What is a 'Community of Inquiry'?

Abstract

When we speak about the aim of doing philosophy on the elementary school level with children as transforming classrooms into 'communities of inquiry', we make certain assumptions about nature and personhood and the relationship between the two. We also make certain assumptions about dialogue, truth and knowledge. Further, we make assumptions regarding the ability of children to form such communities that will engender care for one another as persons with rights, a tolerance for each other's views, feelings, imaginings, creations as well as a care for one another's happiness equal to the concern one has for one's own happiness. Lastly, we make assumptions about children's ability to commit themselves to objectivity, impartiality, consistency and reasonableness. The latter has social, moral and political implications. This paper is an attempt to identify and clarify some of these assumptions.

Not long ago I visited a teacher education residential workshop in Philosophy for Children, directed by two of our philosophers from the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children. A teacher told me upon my arrival that she thought they, as a group, had achieved their goal: they were now truly a community of inquiry. 'It took work', she said, 'but we got there'. They had been meeting for seven days.

At the time I remember distinctly experiencing a pang of revulsion not for the person, but for what she said. However, I said nothing. Later, upon reflection, I thought to myself, 'Why did I feel that way? Such a strong reaction. You yourself told these teachers in the book *Philosophy in the Classroom* that one of the most important aims of doing philosophy with children at the elementary school level was to turn classrooms into communities of inquiry. Further, you yourself asserted that this particular goal was not possible unless teachers themselves had experienced what it was to participate in such a community.' 'Perhaps', I thought, 'it's because you're not really sure what a "community of inquiry" is yourself that you feel uncomfortable when a teacher flings your own words back on you in a tone of self-satisfaction. Perhaps you experience a twinge of pain because you suspect that you might have been responsible for her disillusionment.'

Then I remembered something else. It was a story of a girl, named Mieke, that I had written in 1980. The story was really a story about inquiry and at the end of the tale Mieke, now middle-aged says:[1]

The dialogical education
  embued with inquiry
has to begin early,
  when children
are in the first years of school.
  And it needs to be reinforced
year after year,
  by teachers who understand
children and inquiry,
  and respect children's ideas.
These teachers must help children
  to think critically,
in an open yet rigorous way,
  building upon one another's ideas
as they live the life of inquiry.

  As the process continues
year after year,
  focus must always be on the improvement
of the inquiry itself
  in its relation to the problems
under discussion.
  It is this education,
and only this kind of education
  that will enable children
to think for themselves
  in an objective, consistent
and comprehensive manner.

  I think I know what a community
of inquiry is now
  when I see it.
But I would be hard pressed
  to spell out
all of its characteristics.
  It's something you live
year after year,
  so that,
after a while,
  it becomes a part of you.
And you can make it a reality
  for children.

Perhaps there are lived experiences that we know are genuine, recognize as such when we experience them, even though we can't describe or explain them in words. However, there is something about the notion 'community of inquiry', whether posited as the goal of good teaching or described as a lived experience, that calls for analysis and a ferreting out of identifying criteria and assumptions. Its very

nature calls for at least an attempt at a careful procedural description, if nothing else. Otherwise how would you know when you were experiencing it? Or how would a teacher know when she had finally transformed a classroom of students into such a community?

Now it is true that we have been able to pinpoint some behaviors that would indicate that a child might be experiencing what it is to participate in a community of inquiry:

accepts corrections by peers willingly
able to listen to others attentively
able to revise one's views in light of reason from others
able to take one another's ideas seriously
able to build upon one another's ideas
able to develop their own ideas without fear of rebuff or humiliation from peers
open to new ideas
shows concern for the rights of others to express their views
capable of detecting underlying assumptions
shows concern for consistency when arguing a point of view
asks relevant questions
verbalizes relationships between ends and means
shows respect for persons in the community
shows sensitivity to context when discussing moral conduct
asks for reasons from one's peers
discusses issues with impartiality
asks for criteria.

However, these behaviors do not really pin point the presuppositions of the notion 'community of inquiry'. It might be true that the process of education itself does not teach us anything that we didn't already know. Education should, however, help us become clearer about what we know, more able to make better distinctions, more able to recognize underlying assumptions, better from worse reasons, more able to think consistently and comprehensively, more able to criticize one's own goals and others', more able to criticize one's own thinking as well as the thinking of others. Education should help us to become more objective in our inquiry. Although it's possible that rationality may not lead to certainty, most of us, I think, would admit that human beings have evolved conceptions of cognitive virtues that have been of help in creating civilizations out of barbarous conditions. It's just not so that we would be better off without logic, open-mindedness, willingness to accept criticism, or consider alternative positions, willingness to subject our hypotheses to analysis, willingness to consider reasons, even though we may only approximate these traits to dialogue with one another. We would not be better off without impartiality, consistency and reasonableness, even though we may all live them imperfectly. And as we approximate these intellectual traits, we not only come to understand better the world we live in and other persons, but we approximate self-knowledge.

Relativity theory has made a difference in the way we think about things, including the process of education itself. Sure it has to do with how we think about matter, space and time. But it also bears on what we think of certainty and truth.[2] Many philosophers today would argue that there is no such thing as substantive certainty. Others would argue that with regard to truth, the best we can approximate are 'warranted assertions' that are always subject to revision. But does this condemn communities of inquiry to relativism, that is the view that there can be no way of adjudicating between conflicting theories or views of the world? No! Neither are communities of inquiry condemned to subjectivism, the view that each of us is condemned to live in our own worlds, bound to our own individual perspectives. Participation in a community of inquiry allows children to perceive the other's point of view and to take it into account in constructing his/her own world view. The dialogue always remains open.

We can educate children to identify and agree upon a procedural conception of what it is to reason well. By creating an environment characterized by trust and open inquiry we can also educate children to reason together regarding a balanced, humane conception of how to live well, while at the same time develop a more thoughtful tolerance of the diversity of perspectives that individuals have regarding what it is to live well. However, this education is an education in procedural principles (as contrasted with substantive principles) that can help young persons move towards objectivity, towards an impartial and shared view of the world that has been subjected to public inquiry. When I use the term 'objectivity', I mean an inter-subjective truth arrived at by human beings through inquiry, experimentation, consideration of the evidence and dialogue. This inter-subjective truth is always subject to self-correction. The 'warranted assertions' that we do come up with for the present to help us make sense of our world are truths that are asserted *after* the dialogue has taken place, not before. But as Lisa in Chapter 17 of *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery* states, there is always the possibility that a 'graceful error can correct the cave'. When this happens, as Kuhn has pointed out, our entire paradigm of knowledge is changed, and we begin to seethings in a totally different way. There was a day in the past when we stopped viewing the world as flat. A day came when we no longer thought of time and space as distinct categories. And perhaps there will be a day when we will see and act upon the view that all

people have the right to the opportunity to develop their potential. However, this commitment to open inquiry can only occur when children are given an opportunity from the earliest age to gain practice in participating in a community of inquiry, which itself is committed to the principle of self-correction, dialogue within the philosophical tradition that human beings have evolved to date. This dialogue is characterized not only by community, but by individual responsibility and commitment as well.

It might seem paradoxical, but the mind of the child is both educated and educative. (Socrates showed us that a long time ago.) When a philosopher asked a group of children this past year what they thought was the difference between hoping and wishing, one child said: 'Right up till Christmas morning, you can hope and wish for a certain present. But after you've opened it up, you can wish it were something else, but the hoping stops.' The same philosopher asked another group of children which would be more precious to them, snapshots one took when on a vacation at the seashore or one's memories of the vacation itself. One child said, 'My memories, because I'll never run out of film. They'll never be destroyed.' In discussing animal rights and human rights another child, in London, England, said: 'From a religious point of view, I think it is more morally wrong to kill an animal. Human beings have the opportunity to live in an afterlife, but an animal doesn't.'

It is through speaking to other persons that one becomes a person oneself. It is through speaking to others that the world is brought into reality. St Augustine tells us in his *Confessions,* 'and so I learned not from those who taught, but from those who talked with me'. Language and thinking are overlapping activities. To speak one's ideas to one's peers in the classroom is to create and express one's own thinking and in a sense to create oneself. Further, as Collingwood points out, 'the experience of speaking is also an experience of listening'.[3] In speaking to others the implicit is made explicit, and it is in this way that we come to know better what we have only known in a fuzzy kind of way. When discussing the difference between 'a difference of degree and a difference of kind', a sixth-grade class in a bi-lingual, bicultural school was considering a piece of coal that becomes a diamond. After the dialogue had proceeded for a good while, one child said, 'If you consider the process, you are talking about a difference of degree. However, if you consider the products, the coal and the diamond, you are talking about a difference of kind.' Her classmates saw her point and as one of her peers said, 'So when you are asked whether something is a difference of degree or a difference of kind, it depends on what you are talking about.'

For a child to participate in a classroom community of inquiry, he/she is put in a very strange situation. When one can understand what one's classmate is saying, one can attribute to that person the ideas which the words have aroused in you. This implies treating these words as if they are your own, reconstructing them in such a way that they make sense to you. The latter is essential if one is to respond appropriately. If our worlds are as much made as found (and I think they are), it follows then that coming to know for the child is as much a process of remaking as reporting on what is there. What this implies is that there is a world 'out there' to be discovered, but that persons bring to this discovery process a host of assumptions, categories, ideas, perspectives, which themselves color what they discover. In a sense they invent and discover at the same time. Because human beings are capable of becoming active agents on their world, their interaction with nature can make a difference. Persons have the power to humanize nature itself.

In a discussion about 'discovery' and 'invention' in a fifth-grade class in Newark, New Jersey, children decided that some things were definitely 'discovered'. For example, electricity. But the electric light bulb, they said, was an invention based on a discovery. The same, they thought, applies to magnetism and magnets. When the topic turned to 'the family', 'time' and to 'thinking' itself, they were not so sure. Some of the children maintained that these three things were inventions of humans based on discoveries about nature. Some even thought that the terms 'discovery' and 'invention' were misleading, that when we invent, we are always in the process of discovering something about nature and vice versa. One student argued that an institution like 'the family' is solely an invention, and not based on any discovery about nature itself. When his classmates presented him with a series of conflicting views, he said, 'Of course, I'm only talking about the nuclear family, as we know it here today'. When a philosopher asked the same children what comes first, the discovery or the invention, the children answered in chorus, 'the discovery'. But then one young girl raised her hand and tentatively said, 'You know sometimes you have to invent before you can discover. For example, you can't discover X-rays until you invent a machine to make the discovery.'

If it is true that we are in a sense constantly in the process of not only acting on nature, but shaping it in such a way that it constitutes a new world with each succeeding generation, at least to some degree, then it does follow that education should enable children not only to report inert facts that others have discovered about nature, but to gain the tools that they need to appropriate their own culture in such a way that they can use this culture to reshape and remake their own

world in cooperation with their fellow co-inquirers. This is not a solitary process. It must be done in dialogue. Scientists talk with other scientists, artists learn from other artists, anthropologists share their findings with other anthropologists and philosophers talk to other philosophers with regard to the important issues that shape our consciousness. And sometimes, although all too rarely, representatives from the different disciplines talk to each other!

Since each individual is surrounded from birth by other persons, human beings become conscious of themselves as persons, and their own ideas as they become conscious of others. To understand another person is to show as hearer that you can rightly assign an idea to another person as speaker. One does not acquire a language and later put it to use. To possess it is to use it, and in the using of it we become persons: 'The discovery of myself as person is also the discovery of other persons around me.'[4] Other speakers and hearers become the boundaries of the self. Thus to speak to others is to form a community of discourse, a fusion of at least two persons, their ideas, feelings, imaginings and creations.

As children in elementary classrooms begin to master the art of speaking dialogically to one another (rather than always to the teacher) the discourse should go through various stages. At first, it might appear to an outsider that there is only chaos. Children, at the beginning, have a tendency to want to speak all at the same time about things that concern them. But they learn soon enough that if they continue to do this, they cannot pursue issues that they themselves are interested in talking about with one another. Since they are beings who crave meaning, who desire satisfaction, they will not long persist at an activity that renders little if any growth when they are offered an alternative. It is at this point that the teacher can guide constructively. The students can learn to take turns, to listen to one another carefully and to reconstruct what is being said in such a way that one can respond. As the process continues, the pattern should move from a teacher-student, teacher-student discourse pattern to a student-student-student-teacher-student-student discourse pattern. A question-answer-question process should also begin to form. Questions, proffered either by the teacher or a student, give rise to answers, which in turn give rise to additional questions. Questions prod students to inquire, to look for solutions. Answers prod them to argue their point of view consistently and comprehensively to their peers. This presentation of one's views inevitably gives rise to further questions. Thus construction and reconstruction of ideas among all the students can be seen as distinguishable for purposes of analysis. But in reality they are inseparable when a group of children are discussing a particular issue in community.

The community of inquiry must come to pay particular attention to error. Children can learn to become attentive to the possibility of falsifiability and are particularly adept at coming up with counter-instances to their peers' examples. It is just these counter-instances that must be considered carefully by the group and, if valid, taken into account in the reformulation of the view under discussion. It is error that is the touchstone of truth, and as Collingwood has said, 'adducing the error within the discussion of an idea is the growing edge of one's education'.[5]

One might justifiably ask at this point, does this community of endless inquiry ever get anywhere? Does this process of endless self-correction have any product? Is there any one, true conception of reality or morality, even if all we can do is approximate it in dialogue? Here is where thinkers differ. Some think, as Richard Rorty affirms in his book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,* that all we have is the dialogue itself, the endless self-correcting process always being spoken within the philosophical tradition. Further, he and others think that this dialogue is sufficient to make the world more reasonable, more humane, because it affords procedural methods by which we can make the world a better place in which to live. Other philosophers think that the very fact that we can speak of our different conceptions as different conceptions of rationality posits an absolute truth. The very fact that we can agree that some thinkers in the past have been wrong-headed, or overly obsessed with an idea, or brilliant in some ways but limited in others, presupposes at least that we have a regulative ideal of a balanced intellect. As Hilary Putnam says, 'We do think that there is a fact of the matter about why and how particular thinkers fall short of the ideal'.[6] The notion of a community of inquiry is a very complex one. It presupposes some notion of truth, which in turn presupposes some notion of rationality and in turn again presupposes a theory of good. The good is dependent upon assumptions that we hold about such things as human nature, society, persons, morality and even the universe. It's a fact that we have had to revise again and again our notions of good as our empirical knowledge has increased and our world views have changed.[7] But the very fact that human beings have changed their world views presupposes a community of inquiry – a community of persons-in-relation, speakers and hearers who communicate with each other impartially and consistently, a community of persons willing to reconstruct what they hear from one another and submit their views to the self-correcting process of further inquiry.

At this point a teacher or a child may ask, 'Why be rational? It's all so complicated. Why not just do what

you're told, accept what most people think, and leave it at that. It would be so much easier.' The most direct answer I can think of giving this person is that the rational method – the method of inquiry – is the only one that will help human beings become fully persons, capable of autonomous action, creativity and self-knowledge. It's the only method I know of that will help one devise means to attain the ends that one thinks are meaningful and worthwhile. It's the only method that will enable one to make predictions and to live a self-fulfilling, morally satisfying life. In a circular way the satisfying life involves living the life of the method itself which presupposes rationality. (I might omit this last remark if I were talking to a child.)

Education is a process of growth in the ability to reconstruct one's own experience, so that one can live a fuller, happier, qualitatively richer life. However, in the attainment of practical knowledge (as contrasted with theoretical knowledge), i.e. knowledge that will help one live a better, more satisfying life, one cannot fail to recognize the role of imagining, and how important its development is in the early years of the child. Becoming more reasonable is much broader than deductive logic which in the end, as Gilbert Harmon points out, is mechanical. When one can reason, one can go back to one's own premisses and ascertain whether or not they are true, and whether or not one wants them as the premisses of one's argument. This ability involves our full capacity to imagine and feel, our full sensibility. These traits are not given at birth. They are developed through practice-living reasonably and imaginatively with one another in community. Such a community presupposes care: care for the procedures of inquiry, care for one another as persons, care for the tradition that one has inherited, care for the creations of one another. Thus there is an affective component to the development of a classroom community of inquiry that cannot be underestimated. The children must move from a stance of cooperativeness in which they obey the rules of inquiry because they want to gain merit to a stance in which they consider the inquiry a collaborative process. When they truly collaborate, it's a matter of *we*, not just personal success. It's a matter of our ideas, our achievements and our progress. A few months ago they didn't think this way, and they can be as surprised as anyone else when they begin to think in terms of 'we'. The transition is a wondrous process. A few months ago the child did not look at things this way, now she/he does. But children know that the group has taken on a great significance for them: each one's happiness means as much to each of them as their own. They truly care for each other as persons, and this care enables them to converse in ways they never have before. They can engage in inquiry without fear of rebuff or humiliation. They can try out ideas that they never would have thought of expressing before just to see what happens.[8]

Imagining is a crucial step in the growth of philosophical reasoning in the community. It is a crucial mental act. It expresses itself not only through speaking and hearing with regard to the philosophical dimension of one's experience, but through dancing, drawing, music-making, writing and science. It is imaginative philosophical dialogue that enables children to become conscious of themselves in relation to the other people in their world, and to the ideas and culture of which they are a part. It is such dialogue that enables them to make an attempt to understand another's perspective from her point of view, even if one doesn't agree with it, and only then subject it to critical inquiry. This is the essence of what we mean by education.

The role of philosophy within the elementary classroom is to form a bridge between the old and the new, to bring to consciousness the fundamental ideas of the culture in the child's own words, and to help the students through inquiry not only to make the tradition their own, but to imaginatively re-enact it and reconstruct it into a more coherent and meaningful version – a version that makes sense to them. Philosophical reasoning is open-ended. It points to new ways of looking at the world, new ways of understanding and perceiving. It also constitutes a method for bringing these new visions and versions into reality if they are deemed worthwhile by the community. It affords hope to the children of today, many of whom are disillusioned with the visions and versions of the older generation. As a work of Kandinsky may be as fine, as beautiful as a Rembrandt painting, new ways of seeing the world and deeming what is important and significant in human life are always possible for young people in a community of inquiry.[9]

Learning how to do philosophy well presupposes a community of shared experiences in which there are common procedures and commitment to these procedures. Intellectual habits are not taught by lecturing, but by creating conditions that enable children to gain practice in acting critically, fair-mindedly, reasonably, imaginatively, conditions which encourage them to be open to new experiences and to develop the courage they will need to change their old views based on new experiences. These habits are preconditions of open inquiry. It is the latter that has the possibility of developing in today's children balanced, harmonious and moral intellects.

In the best of all possible worlds, all education would enable children to cast off intellectual fear, 'corruptness of consciousness', as Collingwood calls it. It's this fear that hampers imaginative, intellectual

audacity and creative action. In the best of all possible worlds, teachers would do everything they could to facilitate children's coming to help each other slough off a cowardly reliance upon old ideas (often called facts) no longer tenable, even though the new ideas might appear unsettling. Too many children out of fear communicated and engendered ever so subtly by the older generation turn away from bold, imaginative ideas. It's these ideas they should share with their classmates in an open and critical manner, investigate their underlying assumptions, consider their consequences and create together means to bring them into reality if they appear, after reflection, worthwhile. Instead children are encouraged by society to turn their attention to something much less intimidating, like thinking skills or logic, out of a fear that the new ideas will not lend themselves to domination. (That is not to say that logic and other thinking skills are not necessary to philosophical reasoning. They are. But they're not sufficient. The discussion of philosophical ideas is just as important for the growth of children in intellectual autonomy.) This 'corrupt consciousness is the worst disease of the mind',[10] and is the most serious hindrance to the development of classroom communities of inquiry in which doing philosophy plays a central role.

Supposing I had said all this to that young teacher last summer at the residential workshop when she announced so proudly that she and her colleagues had formed a community of inquiry after only seven days. 'It took work', she said, 'but we got there'. Would she still have been so self-satisfied if I had painstakingly laid bare some of my thoughts concerning the assumptions of what I thought it means to participate in a community of inquiry?

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Notes and References

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8. For a discussion of this move from a personal, egocentric stance to a cooperative stance to a collaborative stance, see SULLIVAN. H.S. (1953). *Conceptions of Modern Psychiatry.* New York: Norton, pp. 14-27.
9. See GOODMAN. N. (1978). *Ways of World-Making.* Indianapolis. Ind.: Hacket, especially Chapter 1, 'Ways of world-making', and Chapter 2, 'Trouble with truth'.
10. COLLINGWOOD, P.G. *Principles of Art, op. cit.*, p. 336. Also with regard to dialogue among individuals, see SHERMAN, M. and STANAGE, S.M. (1968). 'The personal world', *Pacific Philosophy Forum* (now *Philosophy Forum*), **VI**, 4, May, 23-5. For Stanage, there is a distinction to be made between dialogue and dialectic. Dialogue is the actual encounter, the real involvement, the full commitment. Dialectic is the closest approximation of dialogue as actually in process and known reflexively as being-in-process. It is recreation, re-interpretation. Ruth Saw also makes a distinction between dialogue (which is not open-ended and manipulative) and conversation (which is open and carried on for its own sake). See SAW, R. 'Conversation and communication', *Thinking: The Journal of Philosophy for Children,* **2,** 55-64. J.M. Bochenski in his article 'On philosophical dialogue' uses the term dialogue much in the way that I use it in this paper. It is open-ended, nonmanipulative, conducted for the purpose of understanding one another and the issue in question.

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