

From Learning Outcomes to Educational Possibilities—What Happens  
When Philosophical Community Inquiry “Works Wonders” with  
University Students in Taiwan

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### INTRODUCTION

There have been concerns in higher education circles in Taiwan regarding students’ reluctance to participate in class discussion and their lack of ability to think independently about major societal issues. A government-funded study found that the main cause is students’ fear of “losing face,” and suggests a number of practical, culturally appropriate strategies for tackling this deep-seated problem, such as making student opinions anonymous and having students present group ideas instead of individual claims (Lee, 2013).

Addressing the problem from a different vantage point, I turned to a radical shift in pedagogy. This paper describes how I adopted the pedagogy of a community of inquiry and applied it to transforming the classroom into an “intellectually safe” community, where there is “no fear of ridicule, putdowns, or belittlement” (Jackson, 2001). When feeling intellectually safe, students have the courage to express their “raw thoughts” and work together with others to refine them. To borrow from Biesta (2014), they learn how to take a “beautiful risk” and to “come into the world.” This open encounter of self and other enables students to take ownership of their ideas and to exist as *unique* beings in the world.

This pedagogy was inspired by Mathew Lipman’s (2003) formulation of Philosophy for Children (P4C). I also owe a huge debt to Thomas Jackson for his emancipatory vision of philosophy and education in developing Philosophy for Children Hawaii (p4cHI).<sup>1</sup> Embracing the core p4cHI feature of “doing little p philosophy,” ensuring “intellectual safety,” and “not being in a rush” (Jackson, 2001, 2004, 2012, 2013; Lukey, 2013), my Taiwanese version of the “philosopher’s pedagogy” (Maikaiau & Chad, 2012) has “worked wonders” with my university students in Taiwan.<sup>2</sup> The class under study was a university-wide general education course titled *Education for Thinking and Democracy*. The participants were 25 juniors in various departments of the colleges of teacher education and the humanities. The materials used to stimulate inquiry were a selection of TED talks broadly related to education. The course was designed to help students experience thinking and democracy for themselves. The experiential focus allowed me “free teaching from learning,” as Gert Biesta (2015) suggests.

Describing the class as “working wonders,” I do not mean that it was flawless or that it was representative of other p4cHI classes I have taught in Taiwan. In fact, each class was different and unique in its own way. My intention is to document and comment on the transformational journey of this class, because it expanded the horizons of my vision for educational possibilities, which are emancipating in nature. The p4cHI community of inquiry pedagogy emancipates us from the bondage of regimented, predictable learning outcomes and allows us to engage in education worthy of the name. I take such education to be “*wonder-full*” because it is *full of* students’ questions, *wonder*, and bewilderment; it is *full of the wonder* of adventuring into the twists and turns of inquiry; and it is *full of students’ wonderfully* genuine reflections and transformations. Such education is also *wonderful* because it is not simply cognitive or affective, moral or aesthetic, but “all in one,” with all of these elements mutually interpenetrating. The “*wonder*” of this all is that everyone is on board in the journey to learn “from all the contacts of life,” which is the “essential moral interest” (Dewey, 1916, p. 371). As unique individuals, we depart from different places, and head in different directions, but somehow end up being in a more humbled and humane place than where we set out from.

On our p4cHI journey, we practice philosophy not as “combat,” but as “aesthetic experience,” stressing understanding and appreciation (Mattice, 2013). Although there is the perennial controversy concerning the legitimate contours of philosophy in philosophically-guided educational practice (Biesta, 2011), the aesthetic model of philosophy, as described in Sarah Mattice’s *Metaphor and Metaphilosophy* (2013), is more congenial to Chinese cultural sensibilities and philosophical outlooks, and thus holds more promise for grounding p4c in our own cultural soil.

In this paper, I share my journey of teaching and explore its implications for education. I draw extensively from the students’ own reflections in their weekly assignments (WA) and their final questionnaires (FQ). This rich data has enabled me to explore *from their perspectives* what it means and how it feels to be “educated” in the community circle. In elaborating on their experience, I draw from John Dewey’s educational theory, David Bohm’s theory of dialogue, and the more recent ideas of contemporary philosopher of education Gert Biesta. In conclusion, I reflect upon my role as a co-inquirer and facilitator of inquiry and its implications for university teaching.

### *Awakening on the First Day of Class*

Let me begin with the first day of class. We were all sitting in a circle so that the students could see each other’s faces, rather than the back of someone’s head. We

introduced ourselves using the “community ball” to facilitate: whoever gets the ball is the one who talks and who gets to invite the next speaker. In this process, I also asked every speaker to summarize the gist of what the previous speaker said. This created a social need to listen attentively as well as a social responsibility to articulate oneself. This is also a way of breaking the students’ habit of mind wandering and helping them re-orient themselves in this new inquiry setting. This procedure arose from the realization that if we really want to encourage students to talk in class, we must also create a classroom atmosphere where everyone is listening and being listened to, and where everyone’s contribution, however tiny, is acknowledged for making a difference. The goal is to create an environment where listening, speaking, and thinking are mutually reinforcing.

Toward the end of the first class, I asked everyone to share what they experienced in class that day. One student said that it was interesting to watch who was throwing the ball to whom. He noticed that people tended to pass the ball to someone they already knew, and he hoped that this would change. I was glad to find that right from the beginning, the creation of a non-exclusive, integrated community was a shared vision. I also clearly remember how one student said to the class, “I sense so much soul in everyone’s gaze.” There is, indeed, something very special about the looks on people’s faces when they are listening, thinking, and being mindful. No longer drifting, students were awakened to a new mode of being. As I reflected upon these comments, I knew why this class was a success. It had to do with who the students were before they walked into the class. They came in with an interest in community, communication, and reflection; and by living through these experiences, they left with a firmer grasp of their meanings.

### *Maintaining an Intricate Interplay between Listening and Speaking*

As I started to analyze the data, I found an intricate interplay between listening and speaking. On the one hand, students who were vocal in the beginning became more conscious of the importance of listening, and deliberately chose to listen to others first before they themselves spoke. “I found that simply by listening, my thoughts have become much clearer” (WA, S21, 2015/4/7). On the other hand, the more taciturn students gradually began to talk more freely and frequently. As one student noticed, “Some of the quiet students are beginning to share their thoughts in class. I think they are very brave” (WA, S19, 2015/4/7). Such transformation of conduct in opposite directions is clearly shown in this pair of reflections.

I have always been the one who listened more and talked less. I worry that my own views may be too shallow. And sometimes I am not sure how to express my thoughts. But our class is an intellectually safe environment, so I should not limit myself to

my comfort zone. I should speak up and step out of my little circle. (WA, S6, 2015/3/24)

In the past, when it comes to discussion, I thought that I should freely express whatever I thought of. Now in our community of inquiry, I learned to listen more and I found that listening to others and integrating what they say into my own thoughts can make my thinking more complete. (FQ, S24)

This nuanced shift in the students' attitudes toward speaking and listening led to a neat balance, which created "the nice feeling of having everyone all here together in the end" (FQ, S20). The overall positive impression of the students is summed up in the comment: "I hope we can have more classes like this to allow more people to experience what it means to really listen and to really speak" (FQ, S16).

### *Coming to Know the True Meaning of Listening and Speaking*

What does it mean to listen and speak in our community of inquiry? What is listening? Do students not "listen" enough? As one student commented,

*We are so used to listening; we listen when we sit in class, we listen at home, and we listen when we sit in front of the TV, but that kind of listening is perfunctory, not really encountering the thing itself, not taking it seriously. It was like having a wall that blocked the sound signals from passing through, making it difficult to hear. To really listen, then think, and then respond is what I learned the most.* (FQ, S16)

Dewey makes a similar distinction between the "one-way or straight-line listening" associated with much of schooling, and "transactional listening in conversation" (Waks, 2011, p. 194). In one-way listening, a student can live exclusively in her own head protected by "a wall"; in the transactional model, she throws herself into the world in her responding to the other.

The purpose of transactional listening in inquiry is not merely to comprehend some information, but to understand and respond to the other. As one student wrote,

[Listening to others], I found myself wanting to say to the speaker: Is this what you are trying to say? If I guessed it right, I would feel delighted. I don't know how the person feels, but for myself, I was somehow feeling closer to that person. I also found that effectively speaking for another requires wholehearted listening and empathy. You almost need to stand where she is standing, and you need to watch the view she is watching. Only then can you truly express what she is thinking. (FQ, S19)

Embedded in the thinking in a community of inquiry is a special way of *thinking, understanding, and relating to the other.*

Relating to the other in inquiry can also become a means of understanding oneself.

I used to think that listening to the opinions of others can help me understand them better. But I gradually realized that this process can in fact help me understand what I am thinking. Regardless of whether other people think the same or differently, I can, from their sharing and explanation, come to know what it is I agree or disagree with. Understanding others can help me see more clearly what I want. (FQ, S10)

The community circle provides a space in which the self is inextricably connected to the other, where interaction of self-understanding and understanding of the other are mutually reinforcing.

The theme of self-understanding recurs throughout the students' comments about speaking. "Today the biggest breakthrough for me is to express my thoughts. Perhaps not everyone agrees. But *at least, I said what I wanted to say*" (WA, S24, 2015/4/7). This student learned to stand up for what she believed, rather than "hide behind the crowd" (FQ, S16). Through speaking, one student came to understand something new about herself and her role in the community.

In the past, I didn't think that I had any position to say anything. As long as there is someone in the community who is really vocal, the community will move along. However, after experiencing a community of inquiry a few times, I realized that no matter who was speaking, as long as a person's idea got voiced, it would have some kind of effect on the community. It may open up a completely new direction in the inquiry, or it may make the person visible to the community. So even if what I want to say may not be correct, or may even be refuted, I should still try to express myself. Otherwise, I might gradually lose sight of who I am. (FQ, S19)

These comments demonstrate the students' need to be heard, to be seen, to relate to the other, and to connect with themselves. In my view, this need is not an egocentric desire to assert oneself at the expense of the other, but a genuine desire to "come into the world" (Biesta, 2014) and to *exist* for who one is.

### ***Embracing the Power of Genuine Questions***

One of the pedagogical emphases in p4cH is to have every student ask her own questions and have the community vote on the questions. The purpose is to nurture a

sense of wonder and to create a sense of connectedness in the community. In this process, students will also be more likely to ask genuine questions that truly puzzle them and hence be more likely to feel the impact of inquiry on their lives. What is a “genuine” question? Why is it important for philosophical inquiry to engage students with their genuine questions?

In teaching, we all want students to ask questions. We assume that being able to ask questions indicates some progress in learning, particularly when students ask thoughtful, inviting questions germane to the course content. But is there a gap between the good questions teachers love to hear and the genuine questions students have? In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey (1916/1980) prioritizes a “genuine” problem over a “simulated or mock” problem and offers two sets of criteria to judge the difference.

(a) Is there anything *but* a problem? Does the question naturally suggest itself within some situation of personal experience? Or is it an aloof thing, a problem only for the purposes of conveying instruction in some school topic? Is it the sort of trying that would arouse observation and engage experimentation outside of school? (b) Is it the pupil's own problem, or is it the teacher's or textbook's problem, made a problem for the pupil only because he cannot get the required mark or be promoted or win the teacher's approval, unless he deals with it? Is the experience a personal thing of such a nature as inherently to stimulate and direct observation of the connections involved, and to lead to inference and its testing? Or is it imposed from without, and is the pupil's problem simply to meet the external requirement? (p. 162)

The first criterion emphasizes the connection of the question to personal experience and the second criterion suggests that the question come from the student as a human person *per se*, rather than as a role. A genuine question also has to do with the need of an embodied human being (not an abstract mind) to make sense of her concrete, living world, and to navigate her way around.

In our community of inquiry, when we open up a space for students to ask their own questions, we are, in a sense, engaging them to ask questions arising from their contacts with real people and events in the experiential world. We allow our students to turn away from the motionless, eventless, “objective” world of textbook facts, and take a deep look at the world of their everyday lives—where they are bound to confront its complexities, multiplicities, and perplexities, and where they would encounter genuine questions “coming” naturally to them. When genuine questions do arise in inquiry, they surprise, they resonate, and they appeal to everyone.

Let me give two memorable examples from my first “p4cH experiment” in Taiwan. It was the first class of an introductory course on the philosophy of education. I asked everyone to ask a question broadly related to their K-12 schooling experience or their university education. One of the questions was, “Does university teaching have no problems?” The other students resonated with this controversial question, and it indeed got the most votes. Remarkably, on that day, the students were not complaining about the bad teachers they had had; they were thinking together about what was lacking in their university classroom experience, whether class evaluations were at all helpful in improving university teaching, and what was good teaching anyway.

As I look back, I realize the great significance of this first day of class. In fact, it was a monumental opening up of a space of trust in the community. As facilitator, I trusted that the students would discuss such controversial questions in a thoughtful way; and for their part the students trusted that I would respect their thoughts and feelings. Once trust was established, our community was ready to grapple with genuine questions from the students. For example, when the assigned reading was about the purposes of philosophy—pursuing truth and establishing values—our community chose to discuss the question: “If one could live happily with a lie, is pursuing the truth important?” Interestingly, the traditional epistemological problems of what is true and how we can know and verify what is true took on a new rendering in the students’ questioning. They were puzzled by the value of truth in relation to real human life. For me, these genuine questions are invitations to enter into uncharted territory where our own assumptions are held in abeyance—so as to look at the world anew.

Genuine questions coming from the students resonate with the community and spur high interest in inquiry. This is also what happened in the class described in this paper. We inquired about “whether it was the purpose of education to fill an existing gap or to cultivate unknown potentialities,” and “how to differentiate between wasting time and meaningful exploration when trying to find out what to do with one’s life?” One student was genuinely unsure about how to distinguish between thinking and *zuan niu jiao jian*, a Chinese idiom implying wasting time thinking about an insoluble or insignificant problem. This expression is typically used to ridicule people who seem to think too much, too sedulously, or pointlessly. Students have inherited this term from the culture at large without ever considering what it actually means, assumes, and implies. How is it related to thinking? And, what is thinking, anyway? Can we really think too much or too little? Our inquiry may not yield “final” answers, but students may “have gained something more valuable than the answer,” that is, “the meaning of the question itself, its multiple dimensions, and the connections between people’s ideas” (WA, S19, 2015/3/24).

What do students think about the overall meaning of question generating, sharing, and voting? Sharing everyone's questions at the beginning of the class is like "seeing how people, as different individuals, draw from their own life experiences to add a little footnote to the theme under discussion" (FQ, S19). The voting itself created "a shared consensus in the community" and a "sense of honor" for the student contributing the question (FQ, S24). As one student wrote, "Learning to ask my own questions helps me get in better touch with myself, to discover some areas in my thinking that I did not realize before, and to find out why I have these thoughts. These two processes actually helped us better understand ourselves and others" (FQ, S19). The philosophical journey of "knowing thyself" begins by having students ask powerfully genuine questions of their own.

### *Dancing with the Natural Rhythms in the Life of a Community of Inquiry*

We think of the four seasons as nature's rhythms. From nature's standpoint, a hot summer day is as good as a cold winter snow. How about the "natural rhythms" in a community of inquiry when it takes on a life of its own?

The natural lifecycle of a community can be said to consist of the stages of beginning, emerging, and maturity. In my own experience, a beginning community is one where people tend to act the way they are (shy or vocal) and show what is socially expected. There may be an initial atmosphere of peace due to a certain relational distance. An emerging community occurs when people venture to take their own positions and voice conflicting viewpoints. Some tensions may rise and some feelings may be hurt. Although it is important to maintain an intellectually safe community where people respect each other, it is also important to embrace tension as a natural part of its rhythms.

In his vision of using dialogue to create "a common consciousness," David Bohm (1996) indicates a way to work with tensions. As he puts it, "If people can share the frustration, and share their different contradictory assumptions and share their mutual anger and stay with it—if everybody is angry together, and looking at it together—then you have a common consciousness" (p. 33). Bohm adds, "If people could stay with power, violence, hate or whatever it is, all the way to the end, then it would sort of collapse . . . they would become open and trusting of each other. They have already gone through the thing that they are afraid of, so the intelligence can then work" (p. 33). Embracing tensions as natural rhythms can lead to new births and new hopes for the life of a community of inquiry.

Usually around mid-semester, we see a beginning community changing into an emerging community. The strategy I use to scaffold this change is to conduct a meta-



inquiry that gives students a chance to reflect upon their experience in the community, sharing their excitement, frustrations, and hopes for change. Such meta-discussions, if conducted successfully, help the community evolve into a more mature one, where people can truly speak their minds, embrace differences, work with tensions, and stay connected. Then diversity is not merely tolerated, but truly appreciated as conducing to deeper understanding and stimulating moral growth.

Several students in my class expressed appreciation for the openness of our community to work with tensions. As one student described it, we could talk things out without “having to pretend to be all that rational.” Another wrote, “Even if we did argue over certain values, what I got out of it is a certain kind of engrossing earnestness and excitement” (FQ, S2). Another student took the meaning of respect to include the acceptance of emotions.

Respect has always been the most important thing for me, both in casual talks and in debate. When people do show some emotions in a heated exchange or argument, I take that to be a positive sign, a manifestation of seriousness in attitude toward the matter at hand, though I might not always know how to respond on the spot. As long as there is not deliberate attack, criticism, or ridicule, I am willing to include heated debate in my range of what counts as respect. In a community, such respect is very important because it entails safety, trust, sincerity, and acceptance. (FQ, S20)

In my view, a heated dialogue that is emotionally charged is like a sudden thunderstorm on a hot summer afternoon. As Bohm’s statement indicates, if we allow it to happen and run its course, we may be rewarded with a beautiful rainbow if the community is being reflective and mindful about the process.

Apart from the community, the inquiry itself also has its natural rhythms. Sometimes the inquiry will be quite smooth and fulfilling, but other times it may be caught in a stalemate or fall into chaos. In inquiry, there is always the risk that it will not be as perfect as we would like it to be. However, the “thinking together” in an inquiry can still be valuable even if it is far from being perfect. One student reflected on the difference between thinking alone and thinking in a community.

Thinking alone can help a person to think more deeply about the issue and understand oneself, but one can easily get caught up in one’s own prejudice without knowing it or get caught up at a certain level without moving forward. Thinking in a community allows one to hear diverse perspectives and learn from the differences between oneself and others, but sometimes it can be very chaotic, either having no point or having too many points, which almost makes one unable to think. (FQ, S4)

This student had been struggling to make sense of the “occasional chaos” in inquiry, but on the last day of class she wrote: “Up until two week ago I felt frustrated or guilty over my own sense of confusion in inquiry. But now I realize that I am not here to judge other people. I am here to learn from them” (FQ, S4).

While I am sympathetic to her struggles, I have found that this is part of the process of learning to think together, and that it nurtures “faith in the capacities of human nature, faith in human intelligence, and in the power of pooled and cooperative experience,” which is “the foundation of democracy” (Dewey, 1937/1987, p. 219). Indeed, her struggles are only to be expected. How can it be otherwise in Taiwan, where few students really had the chance to learn to think together with their peers and teachers? Not knowing how to think collaboratively with others is the natural starting point for a community of inquiry. We have to begin with where the students are, and then patiently guide them towards transformation and development.

Sometimes a facilitator may have a very good reason for rushing in and rescuing a student drowning in chaos, but undue or untimely intervention may kill the spirit of the inquiry. To be sure, knowing the right timing challenges the practical wisdom of every facilitator of a community of inquiry. However, if we truly embrace inquiry, we must also embrace uncertainty and chaos as natural rhythms. Dewey’s description of “actual thinking” in inquiry, though a bit convoluted, attests to this point.

In the thinking by which a conclusion is actually reached, observations are made that turn out to be aside from the point; false clues are followed; fruitless suggestions are entertained; superfluous moves are made. Just because you do not know the solution of your problem, you have to grope toward it and grope in the dark or at least in an obscure light; you start on lines of inquiry that in the end you give up. When you are only seeking the truth and of necessity seeking somewhat blindly, you are in a radically different position from the one you are in when you are already in possession of truth. (Dewey, 1933/1986, p. 184)

In a community of inquiry, no one is in possession of the truth and knows exactly where it will go and how it should end. To use Dewey’s terminology, we may have an “end-in-view,” but no fixed, predetermined ends. As long as we have an end-in-view, going astray in the middle of an inquiry is as natural as coming to see an answer. If we overemphasize progress and certitude, we will miss out on what it means to genuinely think—to grope in the dark and finally find the way.

To respect the natural rhythms in inquiry, one must manifest a certain kind of openness and trust— in “letting happen,” not “making happen”—which is the true spirit

of “not being in a rush” (Jackson, 2004). Dewey’s notion of open-mindedness serves to elaborate on this point. In open-mindedness,

there is a kind of passivity, willingness to let experiences accumulate and sink in and ripen, which is essential to development. Results (external answers or solutions) may be hurried, processes may not be forced. They take their own time to mature. Were all instructors to realize that the quality of mental process, not the production of correct answers, is the measure of educative growth, something hardly less than a revolution in teaching would be worked. (Dewey, 1916/1980, p. 183)

If we want to breathe “natural life” into inquiry, we need to refrain from any predetermined goals that might smother the spirit of inquiry. We need to trust that the life of the inquiry will create its own existential surprises and educational possibilities.

Two of the students used the image of walking in a maze to describe the collaborative adventure of thinking in our community of inquiry. One stated that it was like “walking in a maze. If you walk by yourself, you can quickly decide to turn right or left, but if you walk with a lot of people, you will perhaps find different exits” (FQ, S9). The other found that “a community of inquiry is risky but creative; you run the risk of having your own ideas questioned, but it may work out for the best in the end because you will get to enjoy some views you have never seen before” (FQ, S19).

### *Seeing Oneself in the Mirror of the Other—Learning from Each Other*

Sitting in a circle—one of the defining features of a community of inquiry—is replete with symbolic meanings and moral underpinnings. A circle makes everyone equally related to the center and hence to each other. A circle also makes everyone see each other. Such seeing makes utterly transparent a certain quality of the person-to-person relationship. Such seeing also makes the “relating to the other” essential. It creates a natural effect of seeing oneself through the mirror of the other.

Apart from the circular sitting arrangement, another important classroom element of a p4cH community is the use of a “community ball” to involve everyone in the process (Jackson, 2001). The function of the ball is to monitor turn taking and to empower every member in the community with the same right to speak, to invite, and to pass. The community ball is made of yarn of different colors, symbolizing the integration of people with different backgrounds and the weaving together of their ideas. One of my students said that the circular shape of the ball also reminds people in the community to improve their relationships with each other by rounding their own sharp edges. The symbolism of the circle also runs at a deeper level, serving as a reminder to “search for one’s center”

as Thomas Jackson has long envisioned in his practice of p4cHI.<sup>3</sup> Finding one's center and speaking from it is the most joyous moment of a philosophical journey—it is where the true, the good, and the beautiful meet.

In my own adaption of p4cH, I created a set of hand signals (see endnote 2) to assist the flow of inquiry and to consolidate our community. Therefore, in our highly interactive community, people can readily connect with each other using eye contact, attentive listening, the ball, or hand signals. The circle, the community ball, and the hand signals—all of these classroom rituals help students *experience and perceive* how their own words, facial expressions, postures, and emotions impact other people in the community, and vice versa. These conventions can increase what Bohm (1996) calls “awakened attentiveness,” which enables students to fully perceive the impact of their thought processes and mutual exchanges in inquiry. In my class, I have found that this “awakened attentiveness” leads to a heightened sense of moral reflection on the part of my students.

As one student wrote, “Basically, I try to respect other people by suspending my own disagreement, but sometimes I wasn't so proud of the way I spoke. I must have looked unpleasantly upset to other people” (FQ, S23). Although this student did not intend to reveal her anger, the mirror of the others revealed to her something about herself that she may not have wanted to see. Another student wrote,

What strikes me the most about this class is that I realized that my ideas and others' ideas differ so much. In the beginning I felt that mine were better, but I gradually realized that I was too conceited. I wasn't really understanding what other people were trying to say. (FQ, S4)

Another student had a cogent analysis of herself in different stages of her overall experience and transformation.

At first, I forced myself to accept others' opinions, but I became deeply troubled by an internal conflict. Then I gradually learned to see that I can have different viewpoints from others, and that I can raise my own doubts and ideas, which is indeed my biggest breakthrough. On the other hand, I also realize that those who seemed to hold strong opinions are not really all that dogmatic or unsympathetic. They were just frankly persisting with what they think is the right thing to do. (FQ, S25)

Another student wrote,

In the past, I would take a different opinion to be a threat because I thought mine was better, so listening to them implied that I should compromise and accept something which seemed wrong to me; and this would be a blow to my self-esteem. But over this semester I realized for myself the importance of listening to diverse opinions. These opinions actually helped to enrich my thinking. (FQ, S1)

Indeed, the biggest challenge for everyone in the class may have been to “truly put self and other in an equal position and be willing to learn from others” (FQ, S4), as one student reflected.

Many students in this class expressed appreciation for the journey of mutual learning. As one noted, “Everyone in the class was like an expert on life . . . rather than either teaching others or being taught by others, this mutual learning from each other makes one more humble” (FQ, S25). An effective community of inquiry does reduce the participants’ egocentricity in the face of a larger world where everyone makes a unique contribution. As one student commented, “My deepest and fondest memory about the class is the sharing and interacting among people. You can see that some people are really sharper thinkers; some are such good listeners and give so much warmth; and some people share special stories from their personal experience” (FQ, S8). In our community of inquiry, the many different ways “people are” and “come to be” have enriched and enlarged everyone’s experience.

Such enriching and enlarging of experience through inquiry and dialogue is at the heart of Dewey’s theory of communication as educative experience. Dewey wrote, “To be a recipient of a communication is to have an enlarged and changed experience.” Since communication leads to a transformation of experience, “all communication is educative” (Dewey, 1916/1980, p. 8). Such educative experiences are the surest foundation of democracy. As Dewey wrote, “Democracy will have its consummation when free social inquiry is indissolubly wedded to the art of full and moving communication” (Dewey, 1925, p. 350). This statement captures the meaning of the title of my course, *Education for Thinking and Democracy*. Although I did not explicitly teach about democracy in class, the students all recognized the close connection between education for thinking and the ideal of democracy.

Before I conclude this paper, I would like to add some caveats. Much of the data I analyzed came from the students’ own self-reports and reflections in their required assignments. Although triangulation was established by checking and comparing different sources, including classroom observations and mid-term reflections, it is still possible that some of the students may have exaggerated their positive comments and

downplayed negative ones out of concern for their grades. I also make no attempt to claim that their transformations are lasting and easily transferred to other settings. Nor do I wish to claim that there is a direct causal relationship between my pedagogy and student change. In fact, this paper is not so much about how the students themselves changed because of the class, but more about what change of experience they had in the class. My major contention is that the students had a very different experience of education; and I tried to show what this experience may have meant for them, for me, and for education in general.

### CONCLUSION: OPENING UP EDUCATIONAL POSSIBILITIES AS WORTHWHILE LEARNING OUTCOMES

Having shared my journey of teaching, I realize I had a larger purpose in mind—to urge us to rethink “what education is” and “what education can be.”

Let me start with a scenario of a hypothesized dialogue. Suppose someone approaches me with these questions, “What did you teach in your class?” and “What did your students learn?” You are likely to see me painfully scratching my head but eventually come to admit, with a frank shrug of my shoulders, “I didn’t teach anything specifically, but we learned to think together.” This answer may be quite unthinkable for those who regard education as transmission, which amounts to nothing more than selecting teaching materials and ensuring learning outcomes. To these people, I venture to suggest a shift in their trajectory of thinking—from “what did students *learn*?” to “how did they *come to be*?” Surely, there are *definite* things “to learn” about the world, but there are *infinite* possibilities of “coming to be” in the world and with the world. “To be or not to be”—that is perhaps the more crucial question to ask, if we are willing to consider what Biesta (2010) calls “subjectification” as a worthwhile educational pursuit, along with what he calls “qualification” and “socialization.” According to Biesta (2015), the “learnification” phenomenon in educational discourse and practice is “seriously limiting our existential possibilities, that is, our possibilities for being in the world and with the world” (p. 237). My teaching experiment described in this paper aims to open up such existential educational possibilities. Admittedly, it is not the only way, but I am convinced that it is an effective and worthwhile pursuit.

To conclude, I would like to pose and answer a question. What is my role as a teacher in our philosophical journey of learning to think together? My students’ views about the criteria for a good facilitator may help shed some light on this question. A good facilitator “has to be very attentive so that she can capture what everyone is thinking and feeling. She also has to renounce her own subjective consciousness and prejudice” (FQ,

S11). She “cannot be partial and only listen to what she wants to hear” (FQ, S20). She needs “to have good verbal abilities and a good-tempered nature, but also a strong will and lot of perseverance in order to earn the true respect of the students” (FQ, S2).

She needs to demonstrate tolerance and sensibility. When all voices are coming out in the community, we need someone who can simultaneously take in all these accounts without making it seem as though anyone is absolutely right or absolutely wrong. When the community falls into chaos, we need someone who can step outside and make everyone see what is going on and guide us to take the next step. (FQ, S19)

In my view, a good facilitator models an ideal participant. A good community of inquiry requires everyone to learn to be an ideal participant. It is everyone—not just the facilitator—that made this learning together possible.

However, as the students themselves suggest, this learning takes some “letting go” on the part of the teacher, so as to “allow the students to try for themselves” (FQ, S6). It also requires “seeing the shinning spots” in students’ unpolished articulations (FQ, S4). If a teacher can really learn to move in these directions, she is bound to discover, like myself, a wealth of treasures that lie hidden and buried in the students’ hearts and minds; she is bound to feel, like myself, a sense of agony over the waste of human resources and experiences that could enrich the meaning of our lives; and she is bound to be moved to action, like myself, to bring more existential educational possibilities to schools so as to encourage all to live a flourishing and examined life.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Philosophy for Children Hawaii (p4cHI) is one among the many developments of P4C inspired by the work of Mathew Lipman. Under the guidance of Dr. Thomas Jackson and because of several p4c teachers winning national and regional teaching excellence awards, p4cH has transformed itself into a general teaching movement with three model schools where philosophers in residence, local school teachers, and school principals work collaboratively to bring about educational change. Philosophy for Children Hawaii now has its own center of teaching and research, the Uehiro Academy for Philosophy and Ethics in Education, at the University of Hawaii at Manoa.

<sup>2</sup> To adapt p4cHI to the linguistic and cultural contexts in Taiwan, I created a set of hand signals combining important features from the “Good Thinker’s Toolkit” and “Magic Words” developed by Jackson (2004). With these hands-on signals, students can practice and internalize the cognitive and affective skills for building the community and deepening the inquiry. These signals include: IDUS (I don’t understand), Thumbs up (well said), Reason, Example, Counter-example, Assumptions, Going off Subject, True?, Speak Louder, and No Side Talk. To see these signals, please visit <http://p4chawaii.org/gallery/#prettyPhoto>.

<sup>3</sup> Influenced by his encounter with non-Western philosophical traditions, such as the Madhyamika school of Buddhism, the Advaita Vedanta school of Hinduism, and J. Krishnamurti, Dr. Jackson has revealed during our private conversations his concern for the loss of a sense of center endemic to the human condition. Therefore, he sees that when p4cH is embedded in school culture, it provides a powerful way for people to reconnect with the center, which is the essential part of their humanness.

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