

Philosophical Inquiry, Democracy and Education

Keynote Presentation at Winchester P4C Advanced Seminar

Maughn Gregory, June 20, 2014

Introduction

I was asked to give a historical perspective on Philosophy for Children as education for democracy, and to talk about what Mat Lipman and Ann Sharp thought that meant, in a broad, philosophical sense: to educate for democracy – as well as what they thought it meant pedagogically, in terms of children’s philosophical practice. I was also asked to indicate what disputes have emerged around these ideas. So what I’ve done is to pull together five groups of inter-related ideas (thirty-seven in all) that I think are the most important ones that cover my assignment, and rather than stand up and talk through them I’d like to invite you to join me in an interpretive practice with them. I thought we could read each group of ideas aloud together first, and then do an interpretive circle, where we say to each other, “I wonder what this part means,” or “I think this part means” If we spend about ten minutes with each group of ideas that will take just under an hour to do, and then I’d like us to form groups of three to come up with questions.

For the small group questions I thought it would be helpful to think about:

1. What about this historical overview just doesn’t make sense?
2. Are there parts that we disagree with?
3. Are there important ideas that are missing?
4. Are there ideas we agree with and want to take further?
5. Other questions?

I’ll ask you to write your questions on the board, and then we’ll look at them and look for relationships among them: commonalities, logical priorities, etc., and I hope this will help us to have a kind of conceptual map of the territory for the two days of this Seminar. As we enjoy each other’s presentations we might think about how this map is and isn’t filling out, so we might help each other get a better sense of this whole area of “P4C as education for democracy,” where each of us might be situated and where we might like to explore.

Part 1: Philosophy for Children

1. In a 2002 interview Matthew Lipman characterized Philosophy for Children as “an educational approach that includes a method and a curriculum, as well as a conception of philosophy in education” (de Puig et al., p. 49). This statement underscores the fact that Lipman and Sharp developed the method of the community of philosophical inquiry, the IAPC curriculum of children’s philosophical fiction and their agenda of philosophy in education simultaneously, so that each of these aspects informed the others.
2. The larger purpose to which P4C is an approach, is a particular “conception of philosophy in education,” meaning the role that philosophical practice should have in the education of children and adults. Elsewhere Lipman referred to this conception as “educational

philosophy.” My own summary of the Lipman/Sharp agenda of educational philosophy consists of the following five propositions:

3. (A) Not only are children capable of certain kinds philosophical practice, but there is something about the affinity of philosophy and childhood that makes philosophy an especially meaningful activity for children and adolescents. Taking seriously their common attributes of wonder, playfulness and intensity of present-moment engagement, we may even say that childhood and philosophy are integral aspects of each other.
4. (B) Philosophical practice conceived as playful and careful, collaborative inquiry into fundamental questions of meaning and value has “educational” benefit for children and adults in the broad, Deweyan sense of growth toward qualitatively improved experience.
5. (C) For children and adults alike, this benefit includes the amelioration of social and political experience (as well as of individual experience), and in fact the philosophical practice developed by Lipman and Sharp constitutes one type of democratic practice.
6. (D) The same practice also has educational benefit for children and adolescents in the narrower, non-philosophical sense of improved academic achievement – though depending on how schooling is conducted, the practice can also be in conflict with certain educational aims and methods.
7. (E) Practicing philosophical inquiry with children and adolescents provides adults not only a necessary resource for philosophical ideas and perspectives without which their inquiries would be discriminatory and impoverished, but also a unique opportunity to maintain their own, continual intellectual and spiritual childhood of wonderment, playfulness and intensity of present-moment engagement.

Let’s take a minute now to look back over these ideas and then begin our interpretive dialogue.

Part 2: Dewey’s Conception of Education

8. Some who have criticized Lipman and Sharp for tailoring P4C to educational goals and thus reducing the meaning and the parameters of children’s philosophical practice to fit conservative or neo-liberal educational agendas have not understood the Deweyan notion they drew on, of what it means for an experience to be “educational.” Let me summarize that notion in four propositions:
9. (A) *Experience* is a *trans-action* – a doing and an undergoing – between a being and its world that happens because the being is *purposive*: is actively pursuing and avoiding many kinds of value or felt qualities. *Intelligence* or *mind* is the ability to respond to certain things in the environment as *signs* of what might be desirable and undesirable, and/or how to realize or avoid them, and thereby improve the felt qualities that one experiences. This is also the broadest meaning of *inquiry*. Inquiry begins when the organism is confronted with a

problem with which its habitual functions cannot cope, or an opportunity of which its habitual functions cannot take advantage.

10. (B) The *meaning* of an experience is both the desirable and undesirable qualities we actually feel or experience – for example, varieties and intensities of justice, beauty, awe, remorse, and jealousy – and their *significance* for future experience. The meaning of every new experience is indeterminate, potential and unfinished, and the ways in which we interact with our environment (in its natural, social and technological aspects) will help determine those meanings.
11. (C) *Education* is the kind of experience in which the trans-action is not only successful (the being got some value or avoided some danger), but also in which the being was *transformed* – grew, self-corrected – in its capacity to transact successfully in future experience. For instance, it discovers a new value worth pursuing or danger to avoid, it figures out a new method for doing so, or it becomes more skilled at an old method. (Sometimes when I read a text I not only get meaning from it but also learn better how to read that kind of text.)
12. (D) Any experience in which we learn how to realize the more desirable qualities potential in a situation and in doing so become more curious, discerning, responsive, purposeful or otherwise more skillful in dealing with future experience, is *educational*. By the same token, experiences that tend to make us callous, careless, repetitive, or scattered when pursuing meaning in future experience, Dewey called “mis-educative.”
13. These propositions are summarized in one of my favorite passages from Dewey, from *Experience in Education*: “We always live at the time we live and not at some other time, and only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future. This is the only preparation which in the long run amounts to anything” (1938; 1967, 49).
14. Dewey had no agenda of the kinds of meanings or qualities that ought to be extracted from our experiences. He believed (A) that means and ends had to be developed in tandem, (B) that there was no other method to reveal which ends and means should be desired other than self-corrective inquiry – i.e., no authority outside the community to judge the outcome, and (C) that there was no final end or purpose to which humans were, or ought to be tending. Without a cosmic blueprint for personal or social fulfillment, we have to learn how and why to reconstruct from the context of our current situation: our current knowledge, passions, hopes, and frustrations.
15. For Dewey, education is nothing less than the way humans and other intelligent beings continually learn what new experiences are worth having and how to have them. This is the conception of education that Lipman thought philosophy could serve, and it was Lipman’s genius to make the move that somehow did not occur to Dewey: to make use of the profound educational experiences offered by the discipline of philosophy as both a practice and a particular content area for inquiry.

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Part 3: Democracy

16. A *democracy* is a *community* that has *educational experience*. A community is a group of individuals that act together toward common purposes. (The group of all red-heads in the world is not a community.) There are trans-actions between the community and the broader world, and this experience is educational when the community grows, by recognizing new purposes, developing new habits or becoming more skilled, and so improving the shared experience of the members.
17. Some of the problems and opportunities that confront us, confront us as groups, and we sometimes respond collaboratively. A group of people brought together by their collective stake in clarifying and dealing with a common problem or opportunity and using a process of collaborative inquiry to arrive at collective practical judgments is what the pragmatists meant by a democratic community. A democracy is a self-transforming community, which might be a family, a group of friends, a professional or political organization or a state.
18. As with individuals, communities only get provoked into growing or reconstructing when they confront new problems or opportunities. The self-corrective community must rely on its members rather than on political or moral experts to articulate which aspects of social life are working well, where there is dysfunction, and in which direction the community's amelioration tends. Conflicts over the allocation of scarce resources, overlapping claims of rights, and claims of injustice are the community's only means of extending, refining, and correcting its cherished political ideals.
19. Questions of value and action are on par with questions of fact: the aim of inquiry is to discover what is most reasonable to want, to believe and/or to do. Values like justice and freedom that are forged in a process of critical social inquiry—in which multiple voices are heard, meanings are clarified, sympathies are formed, tradition is reinterpreted, compromises are considered, and new accommodations are created—are more likely to be far-sighted, broadly and deeply-held, and to have fewer unforeseen consequences. They are, therefore, more meaningful and sustainable in the long run than values imposed by moral authorities or aggregated from personal preferences unmediated by inquiry.
20. The virtues of citizenship in social democracies are simply those that facilitate participation in this process: sensitivity to injustice and other kinds of skepticism about the status quo; willingness to challenge authority, skilled thinking, creativity, the pursuit of broad inclusiveness of interests and perspectives in the inquiry, and the attitude of fallibility regarding one's own beliefs and values. The disposition to enter social inquiry fully aware of one's personal interests and rhetorical abilities, but with the intent of finding out what's most reasonable according to collective criteria, is strikingly different from the disposition one needs to haggle out deals in a political or commercial marketplace, though both may be necessary.
21. "Self-correction," was the phrase Peirce used to describe how scientists and others who practice rigorous, unconstrained inquiry replace "less adequate" beliefs with "more adequate" beliefs by making their own judgments. He intended the phrase to be opposed to

“external correction” by an authority outside the community of inquirers. Clearly no individual or community can “follow the inquiry where it leads” if there is an external authority dictating its outcome, or if some members of the community have more authority than others in determining that outcome.

22. This means that a community is best able to practice good inquiry when the relationships among the community members are non-hierarchical: when each one’s views are given equal consideration and each one’s interests are given equal weight. Likewise, the capacity of every individual member in the community of inquiry to articulate genuine doubt, question the status quo, follow the inquiry where it leads and make her own judgments about its outcomes depends on her relationships in that community being democratic. This kind of equal autonomy is what makes collaborative inquiry possible.
23. Inclusivity of all related members in the network of non-hierarchical relationships is implicit in this understanding. Therefore, the rigor of an inquiry is also relative to the degree of its inclusivity of those whose knowledge, views and experiences are relevant to it. Methods should be enacted to increase the diversity of perspectives and to decrease biased exclusion.
24. On a deeper level, the very capacity of an individual to exercise any kind of rational autonomy depends on her participation in a rational community. For instance, apart from a process of dialogue in which others challenge my reasons, push me to clarify my meaning, make counter-claims against me, lend me supporting arguments, embellish my ideas, show me alternatives, etc., I am severely curtailed in my capacity to think for myself, to self-correct, and therefore, paradoxically, to exercise some kind of autonomy.
25. The more democratic the communities I belong to are, the more free and open will be my interactions with them, my experiments with my own personhood and with new kinds of community. The value Dewey placed on democracy was not that it corresponded to any essential human traits like rationality or autonomy but that it was ideally conducive of ongoing creativity and experimentation in the pursuit of what it might mean to be human.

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Part 4: Community of Philosophical Inquiry as Education for Democracy

26. The community of philosophical inquiry (CPI) is one form of democratic discourse that educates the participants in the virtues of democratic citizenship, in a number of ways. First, the agenda for discussion is constructed by the participants, according to what is most meaningful for them, rather than the teacher or facilitator.
27. Next, the CPI is designed to facilitate open-ended inquiry rather than to propagate substantive political, ideological, or philosophical views or commitments. The role of the facilitator is to help the community follow its inquiry in the direction of the best evidence, the strongest arguments, and the most compelling testimonies. Also, participants are

encouraged to inquire into the procedures of their inquiry and to reconstruct them if they find good reasons to do so.

28. Next, power relationships in the CPI are non-hierarchical. Authority is shared among the participants and the facilitator. The facilitator may exercise a certain authority that derives from her expertise in the procedures of inquiry, but an important objective of CPI is that this expertise become “distributed” among the participants as soon as possible, with the end-in-view that the facilitator become more and more of a regular participant as the community becomes self-facilitating.
29. Next, CPI participants cultivate skills and dispositions necessary for good inquiry. These are not imposed by facilitators without justification or context, but are introduced as they become helpful to advancing the community’s deliberations, and are warranted and sometimes revised by them as they are found to be helpful. This is particularly significant regarding the political education of children, whose loyalty to democracy cannot be imposed but can only result from their own recognition of the kind of self-directed personal and collective growth that democracy makes possible.
30. Next, the CPI is an opportunity to problematize and experiment with concepts of political philosophy as they relate to our everyday experience, such as freedom, rules, rights, justice, personhood and democracy. One of the educative aims of P4C is to wake us up to the ethical, political, and other philosophical dimensions of our ordinary experience because these are part of its unfinished meaning.
31. Next, CPI is designed to facilitate honest searches for understanding and meaning. Therefore, although it encourages the articulation of divergent views and permits disagreement and mutual critique, it cautions the participants against trying to “win” arguments and emphasizes the importance of recognizing the strength of another’s ideas and the weakness of one’s own. Its most significant evidence of success is a participant’s self-correction of previous beliefs, feelings, or values. This is in sharp contrast to conceptions of democracy as a free-market competition of ideas and loyalties.
32. Finally, as CPI brings participants into discursive relations with one another around issues they have identified as meaningful for them, it is likely to direct the sympathies of community members toward each other, help them to understand the social implications of their personal interests, and to construct shared values and other forms of solidarity. It is an important feature of social democracy that citizens be willing to have their interests mediated not only by forced compromise and deal-making, but by learning to understand and care about the interests of others.

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Part 5: Limitations and Criticisms

33. The CPI fulfills Dewey's pedagogical maxim that "the only way to prepare for social life is to engage in social life" (1978, p. 14). However, as it typically practiced in Philosophy for Children, it has some limitations in regard to the pragmatist ideal of social democracy. One is that it rarely provides the opportunity for participants to test their tentative conclusions in non-discursive, empirical experimentation and to bring the consequences of doing so back to the inquiry. P4C communities that extend their inquiries into artistic, political, and service-oriented action projects often do so as "culminating events" to an inquiry rather than an important stage of the inquiry itself.
34. The primary reason for this limitation is that while CPI appeals to the concerns and the lived experiences of the participants, it tends to construe the meaning of those concerns and experiences in discursive terms of puzzling concepts or conceptual problems, to be resolved through reasoned dialogue. This is a limitation on the efficacy of CPI in cultivating democracy as a method for directing social change. As Dewey forcefully observed, "situations that are disturbed and troubled, confused or obscure, cannot be straightened out, cleared up and put in order, by manipulation of our personal mental states. . . . Restoration of integration can be effected . . . only by operations which actually modify existing conditions, not by merely "mental" processes" (1991, pp. 109-110).
35. Perhaps the most serious consequence of this limitation for democratic education is that the community's growth in cooperative intelligence is not utilized for shared governance or collective decision-making over many aspects of community life. This, in spite of the fact that the classroom and the children's club are complex forms of association that are often ripe for democratic reconstruction.
36. In addition to these limitations, P4C is criticized as an approach to democratic education. Critics from the political left fear that getting children to pay attention to ethical and political meaning, inviting them to criticize the world as they experience it, and giving them practice in reasoning and egalitarian dialogue is not enough to counter the hegemonic forces of racism, sexism and capitalism; that in addition we also need to teach children to "read the world" in those terms through consciousness raising. Otherwise, it is argued, our philosophical practices will likely being co-opted by that oppressive system. Some even argue that rationality itself is a practice of domination that needs to be disrupted.
37. Critics on the political right have argued (1) that CPI is essentially illiberal, giving the community too much power over individuals; (2) that traditional values, including political values, should be reinforced rather than problematized, especially for children; and (3) that concepts like "social justice," "feminism," "social democracy," "environmentalism," or even "tolerance" are too partisan (too leftist) to be discussed in schools, because schools should stay out of the culture wars.

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Please send comments or questions to Maughn at gregorym@montclair.edu

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See also Philosophy for Children History, Research & Curriculum Bibliographies: 6.0 “P4C, Political, Social and Cultural Philosophy and Political and Civics Education,” at https://docs.google.com/document/d/1VwaaTb6T_IFG4-J71idz-8Xf35zjteCjNuDa4RohqqA/edit?usp=sharing