

A Few Psychological Projections into the Philosophy for Children Experience

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These - at first sight - dissociated pieces on the psychological nature of community of inquiry have a common feature. All of them represent the author's research - psychological, pedagogical and counseling - projections into a relatively new branch of education - Philosophy for Children. The conclusions presented further are not complete in the sense that, in the end, there are more questions than answers. There are also hypotheses which need to be tested. This means that the author is opening up, at least for himself, a sphere of a deeper search and exploration.

ON THE IMAGE OF THE PHILOSOPHER AT SCHOOL

First, it is worth mentioning that the philosopher at school is not only expected to teach certain skills and knowledge but also *to present a role model for students*. Thus, a CI participant has the possibility, so to say, «to try on the philosopher's gown» and make a decision for including it into her/his «wardrobe». What does it look like? What is so attractive about it, and what could be rejected or even «restyled»? What impression does it produce on the observer? Traditionally the philosopher has been regarded as an ambiguous, ironical, extremely critical and rational figure, who seems always to be guarding his own standpoint and is ready to challenge his/her opponent's.

This description, though kind of abstract, is common even among philosophers. It represents them as occupying a certain meta-position, which helps them to stay detached from the common problems and daily routine so characteristic of lay people. The philosopher is most likely to be devoid of the emotional, and his ultimate weapons are reasoning skills and a strong sense of logic and truth.

But there is one more characteristic of the philosopher's image which I consider more realistic. Matthew Lipman, dealing with the emergent dispositions which students may acquire within the course of P4C, wrote: «To learn philosophy, one must be actively involved in the life of philosophy and this can only be accomplished by children appropriating the philosophical tradition for themselves, reenacting it in terms of their own experience, critically reflecting upon it and incorporating the meanings thus acquired into the ongoing conduct of their lives.» (M. Lipman and A. Sharp *Growing with philosophy*. Dubuque: Kendull/Hunt Publishing Company. 1994. 410 p. (pp. ix-x). This description is much different from the one mentioned above. The student - having mastered philosophy - turns out to be not just

an «expert in sound judgment» absorbed in self-defensive rationalizing strategies, but one who is sensible, probably doubting, and - what is more important - open to exploration and personality change.

If one imagines such a teacher in the classroom, then student reaction to the first type of philosopher, which is typically one of reciprocal defense (i.e. hyper-rationalism when confronted with a hyper-rationalist), would change into something else. In order to determine the specifications of this change, I might elaborate on Lipman's understanding of the teacher of philosophy to children. Rather than «teacher,» he makes use of what might be a word strange to philosophers, but more common among psychologists - «facilitator.» In the person of the philosophical facilitator, we have a combination of one who (a) tries to grasp the general laws and contradictions of reality, and (b) helps others do it on their own. By this I mean not just transmitting his or her understanding, but creating pedagogical conditions under which students are positioned to make their own discoveries.

Thus, the notion «philosopher at school» depends on one's interpretation of the concept «*creating pedagogical conditions under which the student will make their own discoveries*». Does it mean that the teacher (a) is not too fast to deliver and transmit the philosophical information on the relevant epistemological, ethical, or esthetic theories but rather (b) inspires them to discover and deal with all these theories in the context of their own daily lives, in a reasonable and independent fashion?

Or, while doing the first and the second, s/he does one more thing which sublates them: s/he uses him or herself as a model in order to demonstrate the relativity of any theoretical or commonsense construction of reality. If we consider these three steps appropriate, then by «*creating pedagogical conditions...*» we mean the interchange and communication of diverse reality models in the learning process. One reality model may underlie the curriculum, another the teacher's approach, another the student's, another those of the students' significant others, and so on. Each model has its own context and its own course of development. Each model is true, yet, since it is a construct, it is restricted by the set of conditions under which it has appeared and under which it functions.

There is only one further step necessary to develop the concept of «*creating pedagogical conditions under which the student will make their own discoveries*.» I define it as: the facilitating philosopher is one who, while knowing philosophy, is not fixated on it. Not only is s/he receptive to alternative and diverse standpoints and models, s/he is appreciative of their philosophical value. Besides *knowing, receiving and appreciating them*, the philosophical facilitator enriches his or her own scientific and philosophical outlook through interactive communication with alternative models.

In summary, the typical student reaction to the typical rationalistic and ironical philosophizing pedagogue - one of reciprocal defense - would change, under the influence of the philosophical facilitator - to a sociable, caring and respectful professional who is ready to communicate with unconditional positive regard to diverse reality modes and models.

The facilitator as described above may produce an impression of being a «weathervane.» This may be an accurate attribution in situations in which any form of change in the process of learning or teaching occurs through the suppression of either the student's or the teacher's point of view. For example, the teacher may forgo his own perspective in the interests of achieving an agreement or consensus with students. As opposed to this, if a teacher accepts (verbally as well as non-verbally) *any*

point of view as a potentially justifiable, then he or she, along with the students, may be called - rather than a weathervane - a democrat. The democrat differs from a «weathervane» in his or her capacity for the exercise of *imagination*. While the weathervane tends to solve pedagogical problems through adaptation to the existing conceptual context, the democrat does so through undertaking and resolving the inherent conflicts in the context, and thereby transcending and reconstructing it. This could be a long process. Isn't the image of a philosopher at school like that? Here is a man with a developed imagination - one so mature that:

- the students are ready to expect from him or her, as well as from themselves, (in his or her presence) the transcending of their own potentials;
- thus, each class turns into a journey into new spheres of potential human change and development;
- a journey in the course of which the notorious pedagogical shortcomings of controversiality and directiveness are transformed into an advantage, for it is contradictions within a system which lead to its becoming a sort of «building site» for producing and testing new hypotheses, for generating of new perspectives and dispositions,
- and, in the long run, for the construction of new theories and new models of reality.

IS THERE A PLACE FOR A DIRECTIVE FACILITATOR IN A COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY?

Is there a place for a directive type of facilitator in CI? I offered the question once at a workshop in P4C. Having set up a group discussion among graduate students, the teacher found out that some of them were not quite ready to meet the group's expectations. As a result he became very determined, provocative and even ironical toward one student. He pushed him to produce some reasoning in defense of his standpoint. This forceful, confrontative move led me to analyze the issue of directive facilitation in more detail.

The democratic and dialogical style of teaching implies that, if a group participant is at a loss and has no direct answer to a question, or can't express it in distinct terms, the facilitator joins him on his level of cognitive activity, and sometimes makes use of group clarification, or brings forth the operative hidden assumptions by empathic listening. The Vygotskian educator would interpret these moves as falling within the so called «zone of proximal development» (ZPD), as opposed to the zone of actual developments (ZAP). The ZPD approach presupposes putting the student in a stressful situation which promises to help her transcend her habitual ways of learning. The ZAP, on the other hand, makes it possible for the student to be relatively safe and stay within the boundaries of existing learning potential.

A humanistic psychologist might express some objections to the ZPD style of teaching, considering it an obstacle to the formation of self-esteem. The psychologist might say that if we don't accept the student the way he is, the negative effect on self-esteem could be enormous. But I myself can hardly imagine a situation in which development could occur in absolutely comfortable and non-demanding circumstances. That doesn't necessarily mean that the teacher should purposefully set up situations in which the student feels miserable or failure-prone. Moreover, from the point of view of CI group dynamics, the ZPD approach may violate the so called «safety principle.»

As a way out of this impasse, it might be more appropriate to use «confronting pedagogy» in a later stage, when students are more ready to experiment. In this case, the above-mentioned episode would occur only occasionally, and would be considered non-typical for CI facilitation. I can put forward a few arguments against such a view. Postponing confrontation may actually be a form of manipulation, and lead to deformation in the self-organizing process of the community. Furthermore, the teacher, unless she is open in her reactions, is likely herself to confront an ambiguous situation. As a community of inquiry facilitator, she is expected to and expects herself - to be an equal participant in the group process. But because she is an experienced facilitator, and has seen many groups in process, she finds herself able to predict with what might become deadening accuracy the attitudes, behaviors, discourses, conflicts, stages of change etc. of the group and the individuals within it. The consequent sense of boredom and fatigue which this situation creates is in itself a predictable aspect of the teaching experience.

The teacher may be open about her experience, which would represent a confrontation, and therefore offer the possibility of the group moving. She may suppress her experience for several possible reasons. 1) fear and mistrust of the value of conflict and confrontation as having the potential for change rather than just destruction; 2) The persuasion that such an intervention would be non-democratic, in that it would arrogate power to herself that a CI facilitator must at all costs avoid; 3) A fear of taking advantage of her experience in order to manipulate the situation and move the group where it may not want to go; 4) Confronted with a choice between being «nice» and being «effective,» choosing the former as the more humane, and therefore (she thinks) ultimately more effective strategy.

In all these cases, the student's high self-esteem is maintained at the expense of the teachers suppression of his own experience and whatever expertise it may have produced in him. Through taking care of others, he neglects the care of himself and of the process. He suppresses the potential for transformation which his own experience has taught him. For example, he says to himself. «Although I know that if I begin with the second chapter of the material to be discussed, the students will pay special attention to this - and avoid that, which would move us along faster - but, because I don't want to manipulate the process, I will not tell them -» If such situations of the suppression of the teacher's potential for transformative action are too numerous, the group experiences a sense of incongruence. As soon as facilitator turns her own technique into a sort of façade which hides the real processes at work in the situation, no open and authentic communication is possible. False safety becomes a menace. A student may think that the teacher is *too nice to be really sensitive to students' real academic needs*.

In this case, we are confronted with a vicious circle. To make the group process and personal development possible, the teacher must dissociate from her own natural impulses, thoughts, and experiences, which then becomes a source of implicit tension, stress, and insecurity, which in turn hinders the formation of the community of inquiry. On the other hand by being open and congruent with students he may not meet *their* expectations from the point of view of the curriculum.

To survive in a situation of communicative incongruence in the classroom, the teacher must set up learning situations in which she is not a transmitter but a co-learner, who explores contents well-known to her from new perspectives. In order to prepare for such a class, she must prepare herself to occupy at least two «chairs»: one of them tied to the syllabus and the directivity necessary to carry it out,

and the other a unpredictable self-organizing group process, characterized by uncertainty. In this context, it would be difficult for a teacher to say either «I am getting ready for class,» or «I am ready to meet a situation of uncertainty.» Under such paradoxical conditions, the community of inquiry process becomes a quest for group experience in which any member may (under certain conditions) turn into a facilitator. The best preparation for a common group experience is to be present with the feeling of uncertainty that anything can happen - whether anxiety, confrontation, and/or joy, sympathy and care. This broad spectrum of possibilities makes the teacher open and ready to meet the demands of nearly any situation. For example, in the context of a chaotic period in the group's development, he can choose a more directive style, which, in such a situation, promises to facilitate a breakthrough to a new level of stability; whereas in a situation of stability, the opposite style may be appropriate. Though it has elements of each, such a multiple style can hardly be called authoritative, democratic, liberal or anarchic. It may be termed «flexible,» but perhaps more precisely, ecological. The teacher with an ecological style understands that there is a place for everything both self-assertion and genuine receptivity, textuality and orality, cooperation and conflict, reflection and emotion, individualism and collaboration in short, a polylogic.

Is, then, there a place for a directive facilitator in a community of inquiry? Might she, in the present educational climate, be called a «bad teacher»? Or is it only she who can save us from the static, non-developing - the «comfortable» - classroom? Does she, in fact, from an ecological perspective, create the necessary conditions for the process of dialectical development which is implicit in community of inquiry theory and practice?

We might address the same questions to students: is there a place in the classroom for the challenging student, who can be too directive and even «authoritarian» by sticking to his own very «non-comfortable» way of reasoning? Such students might often be the ones we label «resistant» or «bad.» On the other hand, such students may be the very ones capable of saving the teacher from the burnout, stagnation, and the sense of incongruency which results from the static, non-developing classroom. Do they, in fact, from an ecological perspective, create the necessary conditions for the process of dialectical development for the teacher?

ON THE MEANING OF QUESTIONING IN THE COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY

It is assumed that a P4C teacher typically starts the group process by encouraging the students to put questions to a narrative which contains meaningful, philosophically charged material. Usually this procedure takes an extended period of time - often up to it 2/3 of a class period. Why - judging from the time and effort spent - this procedure? I offer the following analysis:

- **It represents an opposing viewpoint to the existing educational paradigm, in which it is the teacher who raises questions and sets tasks for the students to perform.** P4C methodology presupposes that the teacher should not do this. If the student is a subject of the group process, then she should be more active than in just answering teacher's questions.
- **Students are encouraged not to be self-centered, but to learn to identify their questions with social problems.** Participants are taught to correlate their own questions with the those of the others in the group. In this case, the discussion assumes a social dimension and turns into a joint inquiry, which fosters social awareness of an individual.

- In order for a problematic text to be accepted as transformative, participants should project themselves into it. The question can be defined as a means of crossing motivational boundaries for the sake of constructing a shared space for generating new meanings.
- If such a considerable amount of time is given to problematization, it is for the purpose of uncovering **various perspective or alternative ways of viewing the object or phenomenon**. The student may also thereby develop the idea that any point of view can be accepted as adequate - the main condition is to specify the context. On this account, the **formation of the capacity for divergent thinking and of an assertive attitude to life is of major importance**.
- Cognitive psychologists stress that the precise formulation of the question either promotes the resolution of the problem, or in fact is its resolution.

On the other hand, the phenomenon of problematization in CI can be viewed from a different perspective:

- Its learning process as an exteriorized form of thinking is not just a transmission of the material, but neither does it necessarily form the students capacities to put questions in any meaningful way. It is more a form of reconstruction - by which we mean generating new meanings through various forms of group process. In such a classroom, social values are challenged and constructed. Students are often more open, not that overloaded with social responsibilities, more imaginative and, by definition, more motivated to change than adults. If this function of CI is the major one, then in any given class, each participant may undergo an experience of being, not just a problematizer, but a constructor of meanings. This constructive function of education places the teacher and the child in one learning dimension and makes of them co-workers-not because of their space-time unity but of their mutual constructive disposition. The radical problematization which an overemphasis on questioning implies can interfere with this constructive function.

- As soon as a community of inquiry undertakes the formation of a philosophical life-attitude in which critical thinking plays a major part, then its structure must be made up of three major elements: problematization, hypothesis-formation and testing, and self-correction or/and evaluation. The overestimation of the first component of the learning process may lead to a deformation of the process as a whole.

- Another argument against the overestimation of the problematizing component of CI comes from the assumption that if the teacher is not distributing the questioning process among the students, then their capacity to do so is blocked. This assumption could be questioned, for the school is not the only place in which questioning skills are developed. A life situation may be no less of a teacher for a child than any formal educational context or event. The problem of being not being able to ask questions could be interpreted as, say, (a) the student is not motivated to cooperate or (b) the tasks are too easily accomplished, or (c) the teacher is not genuinely interested in listening to the child.

- The research from the Davidovian educational paradigm indicates that, no matter how interesting and problematic the learning material may be from the teacher's point of view, that doesn't guarantee genuine participation in group inquiry into that material. That the student may have learned to put questions does not necessarily imply that this skill contributes to his growth in thinking skills or personal development.

The only view which might eliminate these negative arguments comes from the idea that the formation of the ability to put questions is in itself a model of the learning group process. The construction of questions implies the next two phases of the process - hypothesis-generation and self-correction. The putting of questions is therefore a central aspect of the mutually constructive learning dimension of teacher and student mentioned above. We may even go so far as to suggest that the questioning itself is the construction: as soon as the child has mastered the construction of questions, there may not be a special need to teach him to construct ways to resolve and evaluate the problems as they are. From a dialectical perspective, deconstruction announces reconstruction. The only mediating factor is time.

THE TIME DIMENSION IN COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY

My first experience teaching with the P4C -format took place in one of the Ukrainian pedagogical universities, where I designed a course in Ecopsychology. The idea of conducting it in the form of community of inquiry was attractive to me, because I and my students felt it would be an ideal methodology for exploring deep ecopsychological issues which bordered on existential as well as philosophical problems.

However, as an encounter group facilitator with a therapeutic background, although I am convinced that CI methodology was a most appropriate technique for exploring the issues, I am concerned that as soon as a group which meets for only two hours a day manages to approach the stage of so-called «working alliance» or «rapport,» characterized by relationships of mutual trust and cooperation, the class will be finished. That does not necessarily mean that the group experience would prove to be ineffectual, but the next time the participants got together, there is the strong possibility of encountering a lack of basic understanding and mutual acceptance. There is the strong possibility that after one week's break the group will forget its own social investment.

Encounter group classes, on the other hand, meet for six to eight hours a day - a time characterized by intense and continually transforming psychological dynamics, through which students build up and reinforce a productive «working alliance». In the case of these classes, a deeper level of psychological and philosophical inquiry marked each following day out of 48 hours format. Could this mean that, to arrive at a similar result, the CI facilitator has somehow to condense - from the point of view of time - the group process as it is done in encounter groups? Not necessarily. Another way to build the working alliance quickly is to change the quality of the material presented. As soon as a) the narrative meets a standard of emotional relevance for the group members, and (b) from the point of view of emotional ecology, does not destroy the individual's defense mechanisms (which usually emerge in the initial stages of group development), its analysis and interpretation turns into kind of life change event.

Thus it is not necessarily time that leads the participants to build up relationships of trust, but a challenging common experience involving exposure to an important issue. This could be compared to the impact which even a brief emotional talk with someone who is significant in one's life can have on one's basic self-understanding. This is grounded on the assumption that the personal change process is not necessarily a gradual linear, step-by step process, but a shift or even a non-linear leap to new levels of development. We observe the same phenomenon in «insight events,» during which, within a very limited period of time, persons may arrive at startling insights - generalizations which may resolve the problems that other people have been preoccupied with for years.

In its essence, the resolution of the problem of time in community of inquiry theory and practice can be viewed from the perspective of «guided group insight» - a form of holistic, non-linear, irreversible, quasi-predictable, communal transformation.

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