The Real Behavioral Demands of a Community of Inquiry

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The discussion began quickly after a reading of the text, and has been gaining momentum for half an hour. As is common with such group philosophical inquiry, a number of different subthemes have developed along with what could be called the main item of discussion. The pace is fast, and there is precious little time between contributions, as the participants jockey for the next opportunity to hold the floor. Interesting and provocative points are being made, and there is spirited disagreement. The teacher, or facilitator displays a small role, at times choosing the next speaker, at other times ceding this process to the group itself. To the outside observer, this group discussion appears vibrant, productive and decentralized.

Should we look a bit closer, though, we may find some troubling phenomena. Some participants hold a hand up, or try to indicate to the facilitator in some other way their desire to speak. The facilitator notes their signal and nods. Meanwhile, there is a slight pause in the talking. The facilitator motions to a waiting participant. But before she can speak, another simply jumps in, unable to restrain himself. Explaining that he has but a quick point to make, he proceeds to talk for several minutes, venturing into side details until, during a quick hesitation, another participant quickly enters. This other person reacts to the secondary point made just before. Those with their hands up or awaiting their turn sigh in frustration.

More hands go up. The facilitator acknowledges them, and jots down names in order of appearance. When the speaker finishes, this facilitator must interrupt he who had just spoken from jumping in again, cordially explaining that there are many others with the desire to speak. This is apparently understood by all, and a woman who had been waiting ten minutes begins to respond to an earlier point. She finishes with a very relevant and important question to the group. The facilitator motions to another who has been waiting.

Completely ignoring the question just posed, he responds to another point made earlier. This arouses the excitement of several assertive group members, who simultaneously enter the discussion, verbally jostling for the floor. Between them, another 10 minutes go by before the facilitator must again intervene. The woman's question, bearing on an earlier and central theme, is never addressed.

This could be a description of a grade or high school group, unaccustomed to open group inquiry, struggling towards a constructive discussion. Or it could be a group of teachers participating in a philosophy for children workshop or seminar in the early stages of a community of inquiry. But more importantly, it could easily be a group of professional philosophers, experienced teacher-educators in philosophy for children, attempting to play by the rules of a community of inquiry, supposedly manifesting the behaviors they seek to elicit in teachers and children.

In the world of philosophy for children, we speak incessantly about community of inquiry. In many ways, the community of inquiry is the heart of this educational approach. Young people discussing philosophical ideas, the development of critical, creative and/or higher order thinking skills ... these ideas are not new nor unique to philosophy for children. Doing all this within the environment of a community of inquiry **is**. Since much of how we define our work hinges on this, we must be clear as to the assumptions and implications of the community of inquiry. We must honestly understand what is expected of us as members of a community of inquiry. If not, we may well exhibit behaviors which run contrary to community of inquiry standards at precisely the moment when we should be models of such behavior.

Many who have experienced teacher-educator workshops or conferences will recognize the description given above. They may even see such dominating manners in themselves. As most would agree, a community of inquiry is a very difficult thing to form. The question is, are the required behaviors and ways of being too difficult for many of us as individuals ... perhaps even impossible? As educators and intellectuals, do we value our own ideas so much as to blind us to the imperatives of the community? Indeed, are we capable of sacrificing our precious ideas before another which appears to us far less significant, or even absurd?

To address these questions, let us first look at the paradigm notion of community of inquiry normally at work in philosophy for children, and later at the behaviors this assumes and responsibilities it implies. Here we will address the practical side of the community of inquiry as it may occur in classrooms, conferences and/or seminars.

Most readers are aware that the phrase "community of inquiry" is borrowed from Charles Pierce, who at the time of coining it was referring to the international community of "reasonable" inquirers engaged in the "struggle to attain belief" ...or at least a temporary resting point from the "irritation of doubt". Inquiry, as the struggle to attain belief could be an individual pursuit, and indeed Dewey later elevated it into a description (or prescription) of how we (should) think. Pierce, however, saw the importance of community in helping each inquirer arrive at more reliable beliefs. A working community, after all, not only augments the efforts of each individual, but issues in results beyond that of any individual effort. "The community is more than the sum of its parts" is especially true in efforts of the mind, where the result, the currently and commonly accepted paradigm for whatever question or issue, is clearly the product of an interanimation of minds. The formative importance of community in beliefs and "truths" has come to be a paradigm all its own, from the work of Mead and Vygotsky to the present.

What did progress in such a community entail? First and foremost it meant the avoidance of behavior resulting in the blockage of the path of inquiry, which entailed, one can presume, the disposition to entertain arguments in conflict with one's own when presented reasonably (which, of course, implied the ability and openness to listen to such arguments). Secondly, inquiry demanded that we not remain "fixated" in a belief (to use Pierce's word), but open to possible revision. In the community this implies holding one's beliefs tentatively. Security in one's beliefs should be felt, according to Pierce, to the extent that one has no reasonable need to doubt them. As an open member of a community, though, one must be willing to uphold the need for such doubt, and to self-correct should compelling argument and/or evidence be presented. This is, of course, not an easy posture to assume. Doubt is indeed "irritating", and belief is comfortable. Being sure in one's ideas is to be confident, is to feel strong and capable. Doubting one's ideas is to feel weaker, susceptible, insecure, manipulable. Being "right" affirms one's power and worth. Being "wrong" or possibly wrong can appear to reflect badly on one's worth.

Yet Pierce stressed, with good reason, the value of such openness, which is more than simply surrendering one's autonomy. In a reasonable community, being open to doubt was not necessarily dangerous, for one was empowered through the **community's** search for truth or more warranted belief. What one sacrificed in terms of security was compensated for by the knowledge that beliefs based on **community** inquiry were more secure because more thoroughly investigated. In a well functioning community of "reasonable" participants, risking at least tentative doubt needn't produce fear, for the very "reasonableness" referred to implied trust and mutual respect while at the same time offering the fruits of possibly firmer understandings of the world.

Clearly, assuming a position of humility in one's beliefs and ideas **can** be dangerous in a competitive, hostile environment. One wants to know: just what is it that makes the community of inquiry a safe haven for such risk? Upon reflection, the quality in question is that of 'reasonableness'. While to some the meaning of this may appear obvious, for many others it does not. If we investigate what makes for 'reasonable' behavior in a community of inquiry, this will tell us much about what is expected of the participant in that community. To this end, we can look at the notion of community of inquiry in philosophy for children as expressed by Ann Margaret Sharp.

The idea of bringing philosophy to children, young adults and, by extension, anyone not normally associated with the world of professional philosophy depends almost entirely on engaging those people in the doing of philosophy in accordance with their own experience rather than traditionally telling them about philosophical trends, movements and ideas. Putting into practice Bruner's theory that any subject can be taught with integrity to students of any age, professors Sharp and Lipman needed an appropriate vehicle for bringing philosophy to children. With Dewey's notion of the method of inquiry in mind, they appropriated Peirce's emphasis on community to form the idea of **classroom** communities of inquiry. Such communities would allow children to actively entertain doubt within a structure of loosely organized inquiry, working together to clarify or problematize, investigate assumptions and implications, elaborate on and share their various viewpoints. The teacher in such a community would alter his or her role from purveyor of information and center of attention to facilitator of group dialogue, guiding and helping along the inter-animation of ideas rather than leading towards a pre-determined conclusion.

Along with requiring different behavior from the teacher, the community of inquiry would make new demands on the students. Instead of mastering certain subject manner, listening attentively to the teacher and dutifully repeating that information in class and on examinations, students would have to learn to listen to each other, form their own ideas and theories and express them such that their peers could grasp their points. They would have to learn to ask questions, and listen carefully for the full significance of what was being said. This meant developing a sense of assumptions underlying statements, and of implications following from them. It meant being aware of contradictions, either within the statements of one participant or between statements from two different speakers. It meant learning how to disagree, how not to feel put down or insulted, and how to alter one's idea when confronted with evidence and good argument. In addition, it meant the ability to recognize a sense of continuity in group discussion, and the inclination to limit one's contributions to something pertaining in some way to this direction.

All of this pointed to certain elemental dispositions. As a member of such a community, a student would have to learn to **take seriously** their own ideas and those of other students, **apart from any apparent support from the teacher.** They would have to break free from intellectual dependence on the teacher, learning to be a community that could function smoothly without the need for external authority. This implied a form of self-restraint quite alien from that to which the students are accustomed. It required of them, in short, to be their own authority as a group.

It was assumed that young people are capable of such behavior, and taken for granted that adults and especially professionals could certainly manifest such behavior. Perhaps in the beginning, those new to such a community would struggle, but with enough experience, learn to function as a group. As experience shows, however, such growth is often difficult if not impossible, and not simply among children. Indeed, young students may be more capable of the intellectual sacrifices necessary in a community of inquiry than are most adults, especially those in the world of academia.

Let us look again at the various behaviors evident in a community of inquiry according to Professor Sharp. A participant "accepts the responsibility of making their contributions within the context of others." He or she "follows the inquiry where it leads". The participants "listen to one another". They "support one another by amplifying and corroborating their views." Participants "give reasons to support another's view even if one doesn't agree". Members of the community "speak when they think they have something relevant to say", which entails a clear grasp of relevance (one's own ideas, even if, in the eyes of others quite unrelated, can appear very relevant). Those in the community "appear to have repudiated the prima donna role". Participants "refrain from engaging in extended monologues that preempt or do not really call for response". In fact, "to the extent that individuals engage in monologues, they block inquiry. "Teachers and participants can mute themselves in order to encourage others to speak their own ideas. They have the ability to let go of their positions in order to listen openly, hear and follow the inquiry where it leads...will move from considering themselves and their accomplishments as all important to focusing on the group and its accomplishments".[1]

All of this entails "concern for the rights of others to express their views,"[2] to such an extent that Prof. Sharp is willing to say "One should follow the dialogue rather than thinking about one's own position on what one is going to say."[3]

While many readers will be familiar with the behaviors and qualities listed above, many may not have appreciated the depth of commitment implied. The last quoted statement goes some distance in illuminating this. In a community of inquiry, one must not only be willing to listen and listen attentively, but to do this often **at the expense of his or her own forming idea.** As models for such behavior, are we as professionals willing and/or able to do this? After all, isn't much of what draws many of us to philosophical inquiry the opportunity to form and express our own fresh, original and hopefully insightful ideas (impressing not only others but ourselves with our insight, buttressing our self-esteem)? The reader is advised to reflect on his or her own experiences and observations in workshops and seminars before concluding.

Indeed, how difficult such self-effacing, self-sacrificial behavior is in an intellectual milieu! Let us go back to our imagined session. The discussion had arrived at a very stimulating moment. It had been building well, with contributions relevant and clear. Suddenly, a statement was made with which you were not in agreement. Several powerful counter-examples came to mind. Exhibiting the self-effacing restraint alluded to above, you waited for a good moment to offer your thoughts. But the moment didn't arrive. Instead, consecutive offerings which you deemed to be rather irrelevant had taken the group away from that previous moment of building interest. You perceive the discussion to be degenerating, confused, unclear. Frustration mounts. Is it not your responsibility to set things straight, to return to the main issue at hand? Unable to control yourself, you blurt out a few words to get some speaking space. Aware of the responsibility to be concise, you nevertheless see the necessity to re-explain the previous issue, re-establish the momentum, and then add your own thoughts. It seems as though you have been talking for seconds, but you have been going on for five minutes.

What has happened here? How have you lived up to these "rules": be self-effacing, listen closely to the inquiry as it develops, keep your contributions relevant, be concise and avoid monologues, sacrifice your own precious idea for the good of the developing discussion, etc. The answer to this question is surely perspectival. Those whose contributions appeared as "side issues" surely wouldn't think so.

I have gone into such an extended example in the attempt to illustrate the difficulty of community of inquiry procedures and behaviors in actual practice. Following the inquiry where it leads and keeping contributions relevant seem rather simple until one runs up against the need to control the many psychological needs served by such inquiry. Being self-effacing is obvious until one must allow a good idea to vanish, forgotten while concentrating on the developing ideas of others. The need to listen is clear until one is gripped by an interesting series of thoughts, which must be abandoned in the interest of keeping abreast of others'. Controlling one's contributions to less than a minute seems an absolute necessity (especially when suffering through the receiving end of a long-winded discourse), until, of course, one is carried away by one's own concepts, the complexity of which, unfortunately, require somewhat more than a few sentences. Finally, the need to self-correct when presented with good argument and/or evidence appears to be a cornerstone of intellectual growth, until, that is, a particularly precious belief or assumption, one that goes a long way towards defining our very being is challenged in such a way.

Humility. Self-denial. Restraint. Perhaps no other qualities are more essential as the basis for community of inquiry behaviors than these. In a way, as teacher educators in philosophy for children, we are demanding this of teachers and students, even as we struggle to manifest such qualities in ourselves. We define a community of inquiry by pointing to behaviors that such qualities produce. But are we describing or prescribing? If we are prescribing, if we are saying that a person **should** display such behavior, how indeed can we foster this? Will such personal qualities and behaviors grow naturally after enough experience? As Prof. Sharp says, "The point is to allow the need for procedural rules to develop out of the children's discussions, rather than imposing a set of rules from the beginning".[4]

Many with experience with children may find this simply insufficient. Others with experience in professional workshops may also wonder ... how can the facilitator control the situation more?

Indeed, the burden of responsibility in a community of inquiry is on the participants, both in terms of the content of the discussions **and** in terms of behavior. This is the truly radical aspect of what is being offered here — a **community** functioning on the basis of autonomous control, de-centering from the authority, with each participant prevailed upon to control him or herself. What we are implying is a form of anarchism in the best sense, the liberation from authority based on the responsibility to self-control on the part of each individual.

Yet the community of inquiry is radical in an even more profound way, for it calls upon us to summon the courage and have the strength to sacrifice (at least during the sessions) that which may be closest to our heart ... our specific ideas, the opportunity to impress with our brilliance. For a child, this may not be totally problematic; for the professional academic, it may be almost impossible. As models of the behavior required, though, we cannot afford such a lapse, even if justifiable. Skepticism over the demands of community of inquiry is understandable; we simply provide evidence to that skepticism when showing ourselves incapable of living up to these demands. This is especially relevant to the behavior of leaders or coaches of workshops with teachers.

STRUCTURING THE COMMUNITY

What happens when we attempt a community of inquiry, and the necessary behaviors are not manifest? Again, let us turn to Prof. Sharp:

> *The transformation of classrooms into communities of inquiry necessitates a commitment to the procedure of inquiry itself on the part of each member of the class. Without this commitment there is likely to be one-upmanship, intolerance, fooling questions, inattentiveness and pervasive egocentricity.*[5]

Such distressing results are often seen in elementary and secondary classrooms when philosophy for children first makes its entrance. Depressingly, it is also often seen in professional workshops, seminars and conferences.[6] In such poorly functioning sessions, one can often see certain patterns develop, with the more assertive and confident participants dominating, and others silenced. In general, a badly functioning community of inquiry tends to discriminate, to greater or lesser extent, against the following groups: the more relaxed, the introverted or meek, the more pensive, the slower speaker, the mild mannered, those hesitant out of respect for group process, and quite often, in general and apart from these specific qualities, women.

Those who are often favored in such a community tend to be: the assertive, the confident, those with louder voices, faster speakers and/or thinkers, the devil-may-care type, the charismatic, those with a particular attachment to their ideas, and, often, men in general.

Offering ideas for the structuring of a community of inquiry can seem to be inherently contradictory. After all, wasn't the point just made that at the heart of the concept of community of inquiry was autonomous control and individual responsibility?

In any case, we might entertain the notion that certain steps can be taken to help nurture the self-control necessary. The teacher, or facilitator, may always maintain a stronger hand when it comes to choosing the next speaker. It is always best when the group can manage this independently, but if it hasn't reached that point, the facilitator can maintain a strong awareness of those who need more outside help in entering the discussion. Once the group has been working at such inquiry for a while, a discussion or discussions can be dedicated to what self-imposed rules might be agreed upon, so that eventually the more assertive members of the group come to be aware of themselves in relation to the less assertive.

All this may seem quite acceptable with students. But I also want to refer here specifically to sessions with professionals in either workshops or conferences. Many of you at this point may scoff; it is not easy to view one's own behavior in such groups, and all of us want to believe that we are models of the proper forms of behavior in a community of inquiry.

Because of this very difficulty, a group may try out what may be thought of as a kind of "affirmative action". Before the session (perhaps in the beginning of a workshop or conference), the theme is raised with members agreeing to pay special heed to the necessary behaviors of being aware of marginalized participants and self restraint. This would not be put forth as a quick reminder (as is often the case), but would form a distinct aspect of the process.

One example comes to mind. During the Graz conference, a session on the feminist aspects of philosophy for children took place. Before the session, a number of women asked that the men take special care to allow women (who might ordinarily be silenced) to speak. This "rule", as it were, was rather strongly enforced by the group (much to the dismay of a number of men). Although at first this process seemed rather artificial (and to some, unfair), as the session unfolded it was clear that a very different kind of dynamic was unfolding.

As is usual with such efforts, those who feel artificially suppressed are quick to point out the injustice of such a means. "Natural" marginalization seems so much more just than that which is specifically structured into the process. Yet such structuring can bear fruit, allowing real opportunity to those often denied it while providing an educative experience to those who really must restrain themselves — both to the benefit of the community as a whole.

Until we as professionals involved in philosophy for children are able to learn the behaviors we prescribe for students and teachers, our suggestions will justifiably appear hopelessly utopian. Perhaps more important than research, theoretical, pedagogical and/or philosophical supports for our work is the task of learning to truly manifest through behavior the real possibility of community of inquiry amongst ourselves.

NOTES

1. All of the above are taken from Sharp, Ann Margaret, "'The Community of Inquiry', Education for Democracy", *Thinking*, Vol. IX, Number 2.
2. Sharp, Ann Margaret, "What is a Community of Inquiry", *Journal of Moral Education*, 16, 1, 1987.
3. Sharp, Ann Margaret, "Building Classroom Communities of Inquiry", *Studies in Formative Spirituality*, Volume IV, Number 3, 1983. This article, along with the two previously cited, offer the reader an interesting glimpse into what might be called the "deeper" goals of philosophy for children, quite beyond that of thinking skills and enhanced educational productivity. They also offer some good hints into the underlying spirit of the program, and the reasons behind what can be a mysterious experience in p4c workshops.
4. Sharp, "Building Classroom Communities of Inquiry", p. 358
5. "Building Classroom Communities of Inquiry", p. 359.
6. In the international conference in Graz last June, one professor was heard saying, "I wonder if we're all just too old to change." Many of the sessions, although not all, were models of "pervasive egocentricity" and "one-upmanship". This, unfortunately, is by no means a phenomena unique to the Graz conference.

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