Thinking in the Classroom

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In 1965, Vice-President Hubert Humphrey addressing the White House Conference on Education stated that our country would go down in history for having used its educational system to overcome problems of illiteracy, unemployment, crime and violence, urban decay, and even war among nations. Yet, within a few years cries from concerned citizens questioned the ability of the schools to even teach children how to read and write. (Goodlad, 1984, p. 33)

In the decade that followed, school boards, administrators, and legislators mandated programs and strategies heralding the "back to basics" movement. Yet the decade ended with the sobering report by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) which declared us a "nation at risk." This report not only set the tone for the educational refom that would mark the 1980s and 1990s, it also brought a focus to education that had never happened before.

As a result, states began appointing task forces to study what could be done to turn the educational system around. One of the most visible reform programs was undertaken in Texas, spearheaded by businessman H. Ross Perot, and focused on accountability and competency for both teachers and students. However, when the end of the 1980s saw only marginal improvements in student test scores (too often the only means of evaluating an individual's and school's perfomance, as well as the success or failure of intervention programs) President Bush declared that education would be a priority for his administration. On April 18, 1991, he announced ***America 2000: An Educational Strategy***, a plan to bring the nation toward the six National Education Goals which were adopted by the President and Govenors in 1990.

The purpose of this paper is not to argue for or against the national goals, but rather to focus on the context from which we approach educational reform. The rationale for these goals stems, in part, from the realization that we live in a rapidly changing world, a world whose future we cannot predict. Therefore, it would seem imperative that our society would have an educational system that provides its citizenry with the "attitudes, dispositions, knowledge bases, and skills which would enable them to function and function well." (Reed, 1991) Yet, when we talk of improving education the notion of reform appears to revolve around the existing education model and, for our purposes, we can label this model as the traditional model. Rather than restructuring the existing model, we first might want to rethink the model, in particular, the model of the classroom.

The rest of this paper will focus on the notion of the classroom as a community of inquiry, how a community of inquiry differs from the traditional classroom, and how a community of inquiry develops an individual's ability to think critically.

In order to unpack the notion of a community of inquiry one might look at the writings of John Dewey[1], in particular "My Pedagogic Creed" and *Democracy and Education*. Although Dewey never uses the term "community of inquiry", what emerges from his writings are the distinguishing characteristics of a community, as opposed to that of an aggregate, and what it means for a community to inquire.

In chapter seven of *Democracy and Education*, Dewey states that a community has two distinguishing traits: 1) likemindedness — shared interests, which include beliefs, hopes, and aspirations, and 2) commerce — cooperative interaction, a means of interacting with other groups. For Dewey, the community inquires when it focuses on the problematic, trying to make sense of the situation. One could argue, and with good cause, that the above hardly unpacks the meaning of a community of inquiry. Yet, as one pushes into the texts one begins to realize that much of what Dewey has to say about education is packed into an understanding of a community of inquiry. Therefore, to help clarify our definition we can use Dewey to compare a community of inquiry to the traditional classroom.

In "My Pedagogic Creed" Dewey defines what he believes education is, what the function of the school is, what is the subject matter of education, what is the nature of the method, and what is the relationship between the school and social progress. His educational philosophy is built upon the notion of reconstruction of experience. For Dewey, experience is primarily a noncognitive affair, comprised of an active and passive side. It is a "trying" (active side), we push against our environment, and an "undergoing" (passive side), the environment pushes back (Dewey, 1916, p. 139). Experience only becomes a cognitive affair when one "endeavors to discover the specific connections" between the trying and the undergoing, when the members of the community mine the experience for all its meaning (Dewey, 1916, Ch. 11). The student, then, becomes an active participant in his/her learning, working cooperatively with other members of the community, questioning one another, and urging one another to push deeper and harder into the issue.

On the other hand, in the traditional model one finds education concerned primarily with the accumulation of information, information that is passed from the teacher to the student. Information acquisition then becomes the center of the educative process rather than a tool for making sense of the educative experience. Rather than being actively involved in the learning process, the student is expected to passively and mechanically store, memorize, and repeat the information. John Goodlad, in *A Place Called School*, points out that "rarely is there evidence to suggest instruction goes much beyond mere possession of information... to a level of understanding its implications and either applying it or exploring its possible applications." (p. 236) Nor does he find activities that arouse curiosity, involving the students in seeking solutions not already laid out by the teacher or the text. With the exception of the early grades (kindergarten through third grade) where Goodlad finds more of an emphasis on experiential activities the use of the experiential diminishes as the child progresses through middle school and high school. "Consequently, what students are asked to relate to in school becomes increasingly artifical, cut off from the human experiences subject matter is supposed to reflect." (p. 266)

Dewey argues that this artificiality is a result of ignoring the child's interest. Dewey's notion of interest (a notion, it should be noted, that is often misunderstood) is integral not only to the understanding of a community of inquiry, but more important, it is essential to the educative process. Dewey states that there are two sides to the educative experience: the psychological (the individual's interest) and the sociological (the interests of society), and in order for education to occur, the teacher must be cognizant of both sides. Dewey writes, "the child's own instincts and powers (the psychological side) furnish the material and give the starting point for all education" but only the starting point. In order for the child's interests to become meaningful, to use the psychological side to educate, the teacher "must translate them into their social equivalents. We must carry them back into a social past and see them as the inheritance of previous social activities" (Dewey, 1981, p. 443-444).

Dewey is not advocating "wallowing" in the child's interest; indeed, he admonishes this kind of sentimentalism. By interest, Dewey means "what is between," the connection between the child and the object or subject. "To be interested is to be absorbed in, wrapped up in, carried away by some object" (Dewey, 1916, p. 126). The teacher's task, then, is to discover the relationship that exists between the individual and the subject areas, to help the child see those connections by "utilizing activities in which the child has a concern, in whose outcome the child has something at stake, and which cannot be carried through without reflection and judgment" (Dewey, 1916, p. 132). This is an education that

is not only concerned with preparing the child for an uncertain future, but more importantly, with giving the child "command of himself; ...to train him that he will have the full and ready use of all his capacities" (Dewey, 1951, p. 445).

For the community of inquiry interest **is** the fuel of inquiry. The teacher's task, again, is to discover the members' interests, listening carefully so as not to mistranslate those stated interests. Moreover, the teacher must aid the community (by gently probing and/or asking follow-up questions) in seeing a distinction between a real interest and an apparent one. As Reed points out there are times when the "interests are expressed in an inchoate manner and frequently the attempt at expression by the student obscures the nature of the real interest" (Reed, 1991). Stated another way, the teacher attempts to move the child from a simple psychological claim to a more significant, philosophical claim. For example, the psychological interest in how Stuart Little felt after Marjalo left can be seen as pointing to a philosophical interest in "friendship."

But when one looks at the traditional classroom one finds Dewey's notion of interest practically non-existent. In fact, what one finds is the subject matter providing the starting point for the educative experience, as if subjects are complete in and of themselves. As Goodlad states:

> *There is a short-term view of what is to be learned — topics and facts rather than basic concepts and relationships; focus on what can be acquired in a week or semester and then measured rather than the long-time maturation of intellectual capabilities; observing rules rather than becoming increasingly self-disciplined.* (p. 227)

Although schools are criticized for neglecting the "basics" (reading, writing, and math computations), Goodlad's research repeatedly points out that the majority of teachers "are preoccupied with trying to teach precisely what we blame them for not teaching" (p. 234). He notes that if you walk into any of the 1000 schools his study sampled you would find, over 50 percent of the time, students engaged in passive activities (written work, listening, and preparing for assignments), activities which are almost exclusively set and monitored by teachers (p. 105). Although Goodlad criticizes teachers for either not knowing how to "vary their instructional procedures, or choosing not to," what may be overlooked is the fact that teachers replicate in their classrooms their own educative experience (p. 123). In other words, they teach as they were taught. If we, as teacher educators, are serious about inquiry, then we must educate our future teachers by methods of inquiry rather than "telling" them about inquiry.

Dewey, likewise, places an enormous responsibility on teachers. Not only must they have a certain expertise about children in general (their developmental stages) and children specifically (the interests of the individual child in the classroom), teachers must have a certain expertise concerning society (the needs of society at that given time). One could argue that this places too much responsibility on teachers; yet, if we accept Dewey's and Goodlad's claim that "interest" is vital to the educative experience, then teachers must see their role in a different light.

In a comunity of inquiry, the teacher-student relationship is based on what Whitehead calls a "kind of scholarly ignorance," where the teacher is a co-inquirer, a participant who, like his/her students, is trying to figure things out, to uncover meaning (1976, p. 39). Neither Dewey nor Goodlad imply that the teacher relinquishes his/her authority. Rather than being a "storehouse of knowledge" and "the dispenser of academic praise and blame," the teacher is a sort of "midwife" to the inquiry (Reed, 1985, p. 235). Using his/her greater experience the teacher aids the conversation by encouraging certain sorts of discussions, by pointing out that certain topics seem to have a "logical priority" over others, by facilitating progress within the conversation (enabling the students to make sense of their experiences), and by relating the conversation (the inquiry) to the existing curriculum, thereby making the "curriculum work more effectively" (Reed, 1985, p. 232). Not only does the teacher relate the inquiry to the curriculum, he/she also presents skills and facts, not as isolated entities but rather as tools to aid the members in furthering the inquiry. In doing so the teacher aids the children in understanding "that mining certain logical questions is a helpful device for mining other ethical ones. Learning about transactivity and symetry in logic is, at least, a useful tool for the setting of certain ethical problems" (Reed, 1992, p. 21).

From the discussion at hand one begins to notice two important distinctions within the community of inquiry. First, the teacher utilizes conversation/dialogue as a pedagogic tool. He/She recognizes that lecture is appropriate on occasion (background information, explanations), but more importantly, the teacher values conversation/dialogue as a "device for communication; a tool through which one individual comes to

share the ideas and feelings of others" (Dewey, 1981, p. 449-450). In this sense talk is a powerful tool in the classroom. As the teacher talks **with** the children, as opposed to talking **to** them, he/she puts them in a position not only to voice what they think, but to reflect upon what they think. Within the community a premium is placed not only on giving good reasons for one's statements, but, and just as important, to understand for oneself the reasons why one thinks as one does.

Too often what one hears in the classroom is either the voice of the teacher lecturing or quizzing, or silence. When students are allowed to participate the responses are similar to fill in the blanks or to guess what the teacher has in mind (Goodlad, 1984, p. 108-109). Rarely are students encouraged to question the teacher and/or each other, nor given the opportunity to wrestle with questions of a philosophical nature (Goodlad, 1984, p. 108-109).

Secondly, within the comunity of inquiry there is a focus on the philosophical, inquiring into knowledge, reality, aesthetics, ethics. Dewey argues that these elements are essential to one's "reconstruction of experience" (Dewey, 1981, p. 525-540).

Knowledge, in the traditional classroom, is based upon a certain epistemology, or theory of knowledge. In this context, knowledge is presented as something that "accurately mirrors" the world and can be transmitted "clearly and precisely" from one individual to another (Benjamin and Echeverria, 1992, p. 64). Students are viewed as empty vessels waiting to be filled. On the other hand, in a community of inquiry knowledge is seen as something that emerges from the dialogue. Each individual brings a unique perspective to the community and as the members talk and share their experiences, meaning is created, reflected upon, assessed, and then recreated. In other words, as members listen to one another and reflect upon what is said their individual perspectives are changed and enhanced. The members of the community come to see knowledge as a social element "rooted in human interests, activities, and conditions" (Benjamin and Echeverria, 1992, p. 77).

Not only does the community view knowledge (meaning) as a function of context, but it is also the means by which the community inquires into questions of aesthetics and ethics. Dewey argues that traditionally aesthetic experience is divorced from the "everyday events, doings, and sufferings that constitute experience;" moreover, the individual equates the aesthetic experience with the "art" housed in museums and galleries (Dewey, 1984, p. 525, 528). Not only are the "arts" taught as isolated subjects, too often what takes place in the traditional classroom is talk centered around techniques, critiques, and composition. Rarely are questions of aesthetics integrated throughout the curriculum.

What one attempts within the community of inquiry is to enable the child to connect aesthetic experience to his/her own experiences. Dewey argues that in order to understand aesthetics in everyday experience, as well as its "ultimate and approved forms (fine art), one must begin with it in the raw; in the events and scenes that hold the attentive eye and ear of man, arousing his interest and affording him enjoyment as he looks and listens" (Dewey, 1951, p. 527). Dewey cites the example of the "intelligent mechanic engaged in his job, interested in doing well and finding satisfaction in his handiwork, caring for his materials and tools with geniune affection, is artistically engaged" (Dewey, 1981, p. 528).

Dewey argues that there is a danger in separating the aesthetic from experience: it creates a "remoteness" that not only makes the "works of fine art seem anemic to the mass of people," but more importantly, it robs the individual of a necessary tool in understanding his/her own experiences

Likewise, Dewey states that the "best and deepest moral training is precisely that which one gets through having to enter into proper relations with others in a unity of work and thought. An educational system that destroys or neglects this unity renders it difficult or impossible to get any genuine moral training" (Dewey, 1981, p. 447). If Dewey is right, then proposals to mandate ethics courses (a response to problems of juvenile crime and violence) within the traditional classroom may prove futile. Goodlad voices Dewey's claim:

> *From the beginning, students experience school and classroom environments that condition them in precise behaviors — seeking "right" answers, conforming, and reproducing the known. These behaviors are reinforced daily by the physical restraints of the group and the classroom, by the flat, neutral emotional ambience of the classroom, by the emphasis on individual achievement and performance, by the kinds of questions teachers ask, by the nature of the seat-work exercises assigned, and by the format of tests and quizzes. They are further reinforced by the nature of the rewards — particularly the subtleties of implicitly accepting "right" answers and behaviors while ignoring or otherwise rejecting "wrong" or deviant ones.* (p. 236)

The community of inquiry recognizes that it is also a moral community (Pritchard, 1992, p. 30). As a sense of community develops within the classroom certain ethical dimensions emerge: taking turns, listening carefully, speaking when appropriate and learning tolerance and respect for other persons. As Sharp explains:

> *... a community of inquiry consists of persons, speakers and hearers who communicate with each other impartially and consistently, who willingly reconstruct what they hear from one another, and who submit their views to the self-correcting process of further inquiry.* (p. 42-43)

The ethical inquiry discussed here is not to be equated with exercises in using moral dilemmas or values clarification; rather, the dialogue provides the children the "opportunity to sort out subtle and complex features of situations calling for moral reflection" (Pritchard, 1992, p. 27). Pritchard illustrates this point in a 5th grade class discussion on retaliation. The discussion focused more on the "consequences of retaliation (does it set off a chain of events), does retaliation really get things even (does this notion even make sense);" rather than whether or not the act of retaliation was appropriate or not within the context of the novel (Pritchard, 1992, p. 28).

What Pritchard observed was a thoroughness with which the students approached the discussion. "These were thoughtful responses, made in full awareness of the uncertainties present in the situation under discussion." He concludes that inquiry "contributes to one's moral education" providing children with an environment that yields an "understanding of the moral nuances of situations within their range of experience" (p. 29). The discussion, to this point, has tried to yield meaning to the notion of a community of inquiry. It is also hoped that is has put the practitioner in a position to not only rethink his/her own pedagogy — to see "school as a place that could and should encourage the child to mine his or her experience in a systematic and intense fashion," but to then ask how one would go about doing that in the classroom (Reed, 1992b, p. 21).

One way is to look at Philosophy for Children, a program that is rooted, to a large extent, in the writings of John Dewey. Philosophy for Children began in 1969 when Matthew Lipman, along with other educational reformers, expressed concern that the schools should do a better job of developing a child's thinking skills. Lipman also noted that children who eagerly entered school, "interested and curious about making sense of their lives and learning how to deal with their experiences," soon began to dislike school. For many children, school (as Goodlad also points out) is the "place where their interest and curiousity is killed" (Reed, 1992a, p. 147). Lipman concluded that solutions would not come from programs that emphasized skills-based learning and reasoning, programs which he views as inadequate in helping individuals make sense of the situations which confront them (Lipman, Sharp, and Oscanyan, 1980).

What Lipman noted as important was a "significant similarity between the activity of philosophers and the activity of children" (Reed, 1992a, p. 148). Based on this notion Lipman founded the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children at Montclair State College in New Jersey. From the beginning of the program Lipman envisioned a program that views thinking and thinking well as important as other aspects of the curriculum (Lipman, Sharp, and Oscanyan, 1980). Lipman based his program on three assumptions:

1. children are capable of dealing with and interested in the traditional problems of philosophy, but
2. what keeps them away from developing their capacity and interest is the forbidding terminology of philosophy, and
3. that it is possible to present the traditional problems of philosophy to children in such a way that these questions can be divested of their forbidding terminology.

Lipman began with a novel entitled *Harrry Stottlemeier's Discovery* (in which a group of children model a community of inquiry) to test his assumptions. Not only did the program prove to be statistically significant (in the areas of reasoning, reading, and mathematics), but there is also reason to believe that it is effective in addressing cognitive problems (Reed, 1992a, p. 149).

Philosophy for Children, replicating the Deweyian model, begins with the common experience of reading a chapter from one of Lipman's novels. The teacher then lists the ideas that the children find interesting, important, or problematic. This list provides the agenda for the discussion. As the members talk the teacher facilitates the discussion, encourages inquiry, and uses the accompanying teacher's manual to present activities which not only help the children clarify their ideas, but also learn the skills of informal and formal logic.

Admittingly the preceding discussion provides only a brief overview of a Philosophy for Children discussion and does not reflect the intrica-

cies involved in facilitating the discussion (the reader may want to see previous sections of the paper which discuss the role of interest, the role of the teacher, and the use of conversation/dialogue). Yet, Philosophy for Children strives not only to create an "environment in which children can be sensitized to and gain practice in the art-like endeavors of setting significant problems and experiencing the force of those problems" (Reed & Witcher, 1992), but also strives to develop the intellectual habits of "acting critically, fair-mindedly, reasonably, and imaginatively" (Sharp, 1987, p. 39); and thereby empowering the children to perceive critically the world in which they live.

This paper has attempted to put us in a position to reflect upon our practice, to see our practice within the context of our students' lives. As Dewey states, education is the means by which

> *society can formulate its own purposes, can organize its own means and resources, and thus shape itself with definiteness and economy in the direction in which it wishes to move.* (1981, p. 453)

If we want, as President Bush has stated, a citizenry that is critical and creative, meeting the challenges of the future, then we must view education, as Dewey states, as "society's paramount moral duty," ensuring the "full growth of all individuals." To have any other aim, continues Dewey, is "narrow and unlovely, and acted upon destroys our democracy" (1981, p. 455).

If we agree with Dewey, then we must look and look hard at our pedagogy and what it does to our students. We must ask ourselves if it is a pedagogy that promotes the status-quo, or is it a practice by which individuals learn to deal critically and creatively with their experiences; thereby discovering themselves as active participants who come together as a community to talk, to listen, to learn, and to rename and remake their world.

NOTES

1. Although the notion of a community of inquiry is attributed to Charles Sanders Peirce, it is Dewey who seems to unpack that notion.

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