Paradoxical Nature of Facilitation in Community of Inquiry

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Thinking, as well as any other physical or mental function, develops under the r condition of work. It is well known from the eliminatory course of Physics that work is applied to the places of resistance. Consequently, one of the major tasks of the facilitator who develops thinking is to create resistance or difficulty (problem situations or tasks) in the students' thinking.

But not any problem makes a student think without an adequate attitude. The problem related to thinking implies that the individual has to discover something new, relevant to individual or social perspective. Otherwise the task is solved as being reproductive, i.e. a simple replication of the already existing pattern (which is memory, not thinking). Thus, the other condition to form thinking is an exhaustion of a problematic context which demands a certain search for a resisting or stimulating environment: *in order* to start *thinking* a *student has to be driven to think.*

I could hardly imagine a situation in which a teacher or a facilitator is aware of a student's motivation to the fullest. If it were so she would be free from any pedagogical problems and teaching would be described in terms of mere manipulation or technology, which transforms a student according to a pre-given shape or concept. An analogous situation is one in which teachers' incentives and drives are mastered by the students. I define teaching as a non-linear, irreversible and hardly predictable form of change, that is why problem setting is represented as a communication of problem situations or resistances belonging to different participants of the CI (Community of Inquiry), including the teacher.

Many teachers invite their students by initiating this communication in a definite learning context. But this could be expected on more advanced levels when they have, at least, a «sense of the discipline» and certain skills to make specific transformations within a certain thematic area. Besides, there might be difficulties related to learning anxiety caused by an unfavorable atmosphere in the class. Traditionally it is the teacher who starts the CI process by presenting a certain

task or text which is based on the primary motivational level of the students and their positive expectations towards the teacher whose educational skills are meant to create an developing learning environment. The text is usually designed as a provocation or «a vaccine» to stimulate a person's involved attitude («immune reaction») towards the pre-programmed material. As soon as the person's response is accessed, the facilitator can consider herself and students as sharing the same problematic space. This condition makes a group of individuals a community of joint effort in the thinking process or inquiry. The shared activity corresponds to both learning or teaching activity as well as the social one.

So, the person who wants to manage the group activity should, first, enlist the student's support, i.e. to earn their trust. In this case will the student cooperate in meeting the needs of the teacher especially in driving the CI through the rest of the stages of the group dynamic: setting hypothesis, their testing and evaluation. Establishing this type of relation is called a «working alliance». The point is that the teacher should create the most favorable microclimate for the students, the atmosphere of absolute positive regard (or tolerance) towards each of the students' positions.

Does it mean that her (the teacher's) own needs remain unmet, and goals are not achieved because of concentrating on the students? It surely does. Though temporarily, because the teacher's position is somewhat ambiguous: she shares her «power» with the student not quite sincerely: she does it for her own sake too, to get her pedagogical or personal dividends or benefits somewhat later. Roughly speaking, the facilitator, as well as any other CI participant, needs a partner, not a rival or an opponent. As a result, at the initial stage of facilitation, she should learn how to take not the leading but the following (being led) position.

It is logical that when this position is consolidated or reinforced so that the student stops worrying about her position being underestimated or distorted by the teacher, a critical stage of the CI activity begins. The teacher - similarly, for the sake of meeting her own needs - should very carefully «start to mind» her own priorities, needs and goals, which are held back or «temporarily forgotten». It means that they should be opposed to the needs, priorities and goals, i.e., the position of the «partner» in the joint CI activity. In other words, a teacher may start critiquing the other by promoting her own position, and even trying to win the students over. Very often it is done with the help of interpretation and translation of the student's position into her own professional language.

If in the process of critique students can't avoid strong resistance, the teacher should carefully yield or give back the leadership to the partner. Though, when released, she should «start minding» about her own position again. Thus, resistance becomes the most important evidence of the irrefutable fact that group activity moves ahead towards its constructive closure, i.e. towards the stage when the needs and goals of both subjects of the activity not only correlate but also complement. It is called forming a consensus or collective subject. Within this collective subject there should be «room» for everyone because it is the result of reciprocal listening and the wish to understand each other. The facilitator satisfies her pedagogical needs, the student - her learning needs.

I can conclude now that formation of thinking presupposes realization of the following paradox in facilitation: creating the resisting learning environment which demands the necessity to «work in a thinking mode», the facilitator has to cultivate a tolerant atmosphere, helping the group to maintain the social inquiry especially in the initial stages.

PARADOXICAL FACILITATION

Community of inquiry could be described from at least two perspectives. One of them characterizes it as the best pedagogical form for Philosophy for Children as well as other school disciplines, concerned with person-centered and democratic as well as developing approaches to schooling. The other one interprets CI in terms of a self-organized open system maintaining itself by communication with its environment.

These two perspectives are not mutually exclusive. I assume they could be referred to as complementary: the pedagogical effectiveness of the CI is directly linked to its self-organizing nature and the way it is integrated into the teacher's facilitation. For instance, a facilitator, as compared to a traditional teacher, is likely to interpret the student's learning effects not in terms of her pedagogical achievement but a sort of advance (3), (6): without a positive intention of the collective self-organizing CI subject - regarding facilitation as a necessary precondition of learning- the facilitator would not even be able to present the learning material. That is why right from the start she has to be involved in a process of communal reconstruction of a shared problematic environment, or a learning agenda. Having reached the first consensus about the agenda, the facilitator has enough grounds to reinterpret it as a primary pedagogical gain.

If I assume that she would go on with this successful group leadership through other stages of CI dynamic - like hypothesis setting and testing, and assessment - she is surely to encounter the next paradox. On the one hand, facilitation constitutes a model of a person-centered and developmental pedagogy; on the other hand, directive guidance is a model for the states of a discussion. Directive guidance seems to contradict the person-centered nature of a discussion, even though this move is done within a community of inquiry that is in theory self-organizing. This directive quality of CI facilitation could be eliminated under the following conditions: the facilitator helps students learn not only content material but makes them be aware (reflects on) of the style of facilitation she uses. In this case the students are transformed from objects of somebody's direction into subjects of their learning self-organizing activity. The facilitator's role is also transformed into an ordinary CI participant with a definite life experience, part of which is her professional competence.

And still, there arises a question: Do we need to preserve this directive tendency, if it could be distributed or even assigned to the students? Or is it another manifestation of the power relationship between students and the teacher? I assume there might be a more substantial reason for it.

The previous analysis shows that in its dynamic a goes through a few stages, one of which can be associated with a change of self-organization from a group, where the participants have to be directed, to a collective or community type of self-organization, which is determined by the fact that all its components are determined and executed without a facilitator. I find an assumption here that the ultimate goal of CI is self-sufficiency, independence of the external help, i.e., its transformation from an open into a closed system, which stops its communication with the environment and the facilitator in particular.

Dialectical perspective reveals itself by sublating this contradiction. Any open system 8mvives by closing and opening its boundaries: as soon as the community/collective tyrns into self-sufficiency, there appears a phenomenology of stagnation or cycling., i.e., paradoxical self-organization: in order to survive it has to enter entropy or disorganization. Using Prigogine's terms, CI is paradoxically attracted not only to a state of order but to chaos as well. Thus, CI formation as a collective or community is relative to the context, characterized by a gradual exhaustion of the resisting/confronting/ «non-transparent» environment. Absolute is the state of change and constant reconstruction or disorganization through stages from a group to a community and vice versa. Consequently, group self-organization is described in terms of resistance and meaninglessness of the environment.

By this I can assume that the task of the facilitator is not only to integrate the communal process, bringing it to the stage of coherence and semantic closure but to deconstruct it by moving, at least, one step ahead into a zone of unpredictability, ambiguity and uncertainty. (The pedagogy of this paradoxical move lies in the facilitator's ability «to follow the argument where it leads» in the situation of complete predictability and pedagogical stagnation).

Building on Vigotskyan perspective, this ambiguous zone I call «the zone of transitional or buffer development (ZTD)». In it the proximal zone (ZPD), often associated with the facilitator's teaching activity, exhausts itself turning into the zone of actual development (ZAD). In it students do not feel ready to follow teacher's moves; the facilitator, often temporarily, loses the capacity to lead in a renewed fashion. In order to break through, both should communicate an inability to move further and share the perspectives on reconstructing ZPD. It is quite evident that in this critical zone there are no grounds for anyone's direction. Just as any other member of the group, the facilitator should take care that her own position is open and transcending. This position must renovate its resisting or challenging or confronting qualities. But the latter are the products of a new level of cooperation between the participants and the facilitator. In other words the facilitator functions as the one who maintains the CI reconstructive process: as soon as there are signs of stagnation, she transforms herself into a defibrillator, which stimulates the actualization of the hidden CI resources.

The analysis of the facilitative moves in this zone makes us find the following ways to reconstruct the CI self-organizing activity. All of them are paradoxical in nature [4], [5], [6]. First, the facilitator takes the position of a group «reflector or mirror», helping the CI participants to access the integral image of self-organization. The latter is a necessary condition for self-correction in accordance with an implicit model of ZPD. Pedagogically it is manifested in such facilitative strategies as active listening, group debriefing, localization, structuring of the semantic content, etc.

The other way to reconstruct the rhythm of reconstructive self-organization is through a more challenging position of the facilitator. As soon as the latter is aware of a certain pattern of group development, she starts to focus on challenging it by finding contradictions or in congruencies in it, for instance, between content and the manner in which the pattern is communicated. As it was in the first case, the participants of CI may proceed to self-correction by resolving the contradiction. In the first and in the second types of self-reconstruction (as well as in all possible other types) there is a certain determinism: the facilitator maintains her undifferentiated status which helps the group to keep projecting its own dynamic. As a result the meaning of the communicative pedagogical environment would stay open to both subjects - facilitator and the group participants - saving room for transformation and change. Pedagogically this is done by different forms of constructively oriented confrontations, i.e., the ones that help not to discourage or disorganize the group but to clarify their hidden assumptions and build adequate CI identity.

Analogous can be referred to the following form of CI reconstruction: facilitator's position is even more active than in the previous form. She intentionally becomes more provocative to the group or its participants with a certain personal interpretations or conceptualizations. As a rule it causes radical confrontations in return. The resistance may take the form of a group crisis. The facilitator's other role is to mediate it in order to build a new collective identity, which resolves the formerly hidden conflict.

There could be one more form of reconstruction which happens in the so called «buffer zone». Since the facilitator loses her capacity to lead, she can intentionally acknowledge her state of being stuck. This move makes the CI system open for new possibilities within or out of the group. That could mean that the group might restructure its functions among participants including the facilitator or recognize a need for broadening the CI boundaries by including new members, which would signify a new step in the reorganization of CI.

Summarizing, I can conclude that all the forms of maintaining the rhythm of self-organizing reconstruction have common features: (a) the facilitator's intention to preserve the disposition of openness to change, (b) self-correction and change is associated with chaotic and critical situations (ZTD), (c) the facilitator's focus is not only on the quality of the content matter but on the dynamic or change of transitional forms, boundaries or critical situations. The latter is adequate to an understanding of health as a non-linear, irreversible and scarcely predictable process of transcending the boundaries. Thus, I can hypothesize that facilitation is a paradoxical control of the CI self-organizing capacity by making use of different forms of defibrillating the rhythm of its reconstructive activity.

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