CHAPTER 3

COMMUNITIES OF CONVERSATION

Joseph Giordmaina

Malta



Dialogue, Philosophy, Thinking and Children

The *Teaching Thinking in Europe: Inventory of European Programmes* (Hamers & Overtoon, (eds.) 1997) lists 42 different programmes whose main goal is the teaching of thinking to children in schools. One identified approach is *Philosophy for Children*, a 'subject' developed mainly by Prof Matthew Lipman at Montclair State University. Prof Lipman has also set up The Institute of Advancement for Philosophy for Children (IAPC), which has published a curriculum in Philosophy for Children, one which is currently being implemented in more than 60 countries[i]. Other writers in different parts of the world have taken different approaches from the one taken at IAPC; reflecting the educational traditions they are working in. The common goal of all Philosophy for Children programmes is the development of children into better thinkers, into more reasonable beings. All writers within the Philosophy for Children tradition believe that thinking can be taught and improved, and that it takes place within a subject: one thinks about something, one does not just 'think'. They also believe that the ideal subject to promote better thinking is Philosophy. The goals of Philosophy for Children programmes are to encourage children to think, to reason and to make judgements about issues that are of interest to them, most of which are judgements about values as well as better understanding of concepts. It is through such a process of thinking that children create meaning of their worlds, constructing their values, knowledge, dispositions and making informed and well thought out judgements. Through Philosophy for Children teachers try to develop the social, ethical, aesthetical, affective and political domains of children's lives. The underlying notion is that thinking develops through a conversation within a community of inquiry: my thinking develops because I have a language by means of which I can express my thoughts. I also have the capability of listening to others, assessing/judging their positions, and changing my beliefs accordingly.

Methodology

The Philosophy for Children approach does not involve the uncontextualised drilling one finds in a number of thinking skills programmes; it can be taught both as a subject in itself as well as through the curriculum[ii], and is a 'subject' which is directly related to the child's experience, that experience which goes beyond the classroom walls. Although one cannot divorce methodology from content, for the purposes of this paper I shall focus more on the former, that is, the methodology employed, particularly the part referred to in the literature as the *community of inquiry,* in which dialogue plays a central role.

In the initial part of a Philosophy for Children lesson, children are introduced to a text. A text can be a novel specifically written for a Philosophy for Children lesson[iii], or any other children's literature. A text can be a happening in the school or classroom, an autobiographical writing or a video. Anything in fact is a text, as long as it has enough content to stimulate the children's interest. The text is introduced to children in a number of ways, normally through reading aloud the passage/story, through dramatisation, using puppet theatres, etc. Children are given enough time to reflect and problemitise the text, and are encouraged to note on their 'Thinking Notebook' what they would like to discuss. After 'Thinking Time', the facilitator of the discussion, who initially is the teacher, but eventually can be any child, asks the children to identify what they would like to talk about. These points are written down on a large sheet of paper; the name of the contributing children written next to the sentence. One of the themes identified by the children is chosen for discussion either through general agreement, or by taking vote or some other way. Following this, a discussion or 'inquiry' takes place. For this to be possible, the classroom is turned into a *community of inquiry,* where dialogue is encouraged in order to inquire into the selected theme, through a process of questioning and sharing of ideas. Children are encouraged to move in their discussion from the specific, the point of departure of the discussion, to more general terms, and to correct and change their positions as the inquiry moves

along. Following the discussion, children are encouraged to act on their 'new' positions, for example, by simply taking note of their ideas and how these changed, in their 'Thinking Notebooks', by expressing their 'new' ideas using different media, for example putting up a poster exhibition, drawings, writing a play etc., or to try to bring about a change in the way things are done. If the topic of inquiry is 'fairness', and a classroom procedure is identified as being unfair, children are encouraged to act so as to bring about a change in class: a fairer procedure. The idea is not to stop at the thinking process, but to help children to pass to action, that is, from spectators to actors.

Although the methodology described in a Philosophy for Children lesson seems to be a rather simple one, it involves great skills on the facilitator's part so as to have a meaningful dialogue going on in the classroom. Teachers are prepared for Philosophy for Children through training courses. The teacher's manuals help in developing that necessary 'philosophical ear' in order that certain issues that might escape the untrained philosopher be identified and thought about and maybe even discussed with other teachers prior to the lesson.

Thinking in a Community

For the purpose of this chapter I shall be mainly dealing with the notion of 'community of inquiry' as developed through the Philosophy for Children literature and, drawing on a number of philosophers' writings, I shall try to add different perspectives to how the idea of the community of inquiry and dialogue can be further developed.

In engaging in the community of inquiry the main tasks are two: the first being to inquire, the second to inquire with others. Tinder (1993) distinguishes between different kinds of inquiry: scientific, historical, transcendental, and philosophical, arguing that the latter is the most comprehensive of all inquiries, 'of uniting all

modes of consciousness in a single interpretation of being' (p.359). For Splitter and Sharp (1995) community evokes a 'spirit of co-operation, care, trust, safety and a sense of common purpose', while inquiry evokes a form of 'self-correcting practice driven by the need to transform that which is intriguing, problematic, confused, ambiguous, or fragmentary into some kind of unifying whole which is satisfying to those involved, and which culminates, albeit tentatively, in judgement' (p.18).

Lipman (1991 p.229-243[iv]) argues that in a community of inquiry

1. the process is not merely conversation or discussion, it is dialogical;
2. this activity has a direction: it goes where the argument takes it;
3. it always has an aim: that of producing a product, a settlement or a judgement. This can be tentative, but it is always a product of the activity.

Lipman also argues that the community of inquiry is a necessary means for attaining a democratic society (Lipman 1991 p.244). Lipman's vision is that the community of inquiry in the class should both 'represent and anticipate a society composed of participatory communities - a society that is a community of such communities' (p.247). This is possible if education becomes 'education *as* inquiry and education *for* inquiry'.

The Dialogical Process

The Philosophy for Children movement promotes the use of dialogue in the classroom rather than conversation, debate or argumentation. For example, Splitter and Sharp (1995) argue that dialogue is a form of conversation, in which the following conditions are present:

1. The conversation is structured by being focused on a topic or question which is problematic or contestable.
2. The conversation is self-regulating or self-correcting. Its participants are prepared both to question the views and reasons put forward by others, and to restate their own position in response to questions or counter-examples that come from the group.
3. The conversation has what we call an egalitarian structure. By what they say, participants show that they value themselves and one another equally for the purpose of the dialogue, irrespective of where they stand in relation to a particular viewpoint.

4. The conversation is guided by the mutual interests of its members. In a community of inquiry, it is the participants (of whom the teacher is but one) who set the agenda and determine the procedures for dealing with the issues at hand (p.34-35).

In the process of dialogue children have the opportunity to articulate what they believe in, to decentre from their own point of view in order to understand the position of others, to listen, to take turns, and to build on the ideas of the rest of the community. Dialogue in the classroom gives children the opportunity to modify and improve their thinking[v].

For Burbles (1993) dialogue

> involves two or more interlocutors. It is marked by a climate of open participation by any of its partners, who put forth a series of alternating statements of variable duration (including questioning, responses, redirections, and building statements…), constituting a sequence that is continuous and developmental. Dialogue is guided by a spirit of discovery, so that the typical tone of a dialogue is exploratory and interrogative. It involves a commitment to the process of communication interchange itself, a willingness to 'see things through' to some meaningful understandings or agreements among the participants. Furthermore, it manifests an attitude of reciprocity among the participants: an interest respect, and concern that they share for one another, even in the face of disagreement (pp.8-9).

He distinguishes between 'teleological' dialogue, which is a dialogue in search of the Truth through a process of dialectic (convergent dialogue), and nonteleological dialogue, which is critical and constructive dialogue (divergent dialogue). There are four types of dialogues:

a) dialogue as conversation: where through co-operation one arrives at mutual understanding, but not necessarily towards an agreement or a reconciliation of differences,
b) dialogue as inquiry: where the main goal is the answering of a specific question, and an outcome that is agreeable to all is produced,
c) dialogue as debate: defending and articulating positions; agreements or reconciliation of differences is not on the agenda
d) dialogue as instruction: through the use of questions the discussion is moved towards a definite conclusion.

These four positions can be summarised as follows:

inclusive -divergent	dialogue as conversation
inclusive - convergent	dialogue as inquiry
critical - divergent	dialogue as debate
critical-convergent	dialogue as instruction

(p.112)

Although most writers within the Philosophy for Children tradition argue for type (b) dialogue, that is, dialogue as inquiry, conceiving of dialogue as conversation is more appropriate to the achievement of the goals of a community of inquiry.

Dialogue as Conversation

In a dialogue as inquiry methodology, characterised by Burbules (1993) as inclusive -convergent, the main aim is to move

> towards the answering of a specific question, the resolution of a specific problem, or the reconciliation of a specific dispute; it is convergent in its aims to produce an outcome agreeable to all (p.116).

Rorty (1980) believes that this has been the main goal of what he terms constructive systematic philosophy[vi]. The main goal of such philosophy has always been to find foundations, to find common grounds to which we all agree. Rorty calls this 'epistemology', a set of rules to which we can turn in order to settle an agreement once there is an issue.

> The dominant notion of epistemology is that to be rational, to be fully human, to do what we ought, we need to be able to find agreement with other human beings. To construct an epistemology is to find the maximum amount of common ground with others. The assumption that an epistemology can be constructed is the assumption that common ground exists (p.316).

Rorty claims that not all discourse is commensurable, that such a foundation, such common ground is not always possible. Rorty believes that

> There is no such thing as human nature…There is only the shaping of an animal into a human being by a process of socialisation, followed (with luck) by the self-individualisation and self-creation of that human being through his or her later revolt against that very process
> (Rorty, R. 1990b p.44)

This clearly identifies the role of education as one primarily of socialisation to be followed by 'self-individualisation' and 'self-creation'. For Rorty the former takes place in primary and secondary schools while the latter takes place in colleges and universities.

> Education seems to me two quite distinct enterprises: lower education is mostly a matter of socialisation, of trying to inculcate a sense of citizenship, and higher education is mostly a matter of individuation, of trying to awaken the individual's imagination in the hope that she will become able to re-create herself. I am not sure that philosophy can do much for any of these enterprises.

(Rorty, R. 1990 pp.41-44)

Rorty here is mistaken on two grounds.

The first is his division of the roles of education into consecutive rather than parallel processes. Self-individualisation and self-creation should be encouraged in all students and not only those who manage to make it to university or college. What Rorty calls 'edification discourse', which is discourse which is meant to 'take us out of our old selves by the powers of strangeness, to aid us in becoming new beings'(p.360) should be present in all classrooms, irrespective of whether they are in primary or secondary schools.

The second mistake Rorty makes is that philosophy cannot do much to reach such goals. It is precisely this kind of discourse that teachers within the Philosophy for Children movement are trying to achieve using philosophy: encouraging discourse that helps children to make the familiar strange, encouraging them to react to what is presented as systematic, as unproblematic.

Rorty distinguishes between two kinds of people, the commonsensicalist and the ironists. The commonsensicalists are those who are merely socialised, people who accept the given vocabulary of the day. 'Ironists'[vii] are those who fulfill the following three conditions:

1. She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered
2. She realises that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts.
3. Insofar as she philosophises about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself. Ironists who are inclined to philosophise see the choice between vocabularies as made neither within a neutral and universal metavocabulary nor by an attempt to fight one's way past appearances to the real, but simply by playing the new off against the old.

(Rorty, R., 1989 p.73)

This rather than inquiry should be the main goal of Philosophy for Children in schools. It is a process of hermeneutics which is only possible through the process of conversation; it is by keeping the conversation going that one can understand

the other's position, his/her point of view. Inquiry leads to transformation of 'that which is intriguing, problematic, confused, ambiguous, or fragmentary into some kind of unifying whole which is satisfying to those involved, and which culminates, albeit tentatively, in judgement' (Splitter and Sharp p.18). Conversation is much more than that. Inquiry leads to a closure, even if tentatively, of the conversation. The aim of a community of inquiry should not be inquiry at all, 'of producing a product, a settlement or a judgement', but a conversation without the 'direction' of where the 'argument takes it' (as suggested by Lipman 1991 p.229). Teachers should aim at attaining communities of conversations in the classroom. Depending on the social background of children, on their 'contingent historical circumstances' conversations in a classroom can be incommensurable. At this point understanding is only possible through Rorty's hermeneutical process.

Reed in Sharp and Reed (eds.) (1992 pp.158-164) points out that conversations are 'in a sense, freely chosen'. In a conversation one chooses whom to talk to and about what to talk. It is open-ended and on-going, 'listening to what is truly, genuinely other' (Caputo 1985 p.201). One always has the possibility of refusing to participate. Conversation, of its very nature comes prior to all other forms of communication, including dialogue, which is more focused, more investigative, more of an inquiry. For Caputo (1985) the final goal of hermeneutics and edifying philosophy is to put man back in touch with himself, rather than turning to the 'speculative constructions of metaphysics' (p.265). It is a process of recognition of ourselves, the ability to find ourselves in conversation with others possibly but not solely through philosophy (Bernstein 1985 p.76).

Walzer (1989-90) distinguishes between real conversation and constructed conversation. The aim of constructed conversation like that proposed by Rawls and Habermas is to 'produce conversational endings, finished arguments, agreed-upon propositions - conclusions, in short, whose truth value or moral rightness the rest of us will be obliged to acknowledge' (p.182). On the other hand, real conversation is always inconclusive; it has no authoritative moments.

> Real talk is the conscious and critical part of that process that generates our received and reigning theories - reflection becomes articulate. Arguing with one another, we

> interpret, revise, elaborate, and also call into question the paradigms that shape our thinking…There is no design. Real talk is unstable and restless, hence it is ultimately more radical than ideal speech. It reaches to reasons and arguments that none of its participants can anticipate, hence to reasons and arguments undreamt of (for better and for worse) by our philosophers (Walzer. 1989-90, p.195).

Both Rawls (1971) and Habermas(1990) have designed hypothetical theories by means of which one can ensure the freedom and equality of all speakers involved in a conversation. Rawls' 'veil of ignorance' sets a number of conditions for people in 'the original position', to ensure that agreement is reached in a fair manner. People in the original position do not know

their place in society (social position, class status, generation),
their natural assets (intelligence, strength, health),
their own conception of the good (personal goals, plans, values),
their particular psychological attributes (attitudes toward risk, pessimism, optimism),
anything particular about their own society (its political structure, economic system, history, cultural values, class divisions, etc.).

Habermas on the other hand has designed rules for reason. These are:

1. Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a discourse. Everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatsoever.
2. Everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatsoever in the discourse.
3. Everyone is allowed to express his attitudes, desires and needs.
4. No speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his rights as laid down in (1) and (2).

He also suggests four validity claims[viii] by means of which we can better understand what is going on in a conversation. Habermas claims that these four validity claims are universal assumptions we make during everyday communicative action. The assumptions are that:

1. What we are saying or hearing is intelligible, i.e., it is coded according to the usual rules, etc.
2. What we are saying or hearing is true in so far as it implies the existence of states of affairs, etc.
3. The persons speaking are being truthful and sincere
4. The things said are normatively appropriate considering the relationship among the people and between them and the situation they are in (Young, R.1989 pp.75-76).

Both Rawls and Habermas's theories are only useful in a Philosophy for Children lesson in order to unmask the degree of asymmetry that might be taking place in a conversation. There is always asymmetry of power and knowledge. Deceptions, ulterior purposes, force, authority, intellectual status and other distortions coming from both teachers and pupils may be identified and criticized using the ideal speech situation as a guide. Rawls' and Habermas' ideal situations only help us in being aware of what might be going on in a dialogue, in a conversation.

Conclusion: Confrontational Discourse

In Philosophy for Children the attempt is made to turn the classroom into a community of inquiry. In actual fact a classroom is not necessarily a community where children have the same interests and goals, united by reciprocal trust; these being characteristics of a community. Children in a classroom are simply put together by chance or by design.. They have no option to leave, or to move from one community to the other. In the classroom one has to respect the diverse communities that exist, the differences of race, of culture, of religion, of gender. It is through conversation that children can be encouraged to examine the 'historically inherited and unreflectively held prejudices, and [to] free [themselves] of those which hinder our efforts to understand others' (Kimball and Garrison 1996 p.53). It is only when one person confronts the beliefs and values of others that he or she can recognize, question and value his or her own position. The community of inquiry in an lesson should be the site of confrontation of ideas, of a conversation about what is important to children in order to help them interpret and reinterpret both their 'selves' and their culture. Such discourse encourages them to acknowledge that every participant in the conversation in the classroom and beyond is conditioned by different historical circumstances: gender, age, class, education level, vocabularies, etc. These differences are not to be eradicated, but celebrated. It is only through such a space in the school curriculum, only through dialogue as conversation with the 'other' that children can become more aware of both 'themselves' and the unfamiliar other, resulting in newer, richer understandings and meanings.

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