

What is Said / Not Said in Community of Inquiry

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On more than one occasion, I have observed a reaction in an IAPC group discussion at Mendham which has caused me serious concern about how open the community of inquiry is, or should be, to significant questions. In both cases, a comment was made which represented a serious challenge to accepted views of the group. In both cases the response was essentially to listen politely, and then to ignore the comment. The speakers were of course not shouted down, but neither were they responded to in any way.

At one discussion several years ago, a first-time participant asked why there was no consideration of or experiment with the breaking up of a large group into several small groups. The questioner had been much interested in small-group work and had experimented with it in his own teaching. He pointed out such advantages as the obvious difference in the amount of time available for each person, child or adult, to speak in a small group as contrasted with a whole class or workshop. He mentioned the success he had had, and referred to some experimental work that had been done to evaluate results in this area. The general reaction in the Mendham group was to listen politely, to look at the speaker - and then to go on, taking no notice or account of the issue raised.

I do think that there are questions to be raised, and possible answers to be given, to the suggestion that small groups ought to be tried in P4C discussions. There are reasons one might adduce for favoring whole-class or whole-group discussions. It is possible to wonder whether the facilitator or teacher may not be needed to help the group learn appropriate procedures for accepting and criticizing each others' comments. The aim of developing a classroom community of inquiry might be cited, and a caution suggested against the possible divisiveness of small groups. It might be suggested that having a discussion which is free and open but does not tend to mere chatter is too difficult an aim to be left to small groups of children without an adult leader. (The suggestion might even be made about small-group discussion among newcomers at IAPC workshops.) It might even be proposed that the willingness to leave one's own ideas behind can only be practiced and mastered in a large group.

Still, the issue raised by the newcomer was, it seems to me, a significant one, the considerations advanced were reasonable, and the person who raised the issue was making a serious suggestion. In the context of that whole group discussion (a discussion of procedures in the community of inquiry) the issue was relevant. Did it not deserve more than a polite acknowledgment that someone had spoken?

At a more recent discussion at Mendham, a group was involved with Lipman's story, "anybody's, nobody's and Lady Sadie." The group was talking about guns. Speakers were deploring the prevalence of weapons in the U.S. today, and the amount of armed violence reported. (I was considering suggesting that the guns in the story be considered metaphorically rather than literally, and in that case whether Ladie Sadie's call for guns for all might mean autonomy for everyone - but I hadn't yet made up my mind about broaching that idea.) All the speakers were comfortably united in their opposition to armed violence. Then two members of the group who hadn't said anything on that point spoke up. They were women from Africa. They wanted to raise the issue of the necessity of violence on the part of colonial people to gain freedom. Hadn't guns been necessary, they suggested, for African countries to rid themselves of foreign control. Clearly they believed that armed struggle had been required, and they were asking the group to consider what bearing this might have on the issue of the general

availability of guns. Everyone looked at them. And no one responded at all. The talk rolled on as if they had not said a word. Their point was neither conceded nor contested; it was simply ignored.

It seems to me that a number of things might have been said: that perhaps radically different circumstances might be a limitation on the anti-gun position; or, on the other hand, that Ghanian tactic of peaceful resistance might have been attempted; that retreat of the colonial powers might have been otherwise negotiated; that subsequent events have demonstrated that violent over-throwers don't generally make democratic participants in self-government. Even an expression of puzzlement and discomfort would have been at least an acknowledgment that the speakers from Africa had raised a difficult issue. But they were simply ignored. It seemed that the comfortable self- and mutualcongratulations of those who didn't want to shoot anyone couldn't book any difficult questions.

A third instance of this practice of sweeping aside any comments that might question general agreement took place at Mendham, during an evening conversation following presentation of some Pixie-plays. (Like most of the so-called Pixie-plays I've seen, they hadn't anything to do with Pixie at all, but that's a different issue.) Some things in the plays - or at least in one of them - seemed to be gently poking fun at the regulations and the behavior of the nun who was manager of the Mendham conference center at that time. The questions was raised whether we should not examine our behavior, both in the plays and more generally, in ignoring rules about bringing alcoholic beverages into the house. I acknowledge that I'm not entirely clear as to what point the questioner wanted to make: whether it was that we ought not to be polite to Sister's face and laugh behind her back; or that as people who were (supposedly) concerned to act morally we should consider whether in fact it was moral and honorable to agree to the regulations while in fact ignoring them; or did he mean to raise both questions? as I said, I was - and am - not entirely clear what he meant. But I am certain that he was introducing a moral question - and that he was ignored. There was neither agreement with nor response to his comments. There might have been agreement with his ideas, and the resolution to act and speak differently in future Other responses were possible: that making fun of people in their absence is pretty common, and harmless, and that the people in question would be amused themselves if they were present; and that Sister should be no more exempt from such fun-poking just because she is an administrator, or a nun, or a hard worker, or whatever. Or one might have wondered whether the rule was seriously meant - whether the nuns were really expressing their own views while recognizing that ideas and behaviors of workshop participants were quite different. the relevant point is not what might have been said - but that nothing was.

Admittedly in the last case I am talking of a social occasion, not a formal discussion. In all three cases mentioned, however, the point I wish to make is the same: that when a serious challenge is made to accepted views of the group, the response is essentially to listen politely, and then to ignore the question.

I bring this issue before my fellow participants in the Community of Inquiry enterprise as questions rather than recommendations; do you recognize the situations I have described as similar to any in your experience? How should we understand and deal with comments that constitute serious challenges to accepted views and standards of the community of inquiry before which they are made?

One possibility is that we agree that seriously different and disruptive views should be ignored. Those issues that do find partisans on different sides provide sufficient field for discussion. A significantly different and distant view that calls forth no body of partisans can reasonably be simply dropped. It might be added that the majority of the group has no obligation to discuss or amplify a view with which it is not sympathetic. If people are not willing to battle (non-violently) for their views despite being ignored, their suggestions may reasonably be passed over.

Further support for that view might be found in a claim that in fact there is wide agreement among Community of Inquiry participants on a range of ideas that are substantive as well as procedural. (The undesirability of guns may be one of them.) It may be the case that these ideas are not formally expressed, and tend to be taken for granted. Perhaps the very fact of ignoring some challenging idea is itself evidence that it is unacceptable. it might even be suggested that to take up for discussion ideas which we find radically at odds with those we espouse is to give them weight and credence which they do not deserve.

To such an argument, I would say that we ought then to avoid a pretense that every substantive idea is a fair topic for discussion. Perhaps we could be considerably more specific about the beliefs and values which we take for granted before beginning this enterprise. This, it seems to me, is not what have claimed heretofore. To

children and to adults alike, orally and in print, we have said that all ideas are open to discussion, all points of view worthy of consideration. If we do indeed mean that, do we not then have obligations to those who bring forward for consideration ideas seriously at variance with our original values and beliefs?

We are not necessarily called upon to defend ideas which we find noxious, not to treat them as equally acceptable with those we most strongly espouse. But we are, I think, called upon to be honest.

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