat of the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne presented a paper at the 8th International Thinking Conference called “Brains on the Table: Diagnostic and formative assessment through observation⁶.” His paper focuses on how students can see a verbal problem in terms of its parts, asking students to create a story taking different slips of paper that would allow them to solve the problem. The small groups were observed by teachers to gain insight into how students think about geography concepts. This assessment activity nonetheless illustrates the metaphor of keeping ideas on the table. In Leat’s activity students literally move pieces of paper on a table to construct a story, sorting relevant from irrelevant information and organizing the information to find the problem and to solve it narratively. Imagine a group of four or five students moving slips of paper around the table as they make a case for placing the paper in one area rather than in another area. As students manipulate the pieces of paper and argue for each placement, they engage in a very observable community of inquiry.

By making a method of assessment observable, elements previously invisible may become visible. The “brains on the table” activity is important to a community of inquiry as it makes tangible what a community thinking aloud might look like. This activity also illustrates self-correcting as we observe students making tentative choices that are later revised, which helps the problem solving to proceed. We cannot correct what we cannot see. Lipman (Lipman, Sharp, & Oscanyan, 1984) make a simple but brilliant observation: thinking becomes visible when we talk (or write). It is by making thought visible that improvement in our thinking abilities can be improved. “Brains on table” is another way to make thinking visible.

To further aid in making a community of inquiry discussion visible we should also pay attention to processes by asking questions such as:

- Who speaks when and to whom?
- What discussion moves are made and by whom?

- What activities foreshorten discussion and which enliven it?
- Who helps move a “stuck” discussion forward and what techniques are used?

In Natasha, Lipman (1996) presents an outline called “Forming a philosophical community of inquiry.” A few of Lipman’s points will be highlighted to underscore the democratic elements of a community of inquiry: (1) The class discovers that the text is meaningful and relevant, and appropriate for their consideration; (2) students initiate questions and the teacher recognizes the specific contribution of each student; (3) students and teacher make a decision regarding where to begin the discussion and the joint discovery of the problematic through discussion; and (4) the articulation of disagreements and the quest for understanding may be made by students or the teacher. These points were highlighted to show that there exists at least a theoretical consistency between Dewey’s ideas of democracy, freedom, and equality and Lipman’s understanding of community of inquiry as a form of democratic education.

Da Capo

What I have tried to do in this article is to connect some of the key ideas of John Dewey and Hannah Arendt, and to a lesser extent Charles Taylor, to Matthew Lipman’s understanding of democracy, freedom, and equality as exemplified in a community of inquiry, and thus, to a wider understanding of a democratic educational environment. Implicit in all the works on community of inquiry is the goal of meaning making. Lipman (Lipman, Oscanyan, & Sharp, 1980; Lipman, 1996) sees meaning making as the heart of the community of inquiry. The product of meaning making is an outcome of communal attempts at understanding each other and the world and therefore creating a conceptual space for democratic participation in a community. Meaning making can only happen in a mutually created communication experience, that is, in a community of inquiry.

Lipman’s community of inquiry as an ideal is consistent with Dewey’s idea of democracy. Taylor’s concept of recognition and dignity and Arendt’s “inter-est” point to a beginning for elaborating an educational perspective on freedom and equality that incorporate the importance of human rights. Human equality, that is to say, the recognition of uniqueness and identity along with the development of the capacity for engagement in the world (freedom as defined by Dewey), are essential in a multipolar world of heightened individualism and, along with this, an unprecedented splintering of perceptions. More than ever before, we need to look for the acknowledgement, or rather the emergence, of a common substratum of values that would make economically, socially and culturally viable coexistence possible on a worldwide scale (Kim, 1998, p. 18). I would submit that this common stratum of values may come from a Deweyan sense of freedom (growth in a conversational community) and equality (valuing of our uniqueness within communities).

While democracy has many meanings, if it has a moral meaning this is to be found in the ability to resolve that supreme test of all political institutions and industrial arrangements, namely, the contribution these institutions can make to the all-around growth of every member of society (Dewey, 1938, p. 186). Dewey’s statement about democracy as a moral concept should inspire us to continue our work as educators, seeing democracy in education as the starting point for building a human rights consensus and a more democratic world. Although a democratic educational environment is an ideal to aim for, we would do well to recognize that such a goal is never accomplished once and for all.

Endnotes

¹ Charles Taylor writes about authentic or individual identity in much the same way that Dewey writes about equality.

² I will use conversation and discussion interchangeable throughout this paper.

³ Process writing is an approach to aid students in improving their writing skills by presenting their essays to fellow students for feedback.

⁴ Lipman, Sharp, Splitter, Kennedy, Sasseville and others have recently included the word philosophic with community of inquiry. This paper will use the same working definition of community of inquiry but without the word philosophical both for easy of presentation and also to support the use of this approach in a wide variety of disciplines and classrooms.

⁵ Intellectual interdependence is the hallmark of the theory of community of inquiry as well as its goal.

⁶ This presentation was later published as "Brains on the table: diagnostic and formative assessment through observation" in *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice* with Adam Nichols, June 2010.

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